5

Figuring Finitude

Rilke's Sonnets to Orpheus

The asymmetry between Hölderlin's and Rilke's engagement with finitude (addressed in the opening of chapter 4) also characterizes the relation between chapters 2 and 3 and chapters 4 and 5. Whereas Hölderlin's poetologies allowed me to identify his goals for successful poetry, in reading Rilke I used prose texts supported by personal letters to read *themes* that took up the problems of finitude as they developed across Rilke's career. In characterizing the *Sonnets to Orpheus* as centrally engaged with the human inhabitation of finitude, I will be guided by those overlapping themes as they are taken up and altered in poetic form. First, and most obviously, Rilke's struggles to acknowledge and inhabit finitude appear in his repeated attempts to recast and recharacterize human relationships to death. Second, this recasting directs attention away from a metaphysical or religious "beyond" and toward earthly existence. Third, Rilke insists that subjectivity is defined by being embodied: sexuality, pain, and sensory particularity form vital components of human existence. And finally, these themes all require responsiveness—to and of the body, the world, other minds, and our own finitude. This responsiveness acknowledges the impossibility of certainty and the costs of defenses of avoidance; it accepts the uncertainty in subject and world orientations that makes these strategies so seductive. The importance of embodiment, the earthly, and human relations to death is not news for Rilke scholarship; what I add to these themes is the idea of

a responsiveness that is not merely described but modeled and undertaken in the *Sonnets* themselves using strategies available specifically to poetic form, thus creating world orientations in lyric poetry that inhabit human finitude.

While Rilke himself does not make the claim, like Hölderlin, that poetry addresses finitude in ways that prose, poetology (general or individual), or theory cannot, I contend that his treatment of the sonnet form deploys material qualities of language to *perform* orientations in poetic form that his prose can only identify as absent or desirable (as, for example, in his description of *Malte* as the "hollow form" or "negative" of bliss).[1] I describe this plastic treatment of language using Rilke's poetics of the figure, a term that describes its own work of shaping and orienting. Understanding Rilke's poetics of figurality as a response to finitude illuminates several of the *Sonnets*' most striking and sometimes baffling features: their mixing of concretion and abstraction, the relation between individual sonnets and the cycle as a whole, and the exceptionally plastic and self-actualizing qualities of the sonnets as they expand and interrogate the sonnet form. All of these qualities open to and seek the responsiveness of the reader as she is invited to form organizing orientations within and between sonnets and across the entire cycle. As with my readings of Hölderlin, without the view of language in which language and world are mutually shaping, it becomes difficult if not impossible to understand how Rilke can celebrate the temporary, constructed, and equivocal orientations his sonnet figures achieve; the *Sonnets* repeatedly perform and present the view that any orientation reaching from language to the world, rather than vice versa, is not an illusion but an achievement.

Orphic Implications: The Place of the *Sonnets to Orpheus* in Rilke's Late Work

Rilke's career, like Hölderlin's, is typically broken into several overlapping phases: an initial period from his earliest publications until (roughly) 1902 and characterized by the emphasis on projected subjectivity that Rilke later criticized; a middle phase from 1902 to 1910, including both the extensive engagement with the visual arts in the *New Poems* and the crisis thematized in *Malte*; a "late" period outlined by the beginning and completion of the *Duino Elegies* (1911–22); and finally the inelegantly named "latest" work, beginning with the *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1922) and including the German and French poems that Rilke wrote up until his death in 1926.[2]

1. Rilke to L[otte] H[epner], 8 November 1915, in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Jane Bannard Green and M. D. Herter Norton, vol. 2, *1910–1926* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969), 147.

2. See Manfred Engel, "Vier Werkphasen," in *Rilke Handbuch: Leben—Werk—Wirkung*, ed. Manfred Engel with Dorothea Lauterbach (Stuttgart: Metzler Verlag, 2004), 175–81. Engel's outline acknowledges the overlaps between periods that make unequivocal distinctions difficult, while Judith Ryan argues against this periodization even as her chapter titles more or less conform to it. See Judith Ryan, *Rilke, Modernism and Poetic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Many of

The precise situation of the *Sonnets to Orpheus* is complicated first by their composition during the completion of the *Duino Elegies*,[3] and second by Rilke's own varying assessments of them: initially unconvinced of their quality compared to his finally completed "great work,"[4] he later linked the projects in a letter to his Polish translator, Witold von Hulewicz:

> *We are*, let it be emphasized once more, *in the sense of the Elegies, we are these transformers of the earth; our entire existence, the flights and plunges of our love, everything qualifies us for this task* (beside which there exists, essentially, no other). (The Sonnets show details from this activity which here appears placed under the name and protection of a dead girl whose incompletion and innocence holds open the gate of the grave so that, gone from us, she belongs to those powers that keep the one half of life fresh and open toward the other wound-open half). Elegies and Sonnets support each other constantly—, and I see an infinite grace in the fact that, with the same breath, I was permitted to fill both these sails: the little rust-colored sail of the Sonnets and the Elegies' gigantic white canvas.[5]

Many of the themes I have drawn out as indicative of Rilke's engagement with problems of finitude are attributed in the letter to both the *Sonnets* and the *Elegies*: the theme of transformation, the emphasis on the earthly, and the complementary relation between life and death as two halves of existence.

But despite Rilke's description of them in (and as) the same breath, the two cycles differ significantly in their treatment of finitude and thus in their treatment of language, and it is because of this differing relation to language and finitude that I focus on the *Sonnets* and not the *Elegies* here.[6] The most apparent differences

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the uncollected poems from the middle and late periods anticipate both stylistically and thematically some of the attributes I draw out of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, especially Rilke's discussions of abstraction in modern art: "An die Musik" (1915), for example, already deploys similar metaphors, and spatial figures "prepare for a move toward abstraction in his late elegies and the *Sonnets to Orpheus*" (Ryan, *Rilke, Modernism*, 158).

3. Rilke gave the following account of their writing to Katharina Kippenberg: "The two parts came about from the beginning of February and (part II) now, in the past days. Between them the great storm of the *Elegies* roared in.—So the order (with two exceptions, where poems were replaced with others) within the two parts remains chronological; I lacked the detachment for any reorganization. And this order, in which they were written, may bring its own justification, as it often happened that many sonnets appeared on the same day, indeed almost simultaneously, so that my pencil had difficulty in keeping up with their appearance" (Rilke to Katharina Kippenberg, 23 February 1922, in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rainer Maria Rilke-Katharina Kippenberg: Briefwechsel*, ed. Bettina von Bernhard [Wiesbaden: Insel Verlag, 1954], 455; my translation).

4. Donald Prater, *A Ringing Glass: The Life of Rainer Maria Rilke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 350.

5. Rilke to Witold von Hulewicz, 13 November 1925, in Rilke, *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke*, 2:376.

6. In doing so I am not implying any kind of aesthetic judgment or argument that the *Sonnets* are to be preferred to other poems from other parts of Rilke's career. I am, however, claiming that Rilke's earlier "official" poetic projects do draw on programs or institutions that purport to overcome finitude or obviate its problems, even as many of the poems themselves exceed Rilke's own characterizations of them both in their aesthetic interest and in their approach to problems of finitude; still others of his uncollected poems gain a more responsive and open stance toward finitude by virtue of their independence from Rilke's own programs. On the contrast between Rilke's collected and uncollected poems, see Michael Hamburger, ed. and trans., *An Unofficial Rilke: Poems 1912–1926* (London: Anvil Press, 1981).

between the two cycles are their forms and their guarantors or interlocutors. While the *Elegies* are ten long poems mostly in free rhythms (with occasional fragments of elegaic distichs), the *Sonnets* form a cycle (loosely construed) of fifty-five sonnets in a variety of regular meters. The apparent dedication of the cycle *an Orpheus* (to Orpheus) in the title is complicated by a further dedication, appearing on the title page: "Written as a grave monument for Wera Ouckama von Knoop" ("Geschrieben als ein Grabmal für Wera Ouckama von Knoop"). Knoop, a young woman Rilke met briefly and with whose mother he corresponded, had died two years earlier; her presence in the dedication adds a female and human subject to the mythical presence of Orpheus, under whose auspices the cycle's title places it.[7]

Orpheus's and Wera's mortality thus distinguishes the Orphic program of the *Sonnets* from the appeal to the angel in the *Elegies*, emphasizing the *Sonnets*' particular engagement with finitude: while the angel is native to the realm of the beyond or invisible, Orpheus traverses the boundary between life and death, at home in both,[8] while Wera is an unequivocally human figure whom Rilke identifies as helping him keep the door to death—the "other half of life"—open.[9] Orpheus also, unlike the angels of the *Elegies*, has a physical, destructible, and suffering body, as indicated by its violent rending at the hands of the Maenads in the myth and as described in I.26.[10] This traversal, moreover, is not foreign to the capability of human subjects: while Orpheus performs these crossings more adeptly than we could do, the subject's tentative crossing into death nonetheless aspires to be the same step into (and within) continuous existence.[11] The two guarantors of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, then, underscore that the cycle's project is an earthly or human one that takes up the themes of transformation and death as central components of life.

7. The beginning of the twentieth century saw a surge of interest in Orpheus as a figure of cultural critique, but Rilke's handling of the mythological material, in particular on a formal/linguistic level, distinguishes him from popular- or occult-scientific investigators. See Sandra Pott, *Poetiken: Poetologische Lyrik, Poetik und Ästhetik von Novalis bis Rilke* (New York: de Gruyter, 2004), 333–80. Pott's claim is that much of Rilke's Orpheus thematic reacts to texts on popular and occult science (343). The *Sonnets*, particularly in their discussions of technology, do seem to participate in some kind of critique of modernity, but their aesthetic shaping supersedes the vulgar-sociological themes and normative judgments of these ostensible "source" texts.

8. See, e.g., Thomas Martinec, "The Sonnets to Orpheus," in *The Cambridge Companion to Rilke*, ed. Karen Leeder and Robert Vilain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 99.

9. See Manfred Engel, "Die Sonette an Orpheus," in Engel, *Rilke Handbuch*, 411. For a phenomenological reading of this task, see Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, *The Ecstatic Quotidian: Phenomenological Sightings in Modern Art and Literature* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 126. Wera's presence also underscores the difficulty of changing human relations to death: in treating the deaths not only of distant and/or fictional mythical figures but also of real and familiar others, Rilke acknowledges that pain and loss cannot be elided in poetic work; appropriately he describes the half of life Wera helps keep open as *wundoffen*, "wound open," using a bodily metaphor of pain and vulnerability to depict what the cultural and religious narratives he criticizes portray as a metaphysical beyond or comforting heaven.

10. Orpheus's continued existence in death—according to the myth, his severed head continued to sing as it was washed out to sea—also establishes him as the founding figure in a cultic religion of unity that stands in opposition to Christian distinctions between this world and the next. See Uwe Spörl, "Kulturräume und Literaturen—Antike," in Engel, *Rilke Handbuch*, 36.

11. Spörl, "Kulturräume und Literaturen," 36.

And this emphatic turn toward the earthly—announced programmatically in the *Ninth Elegy* but called into question by the otherworldly *Tenth*—shifts the *Sonnets*' relation to language. While the language conception of the *Elegies* derives from a painfully perceived difference or distance between language and being, the *Sonnets* no longer operate with such a distinction.[12] The *Elegies* thus end with an allegorical journey through the country or landscape of the dead, while from the outset the *Sonnets* "sugges[t] . . . that Orpheus' song is not merely a lament for something lost, but also the creation of something new."[13] Even as the *Elegies* turn away from a transcendent "beyond" toward the transformation of the earthly, the *Sonnets* assert repeatedly that the world's mysteries are not transcendent or separate from the everyday.[14] The blending of the transcendent and the everyday has a striking effect on the cycle's language: unifying for the first time the poetologies of inspiration and craftsmanship that he struggled with throughout his career,[15] Rilke creates sonnets that themselves are shaped, plastic figures, working with language as a constructed and constructive medium that he stylizes as *Diktat* (dictation)—but without specifying any divine or transcendent source. (The sonnets are *to* or *for* Orpheus, but not *from* him.)

This dictation from nowhere that demands responsive openness from the poet without a reassuring source creates a poetics of hearing that combines with the visual metaphors of the figure to create a synesthesia between hearing and seeing. Both the poetics of the figure and Rilke's more general Orphic program blur distinctions between different perceptive faculties (here, vision and sound) in a synesthetic celebration of sensory, embodied existence. The *Sonnets*' self-actualizing language brings together concrete oppositions while leaving the full resonances of

12. KA 2:722. Engel and Fülleborn identify a departure from the high pathos of the *Elegies*; the *Sonnets* attend instead to the earthly (ibid., 726). Judith Ryan likewise distinguishes the *Elegies* and the *Sonnets* because in the former, "sign and signified fall radically apart" (Ryan, *Rilke, Modernism*, 183).

13. Ryan, *Rilke, Modernism*, 171.

14. Gosetti-Ferencei, *Ecstatic Quotidian*, 124. Gosetti-Ferencei elsewhere draws the distinction between the *Elegies* and the *Sonnets* in terms of a (phenomenologically based) distinction between "vertical" transcendence ("a crossing . . . from the realm of earthly, human limitation and finitude, to a realm metaphorically above and beyond") and "horizontal" transcendence ("a virtual line in the distance against which what is experienced or known can be projectively interpreted"). See Gosetti-Ferencei, "Immanent Transcendence in Rilke and Stevens," *German Quarterly* 83, no. 3 (2010): 275–76. She rightly points out that the *Sonnets* do engage with and refer to the first kind of transcendence as something unattainable even as they privilege the second kind, but she occasionally slides into the language of "beyond" that Rilke so categorically rejects. For example, she claims that the "pure transcendence" (*reine Übersteigung*) of the first line of the first sonnet refers to Orpheus (ibid., 279), whereas in fact it refers to a tree that becomes a figure of Orpheus's song: "Da stieg ein Baum! O reine Übersteigung! / O Orpheus singt! O hoher Baum im Ohr." (KA 2:241; "There arose a tree! Oh, pure transcension! Oh, / Orpheus sings. Oh, tall tree in the ear!" Translation: Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, with English translations and notes by C. F. MacIntyre [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960], 3.) The transformation of invisible song into a visible object in an impossible place, and the transformation of a fairly mundane verb of motion into an abstract and seemingly metaphysical noun is, as I discuss below, a paradigmatic linguistic strategy of the *Sonnets*, as they are suspended between the abstract and the concrete.

15. See the section "Rilke's Epoch and Influences: Problems of Finitude around 1900" in chapter 4.

their coexistence open. In doing so, their language extends the poetology of hearing from the poet to the reader/hearer. Furthermore, in keeping with the tension between inspiration and craftsmanship, visible and invisible, the *Sonnets* exist in a tension between the sensory precision of Rilke's images and a curious abstraction or ambiguity of meaning.[16] The interplay of ambiguity and concretion supplies a further element of openness to the reader, as the individual poems display their own disjunctions and contradictions without certainty in their resolution, even as they are held together by the sonnet form.

The ways in which Rilke's treatment of language takes up his engagement with finitude are, of course, best seen in detail in individual sonnets, but identifying a few particularly striking features of that treatment underscores that the treatments of language I analyze are central to the cycle as a whole. Rilke's use of syntactic and formal strategies dynamizes the normally static and syllogistic sonnet form without destroying its shape; the sonnets are all clearly recognizable as sonnets even as they use different meters, line lengths, and rhyme schemes. Precisely this formal dynamization enables the sonnets themselves to become figures of relation without ossifying those relations into closed or rigid structures.[17] Rilke further uses both thematic and formal or linguistic/lexical strategies of metamorphosis to create continuities between individual sonnets or among groups within and between each half of the cycle.[18]

These techniques, fully in keeping with the self-actualizing poetological and concrete progression of the *Sonnets* as a whole, foreground the expressive force of the acoustic and optical levels of language, as word metamorphoses occur using prefixes, suffixes, or single sounds. Appropriately, Rilke also uses unusual rhyme words—often insignificant or normally unemphasized parts of speech—further undoing distinctions between types of words and thus underscoring their phonetic rather than semantic components.[19] His privileging of acoustic material contributes

16. For example, he mentions bananas, oranges, and apples explicitly and then reminds the reader that the sweetness of the latter derives in part from their incorporation of the buried dead (I.13 and I.14), thus relating a particular, concrete object to an ontological concept (death) but in such a rapid and cryptic way that he renders those concrete everyday objects mysterious and meaningful. Fülleborn and Engel point to the tension between what they call Rilke's poetic exactness and a multiplicity of suspended meanings (KA 2:714–15). This rapidity is one of Rilke's strategies for "recasting . . . mundane things" and "awakening" consciousness "from its tendency toward a prosaic grasp and reception of the world, its tendency to objectify and dominate things" (Gosetti-Ferencei, *Ecstatic Quotidian*, 132) by putting them in relation to finitude and death: "The life of poetic consciousness, death's semi-transcendence holds and protects for Rilke the mystery of presence and invests the quotidian with a mysterious depth, glimpsed in natural phenomena. Finitude is the horizon which gives shape and possibility to all things" (129).

17. He describes the *Sonnets* as "the freest, as it were most transformed that can be understood as belonging to this otherwise so static and stable form" (Rilke to Katharina Kippenberg, 23 February 1922, in Rilke, *Rilke-Kippenberg*, 455; my translation).

18. This technique creates a complex interplay of self-similiarity and self-relationality throughout the cycle. See Wolfram Groddeck, "Kosmische Didaktik: Rilkes 'Reiter'-Sonett," in *Gedichte von Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. Wolfram Groddeck (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1999), 206.

19. Annette Gerok-Reiter, *Wink und Wandlung: Komposition und Poetik in Rilkes "Sonette an Orpheus"* (Tübingen: Niemeyer Verlag, 1996), 83.

greatly to the musicality of the work and reiterates the blurring of boundaries between abstraction and concretion on a linguistic level. The radical revaluing of linguistic elements becomes a powerful tool for the creation of figures, as Rilke deploys a simultaneously celebratory and baffling combination of neologisms, foreign words, colloquial phrasing, and archaic flourishes.[20] The precise effects of Rilke's language use—in particular, the ways in which he uses language to make the poems themselves figures—must of course emerge over the course of individual readings. Understanding figurality in relation to the interlocking problems of language and finitude that Rilke takes up in historically specific forms shows that the creation of poetic figures is not a flight into a play of forms but *itself* a mode of world orientation. The organizations of material, the linking of oppositions, the sensory blending, and the temporality his sonnet figures investigate are modes of organizing and attending to not only language but the world—hence, again, Rilke's insistence on attention to the earthly and embodied in the face of dissolution and death.

The concepts of finitude and organization, with their shared blending of concretion and abstraction, introduce the theme of *Bezug*, (relation), which likewise forms Rilke's late and last connection to the visual arts and his strongest tie to classical modernism.[21] Shortly before writing the *Sonnets* and completing the *Elegies*, Rilke devoted his attention to the work of Paul Klee, particularly as treated in Wilhelm Hausenstein's 1921 volume, *Kairuan oder eine Geschichte vom Maler Klee und von der Kunst dieses Zeitalters* (Kairouan or a History of the Painter Klee and of the Art of This Era). Several of the terms Hausenstein used to analyze Klee's work became central for Rilke's own:

> Hausenstein saw Klee's work as a response to the disappearance of the object in the modern world. Instead of the concrete reality of objects, Klee, in Hausenstein's view,

20. Ibid., 116. As I reflect below, this shift of emphasis is analogous to modernist painting's attention to brushstrokes, surfaces, and framing.

21. The term "abstraction" and the figurality I discuss below do not, however, refer to the disappearance of sensory particularity or concretion onto a calculated grid of quasi-mathematical relations, any more than "abstraction" in modern art describes schematization and the disappearance of medial particularity. Quite the contrary: in Rilke's late poetry, as in modernist drawings or paintings such as Klee's or those of Wassily Kandinsky or Jackson Pollack, the absence of representation in favor of depictions of the relationality of elements such as brushstrokes, lines, and surfaces heightens the particularity and concretion of the medium of painting or language (in Rilke's case, the kind of word and sound components I described above). For a narrative of sensory particularity and modernist painting as working precisely *against* schematization, see J. M. Bernstein's claim that "having the familiar world of the senses first liquefy and then disappear into mathematical knowing is a fable for the fate of things in the modern world, and by extension a fable of modernity itself with which we have yet to get on level terms" (J. M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006], 22). It is within this context that one should read Winfried Eckel's assertion that Rilke's poetics of the figure is his most important contribution to the abstraction processes of classical modernism. See Winfried Eckel, "Bild und Figur in der Lyrik des Symbolismus: Beobachtungen zu Baudelaire, Mallarmé und Rilke," in *Das lyrische Bild*, ed. Ralf Simon, Nina Herres, and Csongor Lorincz (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2010), 139.

> represented the extraordinary complexity of their relationships to one another; Klee's art manifests the 'Bezogenheit' (relatedness) of things, transforming it into 'intersphärische Trigonometrie' (interspherical trigonometry) that makes his paintings 'inwendig lauter Figur' (inwardly nothing but figure). In Rilke's late poetry, 'Bezug' (relation) and 'Figur' (figure) are used in a similar sense.[22]

The idea of relationality, in particular the complexity of the relations between things, is taken up in Rilke's paradoxical and productive poetics of the figure: figurality will often appear as the balancing or relating of relations among objects that creates a preserving or shaping tension between them. The *Sonnets to Orpheus* differ from Rilke's earlier work in their awareness and celebration of their own role in not merely observing or picking up but *constructing* such relations.[23] Such self-awareness and constructedness do not mean, however, that the poems represent (only) the play of language within itself: Rilke's calls for the preservation of the ordinary even as it disappears by way of the delineation of its relations within finitude shows that the figures the *Sonnets* create not only consider but enact world orientation, where the mutual influences of subject, language, and world are taken up, tested, dissolved, and reformed again and again.

Figuring Figurality: Rilke's Constellations

These interlocking themes and characteristics indicative of Rilke's engagement with the problems of finitude are gathered nondiscursively in the poetics of the figure that define the *Sonnets to Orpheus*.[24] Rilke, as I show in readings of individual sonnets, uses the sonnet form in particular to make the poems *themselves* figures that reshape and redirect human attention. Figures undertake this reshaping by relating and holding together opposed elements of life in a poetic-material presentation of what Rilke calls *Bezug* (relationality). To illustrate how the Rilkean figure takes up the themes and features I have traced as continuing Rilke's engagement with human finitude in poetic form, I use his most self-interpreting figure,

22. Ryan, *Rilke, Modernism*, 157.

23. Whereas in the *New Poems*, for example, reciprocity between subject and object threatened to collapse the distance between them required for the ostensible program of observation and mimesis, which the poems themselves constantly challenge and undermine. See the section "Rilke's Epoch and Influences: Problems of Finitude around 1900" in chapter 4.

24. The standard approach to elucidating Rilke's poetics of the figure has been to define *Figur* using a combination of general characteristics extracted from Rilke's oeuvre as a whole. In part because one function of figurality is the holding together of opposed attributes or principles, such efforts tend to culminate in extreme abstraction or paradox (or both). Manfred Engel and Ulrich Fülleborn also identify the poems as linguistic *figures*, which bring opposites together and into each other. Because they are only introducing the cycle, Engel and Fülleborn give no detailed sense of how these thematic and formal figures bring together categorically or ontologically opposed components of human existence (KA 2:727); nor, I contend, could one do so in abstraction from the specific imagistic and formal working-through of individual poems.

that of the constellation, to derive the central characteristics of the figural poetics of the *Sonnets*.[25] Constellations are human organizations of nature: the stars are, of course, there, but the traces between them appear only on astronomical or astrological maps, and Rilke himself describes constellations in August 1921 as "spatial distances between fixed points."[26] They are thus necessarily relational structures, ways of putting together separated components that need a human consciousness to collect them.[27] In doing so, that consciousness creates a further relation between earthly and heavenly: the act of looking up organizes natural material into an image, a Stern*bild* (literally, "star *image* or picture").

Furthermore, constellations are always already relativized in several senses, and are thus themselves finite and nonabsolute: they are temporal and temporary, in that they move (or turn) across the sky and change with the seasons (thus also taking part in a wider cycle of the earth's revolution around the sun). Likewise, they are both geographically and culturally contingent: the Northern and Southern hemispheres perceive different constellations in each season. Perhaps even more importantly, constellations are culturally received: two cultures that see the same sets of stars at the same time need not group them in the same way, and, even if the groupings are the same, need not see the same image or give it the same name.

The cultural specificity of constellation names emphasizes their curious combination of myth and geometry (which in turn makes them ideal candidates for Rilke's sensory concretion and portrayals of relationality or *Bezug*): while the spatial relations between stars are fully explicable by lines, planes, and shapes, the myths that describe the creation of each constellation (such as the myth of Orpheus's lyre being placed in the sky after his death) are culturally and aesthetically specific. But nor are constellations, once imagined or described, merely a matter of individual projection; they also serve to orient subjects in (for example) maritime navigation, enabling progress through otherwise undifferentiated and unorganized spaces. In that constellations are both imagined and received, both organized and orienting, both culturally specific and world describing, they add an aesthetic dimension to the idea of convention as the lines along which a culture and a subject intersect in a form of life.[28]

25. Although the *Sonnets to Orpheus* in particular and Rilke's poetics of the figure in general form perhaps his most decisive step into modernism, the idea that there is a special expressive potential to the "movement" of language created by unusual word order, syntax, punctuation, etc. (Eckel, "Bild und Figur," 142) has a poetic long tradition.

26. "Räumliche Distanzen zwischen Fixpunkten"; cited by Jana Schuster, "'Tempel im Gehör': Zur Eigenbewegtheit des Klinggedichts am Beispiel des ersten der Sonette an Orpheus von Rainer Maria Rilke," in *Textbewegungen 1800/1900*, ed. Matthias Buschmeier and Till Dembeck (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2007), 356.

27. This makes them, of course, a paradigmatic example of Rilke's concept of *Bezug* or relationality.

28. See chapter 1, "Language, Grammar, and Forms of Life"; and Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, new ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 11ff.

Implicit in this commonsense description of the attributes of constellations as Rilke's leading figure of figurality are several characteristics that take up problems of finitude in poetic form and as they will emerge in the *Sonnets*: first, the poems persistently treat and perform the relation between temporal persistence and decay (a trope of finitude in general and an instance of *Bezug* as Rilke picked it up from Hausenstein's discussion of Klee); second, they instantiate a related contrastive connection between fluidity and form that complicates the theme of relationality (placing problems of finitude in relation to the *Sonnets*' key theme of transformation or *Verwandlung*); both of these contrasts unfold within what I have called the figure's self-actualization or performativity.[29] Rilke's conception of the temporality and time-containing qualities of the figure dynamizes what might normally be considered a solely spatial and static phenomenon,[30] and raises the second tension inherent to the Rilkean figure: that between temporal or spatial dynamism and the search for a shape or measure to organize that fluidity.[31] And temporality and *Bezug* (relationality) play a central role in the *Sonnets*' performativity or self-actualizing quality. This quality refers to the tendency of the *Sonnets* to announce or unfold their own poetological principles, as well as to the interplay between lexical, acoustic, optical, and formal structures that occurs within and between poems. The *Sonnets*' enactment of their own themes, like their synesthetic concreteness, also corresponds to the theme of earthly attention: they themselves give or posit the principles to which they adhere, rather than drawing such principles from a (metaphysical or transcendent) "beyond." And finally, both the idea of relationality as world orientation and the performative qualities of the sonnets bespeak their partaking in the projects of acknowledgment and responsiveness as they seek to open orientations to the reader without recourse to any authority outside themselves.

29. Eckel remarks that the concept of the figure is constitutive for its own construction and that the Rilkean figure is not observed but undertaken or performed ("will vollzogen werden"; Eckel, "Bild und Figur," 140 and 143). Perhaps motivated by the desire to avoid the speech act theory ramifications of the term "performativity," others have referred to this quality as *Eigengesetzlichkeit*, "self-lawgiving-ness" (KA 2:717), and *Eigenbewegtheit*, "self-movingness" (Schuster, "'Tempel im Gehör,'" 354). Since English efforts to avoid the word "performativity" in describing the quality of a work's own enacting the programs or principles presented in it become unwieldy quite rapidly, I will continue to use "performativity" nonetheless.

30. And indeed, Rilke sometimes uses the word *Figur* to describe sculpture or painting, sometimes dance, the flight of birds, or the parabola traced by a ball. In all these cases, however, he uses the word to describe abstract relations and structures of elements. Ironically, given de Man's famous insistence on Rilke's rhetorical figurality, Rilke never uses the term to describe rhetorical figures. Compare Eckel, "Bild und Figur," 140; and Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), esp. chap. 2. See also Beda Allemann, *Zeit und Figur beim späten Rilke: Ein Beitrag zur Poetik des modernen Gedichts* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1961); and Anke Bosse, "'Auch die sternische Verbindung trügt': Aspekte der Rilke-Lektüre Paul de Mans," *Germanistische Mitteilungen: Zeitschrift für deutsche Sprache, Literatur und Kultur* 54 (2001): 10.

31. Gerok-Reiter, in a reading heavily influenced by Allemann's, describes the *Sonnets* as taking up the problem of how transient matter or material can be given shape or form without destroying it (Gerok-Reiter, *Wink und Wandlung*, 211).

The figure of the constellation as a structure or organization that holds together separated or distant points (creating a relation or *Bezug* between them) furthermore describes the relationship between sonnets across the entire cycle (recall again Rilke's designation of constellations as "distances between fixed points"). One of the difficulties raised by the *Sonnets* is that of their unity or difference: they all belong to the same cycle, of course, and as such are members of the category or genre of *a* "Sonnet to Orpheus."[32] But Orpheus does not appear directly in every sonnet, nor does Wera, the cycle's second guarantor.[33] Rather, the family or genre of the "Sonnet to Orpheus" encompasses a fairly large number of characteristics and themes; all the *Sonnets* have some of these themes, and some of the *Sonnets* have all of them.[34] Within this family or genre, then, it is possible to trace numerous networks or constellations of sonnets linked by theme or content, formal attributes, or even sonic structures. This activity is a large-scale version of the finding and testing of relations or *Bezüge* that form a central component of Rilke's figures; it also extends the performative attributes of the *Sonnets*—themselves thematizing the creation of relationality—to the macrostructural level of the cycle. And the relations between change and identity, persistence and transience, that emerge between sonnets in these constellations take up the Orphic principle of transformation or metamorphosis (*Verwandlung*), which appears on the level of words, motifs, poem groups, and further in the relation of the two parts of the cycle to each other. The constellation, itself a figure of figurality as such, forms the central motif of a network (or constellation) of sonnets with related themes and structures, specifically those containing the words *Sternbild* (constellation), *Bild* (image), or *Figur*

32. I am indebted for this way of characterizing the *Sonnets* to Christoph König and the participants in the workshop of the Peter-Szondi Kolleg with the Deutsches Literaturarchiv and the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung, Marbach (November 2012).

33. Appropriately, the figures of Orpheus and Wera appear as frames of both parts of the cycle: the first and last sonnets of both the first and second parts refer to Orpheus (either directly or in dedications), while the second and penultimate sonnets of each refer to Wera (either in dedications or in second-person addresses to a dancer, Wera's primary attribute in the cycle). See Gerok-Reiter, *Wink und Wandlung*, 41.

34. Although the idea of a genre already addresses the relationship of similarity and difference between each sonnet, the Wittgensteinian notion of a *family* is also helpful here: in discussing similarities and difference between types of game, Wittgenstein remarks: "I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblances'; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc., etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.—And I shall say: 'games' form a family.

"And for instance the kinds of number form a family in the same way. Why do we call something a 'number'? Well, perhaps because it has a—direct—relationship with several things that have hitherto been called number; and this may be said to give it an indirect relationship to other things that we call the same name. And we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres" (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations/ Philosophische Untersuchungen*, trans. G. E. M Anscombe, 3rd ed. [Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001], 28e).

(figure).[35] Using readings of the sonnets that make up this network, I demonstrate that and how the *Sonnets to Orpheus* programmatically invite the reader to engage in the finding and testing of such networks in a larger-scale version of the subject and world orientations that occur in the plastic and thematic shaping of the figure.

Sternbild, Bild, Figur

Having established more general themes and characteristics of the *Sonnets*, I can now turn to the sonnets in the network created by the themes of *Sternbild, Bild*, and *Figur* across the work. These three terms establish a network of eight poems: I.6, 8, 9, 11, 12 and II.12, 18, and 28.[36] I begin with two sonnets that explicitly discuss the creation of figural constellations and the significance of those figures for poetic production: I.11 and I.12. Reading the poems in this network fills in and deepens the attributes of the constellation and of figurality, as the poems deploy a variety of formal and thematic strategies for the presentation of the fullness of life and the shaping, finding, and testing of its limitations. My claim is that these activities (presenting, shaping, finding, testing) identify the desire for certainty, eternity, or transcendence but in response to that desire persistently turn or re-turn to an ordinary of immanent transcendence that discovers aptnesses of expression that orient language and world, text and reader, to each other.

I.11 "Sieh den Himmel."

The eleventh sonnet of the first part combines direct discussion of figures and figurality with several characteristics of the *Sonnets to Orpheus* that I identified as exemplary for the cycle as a whole. In presenting a series of questions and self-interpretations instead of a "plot," the poem thematizes processes of argumentation and questioning; it further represents those processes via physical tropes of paths and turns (*Weg* and *Wendung*). Both this concretization and the sonnet's deployment of volta-like structures not only in the traditional location in the sonnet

35. The *Sternbild/Bild/Figur* constellation is, of course, not the only network into which the sonnets I will read could be placed; the genre or family designation of the *Sonnets* necessarily means that different connections will exist between different groups. Moreover, one could go on building relations that would eventually encompass the entire cycle: I have excluded sonnets that mention stars (*Sterne*) rather than constellations (*Sternbilder*), but if the stars were included, they would link the topos I have identified here to flowers (flower blossoms are described as stars in II.5) and then to fruit, which in turn connects to the topos of the seasons that appears in the cycle, etc., etc. It should be clear from these linkages that I make no claim that the network I identify here is the only or even the most important one in the *Sonnets*; rather, it is the one in which the self-interpreting attributes of the cycle are most apparent because of the self-interpreting nature of I.11, which explicitly presents figurality.

36. These sonnets are reproduced in full in both German and English directly preceding this chapter. Line numbers cited in the discussion of the sonnets in this chapter correspond to the German text and translations there provided.

but in nearly every line support the claim that the sonnet is itself the kind of figure it describes, in which abstraction and plasticity merge in poetic form. But this performance also foregrounds its own temporary nature, openness, and even contingency: the constellation the poem imagines does not exist. The figure created is solely a joining of matter in perception, but it is nonetheless celebrated and, in the presentation of the poem, shared. Rilke's poetic inhabitation of human finitude that does not give up on orientations outside the subject appears, I want to say, in precisely this kind of world organization that does not deny its lack of absolute or universal certainty but seeks to create attunement both with the world and, in its performative openness to the reader, to other minds.

The sonnet opens with a command: "Sieh den Himmel." (1; "Look at the sky.") It then questions the existence of what turns out to be a fictional constellation, *Reiter*, the rider: "Heißt kein Sternbild 'Reiter'?" (1; "Is there no constellation / called '[Rider]'?").[37] Rather than answering the question directly, the poem proceeds with an *interpretation* of the figure of the rider and an insistence on its familiarity:

> Denn dies ist uns seltsam eingeprägt:
> dieser Stolz aus Erde. Und ein Zweiter,
> der ihn treibt und hält und den er trägt.
>
> (2–4)

The lines appear to create a dichotomy between earthly/animal and human, and the subsequent quartet extends the contrasts in the constellation to the *Natur des Seins* (nature of being) while continuing the idea of natural movement joined to rational control:

> Ist nicht so, gejagt und dann gebändigt,
> diese sehnige Natur des Seins?
>
> (5–6)

Beda Allemann points to the coexistence of animals and stars as a coherency of extremes essential to Rilke's poetry,[38] but emphasizes that the turn to *Natur des Seins* focuses on the central relationality or relatedness of being rather than a hierarchical distinction between stars, animals, and humans or body and mind.[39] (In typical

37. Groddeck observes that *Reiter* is the cycle's only instance of a word inside quotation marks, and as such is a *Fremdkörper* (foreign body) in the textual body of the *Sonnets* (Groddeck, "Kosmische Didaktik," 208). He also points out that Rilke names a constellation "rider" in the *Tenth Elegy*'s depiction of the constellations of its *Leidland* (land of sorrow). As my discussions of I.8 and I.9 below will make clearer, the relation between the *Elegies* and the *Sonnets* is in part predicated on a thoroughly different relationship to both *Leid* (suffering) and *Klage* (lament), which Groddeck does not take into account.

38. Allemann, *Zeit und Figur*, 88.

39. The realization of the relation between horse and rider is a recognition of the relational character of being as such (Allemann, *Zeit und Figur*, 88).

Rilkean fashion, the nature of being is described as a "sinewy nature," linking physical and ontological with an image of the connective tissue of the body.)

And indeed, the seventh line turns its attention from the dualistic constitution of the rider (of man and horse) to the path and turns they trace as a single constellation and to the means of communication that unites them:

> Weg und Wendung. Doch ein Druck verständigt.
> Neue Weite. Und die zwei sind eins.
>
> (7–9)

While it seems that the animal movement is contained or turned by the human intelligence in *Weg und Wendung* (path and turning), Wolfram Groddeck points out that in fact either movement or redirection might be initiated by either being. Extending this point, I suggest that the figure of unity is predicated on a relationship of physical touch: pressure, *ein Druck*, makes the two *understand* each other (*verständigt*), collapsing the distinction between mental and physical. That touch, moreover, links horse and rider together as they move through the space opened up by the poem, *Neue Weite* (8; New open vistas). Their unification seems predicated on the contrast between living, concrete beings whose bodies trace the same arc and the undefined spatiality through which they move.

Unlike many of the *Sonnets*, I.11 appears to have a traditional volta at the beginning of the tercet that questions the unity asserted at the end of the quartet: "Aber *sind* sie's?" (9; "But *are* they that?") What has gone before seems to be called into question as mere appearance; the last two verses seem to interpret the first two. But on further investigation, the structures of questioning, contradicting, or reinterpreting appear in virtually every line of the sonnet. Its alternation of apparently rhetorical questions and their logical support or answers (introduced by *denn*, *auch*, *und*, and *doch*; "for," "also," "and," and "however") plays on the traditional syllogistic structure of the sonnet, but it is not in fact easy to tell whether the answers to these questions should be understood as positive or negative. The structure "Heißt kein . . ." of the first question typically expects an affirmative answer, but since there is (except in the *Tenth Elegy*) *not* any such constellation, the reader is caught between the two possibilities. In the second question, the negative structure that anticipates affirmation ("Is it not so that . . .") is repeated, only to have its assertion questioned by the opening of the tercet: "Aber *sind* sie's?" (9) seems to expect the answer "No."

This impression is enhanced by the sonnet's seeming to present an alternative interpretation, one that complicates the relation between horse and rider, on the one hand, and constellation and path, on the other:

> Oder meinen beide
> nicht den Weg, den sie zusammen tun?
>
> (9–10)

The word *meinen* (to mean, to indicate) suggests signification, in keeping with the poem's general tendency toward self-interpretation, and supports the idea that horse and rider are united only insofar as they trace a common path through an expansive space. Indeed, the final line of the first tercet seems to confirm the thought that when this "path" is ended, the constellation dissolves: "Namenlos schon trennt sie Tisch und Weide" (11; "the utter separation of table and trough"). With the end of the path, and the end of the poem, Rilke returns to the constellation and admits its dissolution as well: "Auch die sternische Verbindung trügt" (12; "Even stellar conjunctions can deceive"). But the subsequent lines make clear that the deceptive nature of our projection (what we thought *must* be a constellation because it so perfectly represented our notion of being) is not a matter of disappointment or a reason for discarding the figure it creates. Instead the poem ends by reclaiming the pleasure and aptness of the figure:

> Doch uns freue eine Weile nun
> der Figur zu glauben. Das genügt.
>
> (13–14)

In its insistence on simultaneous aptness and temporariness, the poem offers an important reminder of the temporal limitations of figurality.[40]

The falling together of the end of the figure and the end of the poem already suggests a poetological interpretation of the sonnet as a whole: it itself is a poetic figure that enacts the belonging together of antinomies.[41] Perhaps the key description of how the poem's figurality works appears in the alliterative phrase *Weg und Wendung* at the poem's midpoint in the seventh line. The horse and rider's common path can be interpreted as movement in whose course the figuration is constructed and then, in the "turning," deconstructed, making the *Weg und Wendung* the progress and pivot of the poem itself, the figure it itself describes.[42] I suggest further that *Weg* and *Wendung*, the turning of meaning (which is not separate from form or figure) as it interprets itself, fully characterize the formal qualities of the poem.

As I indicated earlier, the rhetorical questioning followed by interpretation applies the technique of the volta throughout the entire sonnet, appearing in nearly every line, occasionally within single lines. Several of the subsequent sonnets highlight the importance of turning for the formed quality of the figure; appropriately for a poem that thematizes the formative or *shaping* capacity of this turning, I.11

40. See Allemann's remark that "herein lies . . . the insight into the essence of the figure, that always asserts its connectedness only for awhile" (Allemann, *Zeit und Figur*, 73; my translation).

41. This conclusion is generally agreed on in the scholarship; see, e.g., Groddeck, "Kosmische Didaktik," 209. The difficulty, however, is to say *how* the poem does this.

42. Where Bosse understands this deconstruction as the dismantling of the figure, I suggest that it is interpretable as self-interpretation, self-questioning, and a demonstration of fictionality or self-reflection that does not preclude the satisfaction of the figure at the poem's close. See Bosse, "Auch die sternische Verbindung," 10.

is remarkably contained by sonnet form, without the pronounced enjambment that Rilke uses in many of the other sonnets to render the sonnet form fluid. But in keeping with the linguistic proximity between *Wendung*, *Wandlung*, and *Verwandlung* (turning, transition, and transformation), the transformative or metamorphic principles that guide the cycle as a whole, sonnet I.11 is not static. The migration of the volta within strophes and even lines—indicated by the sentences beginning with *denn*, *und*, *doch*, *und*, *aber*, *oder*, and *auch* ("for," "and," "however," "and," "but," "or," and "also")—is the formal instantiation of the poem's perpetual self-interpretation and self-questioning. Following these turns, the reader repeatedly recasts the potential relations between horse and rider, sense and sound, matter and mind, shifting the constellation's image across the space of an interpretive sky until its aptness emerges out of its very temporariness and self-questioning. This shifting or alteration invites the reader to test her world attunements and recognize the fit between mind and world even as it recognizes the temporary and conditioned (because human and subjective) nature of such a fit.

I.12 "Heil dem Geist . . ."

Sonnet I.12 continues I.11's discussion of figures and figurality along several lines. Most centrally, it introduces the idea of *Bezug* (relationality), one of Rilke's central terms for characterizing the work of balancing shaping tensions and contradictions accomplished by and within poetic figures. Not only do figures shape relations between differing and potentially opposing elements of life; they themselves are also shaped by tensions between images, ideas, and personae. The shaping created by such tension enables a further relation between form and formlessness, one that Rilke maps onto the opposing temporal qualities of persistence and transience. Both the attention to transience and the introduction of distinctions between true and untrue, actual and inactual, or literal and nonliteral reiterate the inadequacy and finitude of singular human orientations. The figurality that seeks orientation within human finitude thus simultaneously places that finitude in relation to forces outside itself, forces that are unknowable and yet familiar.

The sonnet begins by using the terms *wahr* (true), *eigentlich* (actual), and *wirklich* (real), implicitly contrasting them with *falsch/unwahr* (wrong or untrue), *uneigentlich* (inactual or nonliteral), and *unwirklich* (unreal). But this contrast itself opposes the commonsense distinction between figural and nonfigural speech:

> Heil dem Geist, der uns verbinden mag;
> denn wir leben wahrhaft in Figuren.
>
> (1–2)

Truthfulness is found in figures; even more strongly, according to the second line, we *live* in them. Using the word *Verbindung* (connection) as itself a connection

between the sonnets,[43] Rilke underscores the relational capabilities of the figure: *Verbindung/verbinden* not only links the two sonnets but has the potential to link human (?) subjects through the *Geist* (spirit) of (presumably) Orpheus. The next four lines (3–6) reiterate the distinctions of the first two along the lines of actual/inactual and real/unreal applied first to a temporal (in *Tag*, "day") and then to a (loosely speaking) spatial concept (*Bezug*, "relation"). In the third and fourth lines, the parallel between chronometer or measured time (here emphasized by the device of measurement, namely, the clock) is shifted from the temporal to the spatial realm by the claim that the two types of time move *neben* or "next to" each other, apparently without interference. Likewise, the relation between two kinds of space: our unknowing location (we have a *wahren Platz*, a "true place," but do not know what it is) works simultaneously within our *wirklichem Bezug* (real relation), a relation temporalized by the verb *handeln* (to act).

The normative vocabulary of *wahr* and *wirklich* (in our "true place" and "actual relation") and their distinction from the *Geschäfte* (businesses) in line 10 restate in poetic form the distinction between full attention to the subject's placement in the world and the businesses of modern life that Rilke first delineated in *Malte* and that I followed into his calls for a fuller existence in his late prose texts and letters.[44] This "true place" and "actual day" (*eigentlicher Tag*, 4; MacIntyre translates this as "intrinsic day") take up the call for an existence that places subjects in relation to death—our *wirklichem Bezug*. Thus it is appropriate that we should not know or recognize our full existence completely from within one part of it ("Ohne unsern wahren Platz zu kennen" [5; "Without knowing our proper place"]), but our creation of figures that illustrate fullness and the holding together of relations enables us to feel our *relation* to that wholeness (despite our lack of *knowledge*, we nonetheless act within our true relationality). This suggestion is substantiated by the sonnet's next image, which combines modern technology and the insect world in a figure of relationality: "Die Antennen fühlen die Antennen" (7; "The antennae feel the antennae"[45]). Strange as the image is, it is not the first time Rilke uses it to describe not only existential but intersubjective communion or communication: a month before the composition of the sonnets he describes Wera in a letter to her mother: "Oh how, how she loved, how she reached out with the antennae of her heart beyond all that is graspable and encompassable here."[46] But whereas Wera's love is described as reaching beyond or over (*über*) everything earthly, the antennae of the sonnet reach toward

43. The *Sonnets* progress from *Verbindung* (connection) in I.11.12 to *verbinden* (to connect) in I.12.1.

44. See the section "After *Malte*: Being-Here" in chapter 4.

45. MacIntyre translates this as "the antenna feel their sister-stations," emphasizing the technological element and enabling the rhyme with "relations" in line 6.

46. Rilke to Gertrud Ouckama Knoop, [?] January 1922, in Rilke, *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke*, 2:284.

each other, relating relations across what is described as *die leere Ferne* (empty distance, 8).

In a particularly clear instance of the *Sonnets*' self-actualizing or performative qualities, the distance and void (perhaps commensurate with the *Neue Weite*, "New open vistas," in I.11.8) are represented by an ellipsis and missing syllables: while the sixth line, with which line 8 rhymes, has nine syllables, line 8 has only seven. Moreover, the ellipsis and the continuation of the sentence it indicates create the tension the first line of the first tercet describes. The virtuosity of the sonnet becomes clear as this tension appears on three levels: first, it draws out the space between the second quartet and the first tercet, taking advantage of the structure of the sonnet form, which expects some sort of event in the transition from quartets to tercets, to increase tension and anticipation. Second, the sentence and its syntax delay their resolution by delaying the object of the verb *tragen*, "to carry or bear." (*Tragen* in the sense of "to bear weight"—"to hold up"—thus reverses the significance of *trügt*, "deceives," in I.11.12 even as the sonic affinity between *trug/trügt* rejects the binary distinction.) And third, both form and syntax correspond to the image being created, which is one of a relation tensed across space like a string across an instrument, anticipating and illuminating the apostrophe that closes the ninth line: "O Musik der Kräfte!" (O music of forces!). The shape of the poem itself on the page continues the Rilkean topos of the world as an instrument across which the relations of existence are stretched and against which they resonate.[47]

Whereas sonnet I.11, then, was a figure of the turning and shaping of constellations as figures that unite the contrasting forces of existence, I.12 attends to the tension created by these relations, likewise a shaping force. The two sonnets thus present two related but differing versions of figures as figurations of relationality. In the remaining five lines, I.12 returns to the vocabulary of technology and antennae in the word *Störung* (disturbance): the *läßlichen Geschäfte* (indulgent affairs, 11) of human actions divert disturbance from the true tensile relations that enable the *Musik der Kräfte*. This is an extraordinarily benign presentation of the human distraction condemned in *Malte*, and the use of a semitechnical word (in conjunction with antennae, *Störung* sounds like an interruption of a connection) anticipates that human behavior will not always be so harmless—sonnets I.17, 18, 19, 22, 23, and 24 contrast the hastiness of and damage done by an instrumentalizing worldview to the slower and deeper transformations of the earth. These earthly transformations appear in an abbreviated form at the end of I.12, as human actions seem perpetually

47. See, e.g., "Am Rande der Nacht" and de Man's reading of it (de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 33ff.). MacIntyre is obliged to sacrifice this effect in the interest of the rhyme scheme; he places the ellipsis in the ninth line.

to fall short of an earth that comes forward to meet them. Without any explicit connection to the previous lines, the last tercet insists:

> Selbst wenn sich der Bauer sorgt und handelt,
> wo die Saat im Sommer sich verwandelt,
> reicht er niemals hin. Die Erde *schenkt*.
>
> (12–14)

The generosity of the earth and the vocabulary of sowing and seeds prepare the next group of sonnets centered around fruit and trees (I.13–15). The subject's concern and care foreshadows not only the husbandry of natural products but their intertwining with death and loss; the sweetness of fruit comes from the dead: "die Toten . . . die die Erde stärken" (I.14.5; "The dead . . . who strengthen the earth"). In this progression of themes, the *Sonnets* demonstrate that figurality is not merely a poetological principle or a linguistic trick; figurality, in the logic of the cycle, opens onto the themes of the earthly, sensuality, and death that I read as central to Rilke's engagement with problems of human finitude.

I.6 "Ist er ein Hiesiger?"

The sixth sonnet of the first part, the first sonnet in the cycle to use the word *Bild* (image), likewise presents the concept of *Bezug* (relation) for the first time, linking it, moreover, explicitly to visuality. Whereas the first five sonnets focus on the ear, hearing, and singing, the sixth turns to the eye and *das Geschaute*, "that which is seen." (That *Bezug* is likewise a sonic relation should already be clear from I.12; the interplay between visuality and orality is a fundamental part of the cycle's synesthesia.) And this visuality is introduced by way of a series of contrasts between Orpheus's nature or being and a second group, referred to only as *ihr* ("you," plural)—possibly other poets, or human subjects more generally. Rilke contrasts the two specifically along the lines of their relation to death. While Orpheus comes from *beiden* / *Reichen* (both / realms, 2–3), the addressees have an antagonistic or oppositional relation toward death, as explicated in the second quartet. The sonnet ultimately extends the idea (present more implicitly in I.12) that a recast relation to death or mortality instantiates a shift in perception: the vagueness, mysticism, and hermeticism of occult practices become, for Orpheus, as clear as *der klarste Bezug* (the clearest relation, 11; MacIntyre translates "the clearest things" to rhyme with "ring" in line 14). And the sonnet figures this shift as an activity of mediating between clarity of relation and obscurity (or absence of differentiation), presenting a series of framing structures organized around images of blending, mixing, or dissolution. It thus enacts the organization of the relation between relation and nonrelation it calls for as part of the human orientation toward mortality and finitude.

An Orphic relation to death changes human world-orientations, shifting fear and hostility to praise—an activity that, centrally, calls not for religious or mystical experience (Rilke has already rejected them in his late works) but for poetic production.

Like I.11, I.6 begins with a question, this time not about the external world (Does such and such a constellation exist?) but about Orpheus himself: "Ist er ein Hiesiger?" (1; "Does he belong here?"). The answer, "No," seems to separate Orpheus from the human and earthly, but it is immediately qualified to explain that his nature comes from "*both* / realms" (1–2; my emphasis). It seems that these realms might refer to either mortal/immortal or living/dead; although the previous sonnet's insistence on Orpheus's death and transience strongly suggests the latter, both would entail a recast relation to death. (His nature is also described as *weit*, "broad, ample, or far," linking it to the "Neue Weite" in I.11 in which figures turn, emerge, and decay.) Moreover, the subsequent lines root (literally) the dual nature of Orpheus in the earthly by way of an analogy to the relation between roots and branches of a tree:

> Kundiger böge die Zweige der Weiden,
> wer die Wurzeln der Weiden erfuhr.
>
> (3–4)

Experience of the subterranean and the ethereal elements of a natural object, the tree, would enable more skillful shaping (bending: *bogen*) of its visible parts. And the bending of branches recalls both the twisting of funeral or mourning wreaths and, in reference to the end of I.5, the bending of the lyre, itself a figure of Orpheus's transgression of the boundaries between death and life.[48] The analogy implies that Orpheus has a deeper and clearer relation both to the living and to the dead (those who are above and who are below ground) by virtue of his experiences in the underworld.

The second quartet differentiates Orpheus from an addressed group, *ihr*, who seem to have an antagonistic or hostile relation to the dead: they are commanded to avoid leaving milk and bread out overnight lest the dead be attracted by the nourishment they can no longer enjoy. Line 5 mentions going to bed, explicitly, returning to the topos of sleep central to the second sonnet of the first part, which connects sleep to death and to Wera.[49] The line likewise initiates a further contrast

48. See sonnets I.3 and I.5 in particular (KA 2:242–43; MacIntyre 7 and 11).

49. "Und alles war ihr Schlaf. / . . . Sie schlief die Welt. . . . / Sieh, sie erstand und schlief. / Wo ist ihr Tod?" (I.2, 5, 9, 11–12) "Her sleep was everything. / . . . She slept the world. . . . / She rose and fell asleep. / Where is her death?" KA 2:241; MacIntyre 5.

between mortals and Orpheus that emphasizes visuality even as it takes place in unseeing eyes under sleeping eyelids:

> Aber er, der Beschwörende, mische
> unter der Milde des Augenlids
>
> ihre Erscheinung in alles Geschaute;
>
> (7–9)

Orpheus seems to be able to call up the dead in dreams; the first tercet's portrayal of the magic of the plants rue and fumitory seem appropriate to the vagueness and otherworldly qualities of dreaming and the process of *mischen*, "mixing" (7).[50] But the final line of the first tercet denies such hazy mixing or occultism; for Orpheus, the appearances of the dead are as true as the *der klarste Bezug* (the clearest relation, 11) Particularly in conjunction with the meaning of *Raute* as "rhombus," *Bezug* reads as geometrical; its clarity forms the locus of comparison between human and Orphic practices of relation to the dead.

Clarity, truth, and definition, then, seem to prompt the emergence of the word *Bild* (image) in the first line of the last tercet. Without explanation, the line insists: "Nichts kann das gültige Bild ihm verschlimmern" (12; "Nothing impairs the [image] that's true"); what exactly that picture *is* remains unclear. It seems, however, to emerge from the relation outlined in *Bezug*, a figure of our relation to the dead traced more clearly by Orpheus than we could ever perceive it to be. The poem's final lines likewise link the realms of the living (contained in "rooms") and the dead (in graves) via their focus on concrete objects: ring, clasp, and jug. All of these objects, in addition to being commonly found at grave sites, represent figures of joining or turning: the circle of the ring mirrors the turning of the jug in its formation, while the clasp holds beginning and ending together, allowing all three to figure the unity rather than polarization of existence between the realms of the living and the dead. The call to praise these objects underscores the positive and open rather than hostile and protective relation toward death enabled by a recast stance toward mortality from an Orphic perspective.

The poem's contrast between image/clarity/visuality/relation and dreams/magic/mixing is taken up formally as well as semantically. Perhaps most strikingly, the enjambment that runs from line 8 to line 9 enacts the "mixing" it calls for in the optative (*mische*), as the sentence overruns the boundaries of sonnet

50. These plant names are themselves highly suggestive: fumitory is called "earth smoke" in English as well as in German, and the occult practices of burning herbs, the burial practice of funeral pyres, and the Hades-like connotations of smoke from the earth merge in its common name. *Raute* (rue) refers, first, to the plant buried with the dead, especially deceased children, to protect them from evil. See Thomas Krämer, *Rilkes "Sonette an Orpheus" Erster Teil: Ein Interpretationsgang* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1999), 80. But it also means "rhombus," the geometrical figure, thus mimicking the blending of myth and geometry found in the constellation.

form and mixes quartet and tercet. The poem thus performs repeated processes of framing and blending, putting interior and exterior in relation to each other in a figure of second-order relation *between* relation or shape and mixing or indeterminacy. So the extended description of blending or nondifferentiation is differentiated by the frame of the first quartet and last tercet, placing relation and the absence of relation into relation with each other. Several smaller instances of framed indeterminacy appear within each framing structure: the initiating question frames an enjambment as *beiden* / *Reichen* (both / realms) is divided between the first two lines, further framed by the *n* sounds of *Nein* and *Natur* (1, 4; No and nature); lines 7–9, calling for this mixing or blending, are surrounded by a further interior frame created by the contrast between the *ihr* ("you," plural), whose carelessness could create a blending between the realms of the living and the dead, and Orpheus, whose experience of this blending is one of clear relations. The sonnet's enactment of its own calls for forming and framing thus emphasize that mystery, difficulty, mortality, and lack of clarity are not alien to the Orphic standpoint or poetic act, but are rather to be incorporated within it. Because the form of the sonnet itself allows the tension between form and formlessness to persist, it demonstrates once again that Rilke's inhabitation of finitude does not entail shifting from one side of an opposition to another but rather the holding open of those polarities in a fuller relation to existence and finitude.

I.8 "Nur im Raum der Rühmung . . ."

In I.8, the theme of praise (*Rühmung*), initiated in I.6 and expanded in I.7, continues; whereas in I.6 and I.7 calls for praise contrast with presentations of death and mortality, I.8 creates an oppositional link between praise and lament (*Klage*), thus shifting from extrasubjective considerations of the relation between the realms of the mortal and the dead to a perspective within the mortal or human world, in which lament represents an emotional and subjective response to death. As it thematizes the relation between lament and praise, the sonnet likewise connects types of poetic production and modes of emotional experience; in doing so, it both personifies and spatializes these affects into the nymph Klage (Lament) and the *Raum der Rühmung* (land or space of Praise, 1). The movement of a (here, personified) living being through space recalls the movement of horse and rider in I.11, while the constellation (Stern*bild*) into which lamenting voices coalesce in the final lines makes the mutually constitutive relation between image and voice explicit for the first time. In doing so, the constellation evokes both the tension between organization and fluidity (present in the theme of *Bezug* paradigmatic for poetic orientation within finitude) and the synesthesia central to the cycle's presentation of embodied subjectivity. Finally, the themes of embodied subjectivity, affective responsiveness, and transience or temporal fluidity are combined in the literal fluidity of human

tears contained within a spring. The image of the spring introduces the motifs of liquidity and containment that appear in multiple sonnets as figures of the shaping tension between transience and persistence. Here, as in I.11, Rilke combines orientations to human finitude with an emphasis on the shared but temporary nature of these orientations. He uses the sonnet form not merely to depict but to enact the shaping and fluidity, persistance and transience, that are central to such orientations within finitude.

The first appearance of constellations in the *Sonnets* does not occur until the penultimate line of I.8. At its outset, the sonnet continues the theme of praise that emerged in the final line of I.6 and was elaborated upon in I.7; in an apparent inversion of the relation of lament and praise presented in the *Elegies*, I.8 locates the spring formed by the tears of a personified Lament within the space of praise (*Raum der Rühmung*).[51] The sonnet introduces the need of a space of praise for the movement or presence of *Klage*, "lament"; this lament is personified using mythological details from the story of Byblis, whose unhappy incestuous love culminates in her tears being transformed into a spring by Lelegeian nymphs (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 9.454–665). The fluidity of her tears links I.8 to the previous sonnet's images of the heart's blood as overflowing wine, as does the task Rilke gives the *Nymphe des geweinten Quells* (line 2) in the sonnet of watching over *unserm Niederschlage*, a metaphor of precipitation for human tears. This overflowing finds its representation in the poem's formal features: the first sentence overruns the first quartet (subtly through the use of commas, appropriate to a gently flowing spring). The spring takes on Orphic and thus poetological import by virtue of being the cliff that also holds (*trägt*, "carries": the same verb that Rilke used to describe the relation between horse and rider and the tension held by empty distances) the altars and gates of the *Tempel im Gehör* (Temple in hearing) erected to Orpheus in the first sonnet.

Lines 6–11 complicate the personification of *Klage* by describing her in relation to *Geschwiste[r] im Gemüt* (MacIntyre translates this as "the Passions' sisterhood," but *Geschwister* is the gender-neutral "siblings"), specifically Jubel (rejoicing) and Sehnsucht (longing). In doing so, these lines continue to elaborate the relation of joy and lament to one another and, as will appear in the figure of the constellation in line 13, to poetry. Klage is described as (potentially) the youngest of the *Geschwiste[r] im Gemüt*; she *lernt noch* (still learns, 10), and her activity is *mädchenhändig* (with girlish hands, 10). *Jüngste* also suggests that lament is the first emotion in reaction to loss, one that cannot achieve the perspective necessary to understanding the belonging together of death and life. Instead, Lament remains preoccupied with loss and absence:

51. In the *Tenth Elegy*, conversely, the *Quelle der Freude* is located in the *Landschaft der Klage* (landscape of lament) and flows from *Gebirgen des Ur-Leids* (mountains of primal sorrow), as Engel and Fülleborn point out (KA 2:734).

mädchenhändig
zählt sie nächtelang das alte Schlimme.

(10–11)

The "knowledge" that belongs to joy or praise ("Jubel *weiß*" [Rejoicing *knows*]) and the openness or confession of longing ("Sehnsucht ist geständig" [Longing is contrite]) contrast with the unmediated grief of Klage. But (and here Rilke shifts the volta of the sonnet, this time placing it at the outset of the last tercet rather than at the transition from quartet to tercet) precisely Lament's newness or purity of feeling seems to relate it to specifically human feeling:

Aber plötzlich, schräg und ungeübt,
hält sie doch ein Sternbild unsrer Stimme
in den Himmel, den ihr Hauch nicht trübt.

(12–14)

The rhyme between *Schlimme* (evil, 11) and *Stimme* (voice, 13) suggests that it is the nymph Klage's lack of mediation or distance toward suffering that makes her capable of producing a constellation of *human* voices; the plural *uns* (us) implies that the voice is human, not that of the nymph Klage, while the singular *Stimme* creates a single image or *Bild*, underscoring the synesthesia of the constellation and poetic production as it hovers between orality and visuality.

Furthermore, the group ("we") designated by the repeated use of the first-person plural (*wir*) in I.11 and I.12 appears in I.8 only in the possessive *unser* (our) with reference to (human) tears and the (human) voice, insisting on the relation between tears and the voice, linked in the aesthetic production of the sonnet. The visualization of the voice in the constellation offers a potential figure of the relation between the written form of the sonnet and its traditional identity as a *Klinggedicht*, or "sound poem";[52] I show further the necessary relation between that poetic production and the tension between fluidity and formation in my reading of I.9. For the moment, I want to reiterate that, as itself a figure in the form of a sonnet, I.8 as a whole acts out the flowing, overlapping, and rippling back into itself of a spring, first through the subtle contrast between syntax and line endings, and then in the tercets in a conflict between meter and rhyme scheme. Lines 9, 10, 11, and 13 all have ten syllables and end with an unaccented syllable, while lines 12 and 14 have nine and end with an accented syllable. The rhyme scheme is *eef gfg*, which further disrupts the unity of each tercet: the first tercet appears to start with a couplet and

52. See, e.g., Groddeck's claim that the constellation is a visual metaphor of the voice, i.e., the transformation of the audible into the visual, like the written (legible) signs of the sound-poem/sonnet (Groddeck, "Kosmische Didaktik," 219).

then has an unrhymed line that does not receive its rhyme word until the second line of the next tercet. The sonnet genre as experimenting with fluid (literally liquid in depictions of bodies of water) thought encased in rigid form is of course a canonical topos, but Rilke's sonnet makes that form itself a representation of bounded fluidity, corresponding precisely to the overflowing tears that form a spring whose images will, in the next sonnet, take up the holding together of life and death, lament and joy.

I.9 "Nur wer die Leier schon hob . . ."

Sonnet I.9 takes up several of the central themes of I.8 in particular and the cycle as a whole, including the simultaneously aural and visual nature of poetic production (voice as creating a *Bild*, or "image"), the relation toward death and the dead, and the topos of liquidity in bodies of water. Most importantly, however, the theme of the tension between persistence and transience is extended into a new semantic field with new connotations. The final lines call for voices (whether those of poets, humans, or the dead is not clear) to become *ewig und mild* (eternal and mild), a set of terms that seems at least slightly contradictory (the strong or harsh might be expected to be more persistent than what is mild; Rilke addresses this expectation directly in II.12). Such voices, however, are eternal within a *Doppelbereich* (dual realm) that emerges, I contend, as neither the transient nor the persistent but the relation between them; the slight paradox of the persistence of mildness begins to elaborate the idea that transience will turn out to be not opposed to but necessary for persistence. As the poem figures the *Doppelbereich* it describes by way of metrical doubleness throughout its structure, Rilke tentatively elucidates poetic presentations of the call in his letters for individual and finite subjects to orient themselves toward death (that is, toward their own transience) not as other or alien but as a component of existence. What emerges in poetic figures (as opposed to more discursive prose texts or letters) is the more paradoxical idea that only in undertaking this reorientation can subjects begin to reach outside their own isolation toward something persistent or even "eternal" in its very passing away.

Several more specific elements also link I.8 and I.9: both sonnets refer to voices (although they are clearly human in I.8, and in I.9 it is not clear whose or what voices are described); the fluidity of the tears and the spring (*Quelle*) in I.8 return in the form of a *Teich* (pool or pond) and the *Bild* (image) that "blurs" (*verschwimmt*); finally, the description of (implicitly) the reflection in the water as a *Bild* hints at a connection between the myth of Narcissus (as a personification of the nexus of death, beauty, and poetry) and the topos of the figure that appeared as a constellation in I.8. The sonnet's first project, however, is to tighten the relation between Orpheus and a mode of poetic production emerging from death and absence, apparent

in the reference to the lyre and its being played among the dead (the shades or shadows):

> Nur wer die Leier schon hob
> auch unter Schatten,
> darf das unendliche Lob
> ahnend erstatten.
>
> (1–4)

Here, too, the topos of the constellation occurs in the reference to Orpheus's lyre, itself placed among the stars after the singer's dismemberment by the Maenads.[53] Death thus appears as a necessary component of praise. This relation is complicated by a connection specifically to memory in the second quartet, which likewise emphasizes the *sonic* quality of Orphic poetry or singing:

> Nur wer mit Toten vom Mohn
> aß, von dem ihren,
> wird nicht den leisesten Ton
> wieder verlieren.
>
> (5–8)

Poppies, associated with forgetting, establish the complex relation between forgetting (transience to and in an individual subject) and poetic production: precisely the person who eats the food of the dead and has been among them will not lose (forget? miss?) the softest of tones.

Two important shifts take place in the shift from quartet to tercet: first, the sonnet moves from portrayal of Orpheus and the dead to the activities of an *uns* (us), and, second, the sonic register becomes visual without losing any of its fluid qualities. Given the mythic frame of reference, the figure of Narcissus resonates fairly immediately within the description of the *Spieglung im Teich* (reflection in the pool, 9), also anticipating the mirror sonnets of part II in a mythically and intrasubjectively inflected version of the self-commentary and self-interpretation of the figure that occurred in I.11. The seemingly contradictory relation between the fluidity or dissolution of the image in lines 9 and 10 and the command "*Wisse das Bild*" (*Know the image*; MacIntrye translates this as "*Make the image yours*") in line 11 continues the paradox of continuity and change that emerged around the tension between poppies and memory in the second quartet and places it explicitly in relation to one of the central tensions of the figure.

53. For an account of the myth, see Gertrud Höhler, "Rainer Maria Rilkes Orpheus," in *Mythos und Mythologie in der Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Helmut Koopmann (Frankfurt a.M.: Klosterman, 1979), 380.

The final tercet seems to elaborate on the reasons for or achievements of following the command to know the image:

> Erst in dem Doppelbereich
> werden die Stimmen
> ewig und mild.
>
> (12–14)

It is not immediately clear what *the* double realm (the line uses the dative form of the definite article) refers to; the most immediate referent seems to be the doubling of the world in the reflection. But while reflection is precisely what dissolves (*verschwimmen*), *das Bild* (the image) is what the hearer/reader is commanded to *know*; I want to suggest that the double realm in which voices are both mild and eternal is that of the relation *between* reflection and world, and as such the *Bild* is not the reflection itself (after all, Rilke uses different words for reflection and image, *Spiegelung* and *Bild*, respectively) but the doubleness of self-reflection.

The term *Doppelbereich*, moreover, provides insight into the techniques Rilke uses to make the sonnet a figure of doubleness that expresses the complex relation it presents between persistence and decay. The structure of the Italian sonnet, in general, exists in a double realm between multiples of two and multiples of three (quartet/quartet//tercet/tercet or octave/sestet); Rilke heightens this impression by alternating lines of three and lines of two strong syllables throughout the first eight lines. In the tercets the first two lines of each continue this pattern, while lines 11 and 14 preserve the pattern of two strong syllables but reduce the total syllables in each line (seven/five/four). This tapering does not interrupt the doubleness of the sonnet's meter, but it executes the mildness and fluidity that in the sonnet is the proper form of memory. The gentle fading away of the end of each tercet figures the necessity of decay, ending, and susceptibility to the passage of time for the human situation in the fullness of existence; knowing the figure of the sonnet requires the reader to recognize that what II.12 will call *Erstarren* (becoming rigid) and *Bleiben* (staying or remaining), antagonistic attempts to exceed temporality, are distorting forces that preclude the transformation of the earthly and ordinary that is the *Sonnets*' project.

II.12 "Wolle die Wandlung."

The first sonnet of the second part to mention the figure directly is II.12, the pendant sonnet to I.12 in which the program of figurality becomes a vehicle for confident praise. Sonnet II.12 is also the last sonnet in the cycle to mention *Figur* explicitly, in keeping with the second part's more diffuse presentation of themes and images from the first part following the death and dismemberment of Orpheus described in I.26. And here the theme of transience and persistence is linked

most strongly to the tension between identity and change created by the cycle's central theme of metamorphosis or *Verwandlung*. This theme further describes the formal principle of the cycle, with its shifting and self-commentating network of images, formal features, and sounds that develop between individual sonnets, between groups, and between the two parts. *Verwandlung* is thus legible as the specifically human attitude of openness and responsiveness toward our own finitude in the infinity of existence, and, more concretely, the formal and semantic impulse of II.12. Under the auspices of the theme and structure of transformation, II.12 reiterates the paradox between persistence and decay even more strongly than the earlier sonnets, as attempts to achieve *Bleiben* (remaining) lead to violent destruction, while self-dissolution ("Wer sich als Quelle ergießt" [9; "He who pours himself out as a spring"]) offers continuity between beginning and end (11). And the poem enacts this relation between persistence and transience in the contrast between its unified sonic structure and the perpetual presentation of "turning points" as the sonnet becomes a figure for the relation between finitude and persistence that describes figurality's capacity for creating orientations within finitude.

II.12 also collects and reiterates numbers of the motifs I have traced in previous sonnets: not only the reference to *Figur* but the presence of *Geist* (spirit) connects it to I.12; like I.8, II.12 refers (here indirectly) to Byblis in line 9, and in line 12 to praise or happiness intimately made material in a physical space that is also related to separation and loss; both Byblis and, in the thirteenth line, Daphne, link the sonnet to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and thus to the theme of metamorphosis (also translated as *Verwandlung*) more generally. Like I.11, II.12 begins with a command; here, the theme of transformation could hardly be more explicit: "Wolle die Wandlung" (1; "Will the transformation"). A further command spills over into the second line and transforms *Wandlung* into *Verwandlung*:

> O sei für die Flamme begeistert,
> drin sich ein Ding dir entzieht, das mit Verwandlungen prunkt;
>
> (1–2)

The flame in which *ein Ding* (a thing; MacIntyre translates this as "something") recedes seems to stand for the consuming and disappearing of all experience; *entziehen* (to withdraw) is the *Sonnets*' descriptor for the transition of objects from present to absent, from *Besitz* (possession) to *Bezug* (relation),[54] the latter being the spatialized version of connection or relation that traces figurality. Already this withdrawing implies that present and possessed objects are themselves no more than a component of figurality, and it is their transformation that enables them to exist in the tension between absence and presence, fictionality and aptness, that is

54. KA 2:753.

constitutive of the figure. The central moment of this transformation appears in the next line in what appears to be a justification for such enthusiasm for transformation and change:

> jener entwerfende Geist, welcher das Irdische meistert,
> liebt in dem Schwung der Figur nichts wie den wendenden Punkt.
>
> (3–4)

Schwung der Figur (soaring of figures) suggests the turning of constellations through the sky.[55] *Wendenden Punkt* (point of turning) can also be taken literally, as either the precise moment in which the thing recedes into relationality or simply the turning point of the poem.

And the next quartet does turn from praise of transformation or metamorphosis to a warning about the misguidedness of attempts at stasis or unchanging persistence:

> Was sich ins Bleiben verschließt, schon *ists* das Erstarrte;
> wähnt es sich sicher im Schutz des unscheinbaren Grau's?
>
> (5–6)

The rejection of *Bleiben* (remaining, abiding) and, even more strongly, *das Erstarrte* (the numbed or ossified) serves as an important reminder that the figure, properly conceived, is measured and shaped but not rigid or fixed. Although the question is not directly answered, the apparent safety (of, it appears in the subsequent lines, an unformed stone) is revealed as transient; something still more irrevocable and perhaps immaterial (*abwesender Hammer*) will transform it, too. Strong *w* sounds alternate breathlessly with *h* and long *e* sounds to spell or sound out the word *Wehe* (woe) four times: "**W**ar**t***e*, ein **H**är**t***e*stes **w**arnt aus d*e*r F*e*rne das **H**ar**t***e*. / ***Wehe***—: ab**w***e*send*e*r **H**amm*e*r holt aus!" (7–8; "Wait, a hardest forewarns the hard from far away! / Alas, an absent hammer upheaves!") Moreover, the eighth line, concerned with woe, violence, and absence, is itself noticeably shorter (nine syllables, with a clear break marked by an em dash and a colon after *Wehe*, "Alas" or "Woe"), reiterating the failure of *das Erstarrte* to persist and dynamizing the meter of the sonnet.

In a second *wendender Punkt*, "turning point" (this one at the standard volta locations between quartets and tercets), the tercets present the examples of "Wer sich als Quelle ergießt" (He who pours out himself as a spring; a reference to the story of Byblis abstracted to a potential activity for poet and/or reader) and Daphne as figures of transformation. The spatialization of creativity to *das Geschaffne* (creation, the created) through which the self-transforming and fluid subject is led is likewise temporalized in the relation of beginning and end in the eleventh line, as

55. Groddeck points out that *Wendepunkt* is an astronomical/astrological term as well (Groddeck, "Kosmische Didaktik," 220).

it "mit Anfang oft schließt und mit Ende beginnt" (11; "often ends at the start and begins at the end"). As beginning and end meet in a circular or cyclical conception of time, their meeting underscores the Orphic program of the wholeness or fullness of existence, which, as Rilke remarked in a letter to the Countess of Sizzo,[56] encompasses both life and death.

The poem reiterates this circularity sonically as well: the *w* sounds of *Wolle* and *Wind* open and close the poem. The *w* sounds that appear throughout the poem are in large part an effect of one of Rilke's grammatical permutations of *Wandlung* or *Wandeln* (transformation)—an effect itself sometimes grammatically referred to as *Wandlung*.[57] Transformation is grammatically transformed and linked with prefixes to *Ver-wandlung* and thematically to *Wendung*. But despite the poem's insistence on transformation, the sonic level of the poem is astonishingly consistent: *Wolle*, *Wandlung*, *was*, *wähnt*, *warnt*, *warte*, *wehe*, *wer*, *will*, *wandelst*, and *Wind*, in addition to the internal *w* sounds in *verwandelte* and *abwesend*, create an acoustic network across the poem.[58] This acoustic element remains constant in the grammatical and thematic *Verwandlungen* of the sonnet; as such, it demonstrates on a lexical or material level the complex relationship between persistence and decay, constancy and change, that I have followed in I.8 and 9 (perhaps also in the fictionality and temporariness of I.11) as a central tension of Rilke's figures. The tension between identity and change, even death, reminds the reader that the inhabitation of finitude entails neither an insistent and unidirectional projection of subjectivity onto the world nor self-relinquishing immersion in the flux of time or nature. II.12 acknowledges the desire for assured persistence or even eternity; its images show that attempts to achieve such persistence lead directly to an ossification that denies finitude and thus destroys the relation to the wholeness of existence opened up by Orphic transformation of the ordinary and transient.

II.18 "Tänzerin: o du Verlegung . . ."

Wera appears indirectly in her attribute as a dancer in II.18, making it a prelude to the penultimate sonnet (II.28), in which her biography is addressed more specifically. As with the Wera motif as a whole, II.18 is centrally concerned with human relations toward death and finitude: here, a dancer's final twist or turn mimics

56. "Like the moon, life surely has a side permanently turned away from us which is not its [opposite] but its complement toward perfection, toward consummation, toward the really sound and full sphere and orb of *being*" (Rilke to Countess Margot Sizzo, 6 January 1923, in Rilke, *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke*, 2:316).

57. *Grimms Wörterbuch*, in its article on *Wandlung*, specifies that in linguistic tracts, *beugung* is "declinatio" (declension), *wandlung*, "conjugatio" (conjugation), *fügung*, "syntaxis" (syntax) (*Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm*, online ed., s.v. "Wandlung").

58. This sonic consistency is much less striking in English: "will," "transformation," "what," "believes," "wait," "forewarns," "woe," "who," "will," "transforms," and "wind."

other figures of turning and completion, placing artistic accomplishment irrevocably in relation to death. Appropriately, the sonnet is caught in an ambiguity between praise and mourning—it celebrates Wera's accomplishments (or rather, those of the unnamed dancer) even as the ending of her movement falls together with the ending of her life. The poem's uncertainty manifests itself in the overwhelming presence of the negative *nicht* in its repeated questioning and in an overarching tendency toward repetition or redescription, as if the speaker sought to reinscribe lament as celebration, but remained unsure of success. Formally, the sonnet's pronounced variation between long and short line lengths reiterates both the dynamic of forward motion and controlled turning together with the tentativeness of its repeated questioning—it never moves into a full flow of equal line lengths uninterrupted by enjambment or punctuation. The sonnet thus enacts the movement of lament (here represented by negation and questioning) through a land of celebration (in the descriptions of the dancer's completeness and virtuosity) in a figuration of finitude's complex relation (*Bezug*) to grief and joy.

Like II.12, II.18 begins with an address; unlike II.12, that address is not a command and is directed to a specific person, a *Tänzerin* (dancer, 1). This apparent addressee complicates the most striking feature of the sonnet, namely, its deployment of questions. Because they seem to be addressed to the dancer (presumably but perhaps not only Wera), it is not clear whether they are rhetorical questions. Like the questions in I.11, they are posed in the negative form that initially seems to expect a positive answer. Whereas in I.11 this expectation was undercut from the outset by its reference to a fictional constellation, in II.18 the questions seem to work within the expectation of a positive answer. But by the end of the poem, the word *nicht* has been repeated six times in five questions ("nahm er nicht . . . ?" 3; "Blühte nicht . . . ?" 5; "war sie nicht . . . nicht . . . ?" 7; "Sind sie nicht . . . ?" 10; "ist nicht . . . ?" 12), leading to the uncertainty that it really might *not* be the case that the questions are to be answered affirmatively. The speaker also consistently repeats and qualifies his questioning assertions, as in lines 7–8 ("die Wärme, / diese unzählige Wärme aus dir?") and line 9 ("Aber er trug auch, er trug . . ."; But it also bore, it bore . . .). Several lines seem to redefine or qualify their original object, so that the *Wirbel am Schluss* (whirl of the finish, 3) becomes a *Baum aus Bewegung* (tree of motion, 3), and the *Zeichnung* (drawing, 12) becomes a *Zug* (line or stroke, 13). The sonnet's tentative self-qualifications reiterate that there can be no unequivocal assurances in relations toward mortality or finitude.

This uncertainty is inherent to the *Sonnets*' engagement with human finitude and mortality, taken up so often in the tension between persistence and transience. In the second line the translation (*Verlegung*) of transience into movement (*Vergehen* to *Gang*, "gait") uses a grammatical-etymological transformation to describe the transformation of mortality or transience into aesthetic making. The end of the sentence (one of only two nonquestions in the sonnet) praises the addressee's bringing of her dance as an offering: "wie brachtest du's dar" (2; "how you made it

clear!"). The figure of the tree encompasses both the deepening of the roots among the dead and the expansion of limbs and leaves into the air, and is as such itself a figure of the unity of death and life recalling the connections between roots and branches in I.6. But this "tree of motion" is itself the figure of completion of the dancer's spinning or turning (*Wirbel am Schluß* [whirl of the finish, 3]), which encompasses as tree and as turn *das erschwungene Jahr* ("the hard-won year," but *erschwungen* includes the participle of *schwingen*, "to swing"), recalling the turning point of transformation into figures in II.12. The warmth that radiates from the figure of the dancer, meanwhile, and the summer whose fruits appear in the first tercet, recall the earth's gift of the ripening of the seed at the end of I.12.

The tree's fruition is described specifically as *bearing* fruit ("er trug" [9; "it bore"]). The conjugated form of the verb *tragen* (past tense imperfect) links the figure to the bearing of the rider by the horse in I.11 but also to the *Be*trug (deception or fictionality) of the figure represented in the constellation. The natural act of ripening, which the farmer in II.12 cannot reach, extends in II.18 to artifacts as well: the vase and jug are described as *gereift* (ripened) in the eleventh line. Both the connection of the sweetness of fruit to the *Lehm* (clay) of the dead (I.14) and the vase or jug's connotations of rounding off or finishing of movement make them, too, figures of completion and death that depict the fullness of existence in their rounded forms.[59] This connection has, of course, already been made explicitly in the praise of *Fingerring, Spange und Krug* (ring, clasp, and jug) in I.6, with its direct consideration of Orpheus's shifting relations between the dead and the living. These figures indicate an aesthetic or craftsmanly synesthesia (a more physical complement to the interplay between visuality and aurality in the earlier sonnets): the tactile spinning and shaping of the pot and the visual and dynamic forming of the dancer combine with drawing (*Zug*, "stroke") and writing (*geschrieben*). Moreover, the image integrates relationality with embodied subjectivity as *Bezug* becomes *Zug*, and the wide spans of the cosmos are written not on but *by* a human face.

In addition, the tree recalls the *Baum im Ohr* (tree in the ear, I.1.1) evoked or created by Orpheus's singing and its poetics of hearing. Thus both Orpheus and Wera are present in the tercets, placed into relation by the movement of the dancer forming the Orphic tree and the Orphic poet writing the stroke of the dancer's face. That face, appearing *rasch an die Wandung der eigenen Wendung* (swiftly in the texture of their own turning, 14), recalls the face reflected in the pond of tears in I.9. There, the double realm of persistence and transience was portrayed in the double meter of the poem; here, the tension between absence and presence, life and death, constitutive of Rilke's figures appears in the placing of the network of several of those paradigmatic figures into the ambiguity between negative and positive answers to the questioning that shapes the sonnet. The poem creates the field for reflection (per I.9, a *Doppelbereich*, or double realm) in which the relation between

59. Gerok-Reiter, *Wink und Wandlung*, 216.

persistence and transience unfolds, turning *Zug* (stroke, line) into *Bezug* (relation) in its poetic shaping.

II.28 "O komm und geh."

Wera reappears in II.28, the penultimate sonnet, as it forms the interior frame of the double framing of the sonnets by Wera and Orpheus.[60] It is primarily concerned with human aesthetic production, particularly Wera's, as it unites her dance steps with other art forms in the kind of synesthetic blending characteristic of the cycle and its treatment of finitude. The sonnet itself both depicts and is a figure of the tension across an empty middle, familiar from I.12. Here this figure is affiliated directly with Orpheus's lyre; the shape of the lyre itself, as a frame around emptiness crossed by tensed strings, both corresponds to the sonnet's participation in the cycle's frame and refers to the conditions of possibility of song itself (emptiness in which to resonate). The dancer's activity and her glance (or perhaps Orpheus's) undertake the boundary crossing performed by the rider in I.11, thus linking the two sonnets; whereas in II.18 the dancer's movement was the shape around an empty middle, here, the dancer mimics the crossing of space by the strings of the lyre in her own enactment of the tensile boundary crossing of relationality or *Bezug*.

The first line addresses or commands Wera to perform the activity attributed to Orpheus in the fifth sonnet of the first part ("Er [Orpheus] kommt und geht" [I.5.6; "He comes and goes"): "O komm und geh" (1; "Oh, come and go").[61] She is directly implicated in the Orphic poetology by the strange image of a tree that responds to her movement, recalling both the tree *of* movement and silence in II.18 and the "tree in the ear" in the first sonnet of the cycle. The figure created by both dance and poetry is connected explicitly to a constellation that, like the constellation Reiter (rider), is temporary (*für einen Augenblick* [for an instant, 2]) but complete (*ergänze*, 1). That dance and its figures are the ordering in which humans, although transient, supersede the ordering of nature in its sheer physical there-ness. Constellations are both more fleeting and less concrete, but they gather and shape perceptions of the external world, allowing subjects to place themselves in that world and the world in themselves, thus exceeding (*übertreffen*) natural physicality as the line exceeds the quartet:

> darin wir die dumpf ordnende Natur
>
> vergänglich übertreffen.
>
> (4–5)

60. Gerok-Reiter, *Wink und Wandlung*, 41.

61. In fact this could also be a command to the reader, as the attributes that make clear that the *Du* (You) here addressed is Wera appear only gradually in the rest of the poem.

The joining of Stern*bild*, Tanz*figur*, dance, and singing/hearing recalls the Orphic synesthesia that has appeared throughout the cycle; here, however, aesthetic production appears to be motivated by an *unerhörte Mitte* (unheard-of center).[62] Curiously, the middle point of the poem is anything but empty—through a striking enjambment, it seems rather to stretch syntax over the space between strophes:

> wenn ein Baum sich lang
>
> besann
>
> (8–9)

This middle is initially not named as such but instead described as the originary space of Orphic poetry:

> die Stelle, wo die Leier
> sich tönend hob
>
> (10–11)

And then a representation of the unheard or unheard-of does appear, as the line is interrupted by an em dash and a semicolon: "sich tönend hob—; die unerhörte Mitte" (12; "resounding—the unheard-of center"). Although *unerhört* in fact carries the same idiomatic connotation in German as *unheard-of* in English, meaning "unprecedented or tremendous" (perhaps an echo of the excess of *übertreffen*, "to exceed," in line 5), it also, of course, comes from the verb *hören*, "to hear." I suggest that this empty middle is both unheard-of, in the sense of strange or fantastic—perhaps something human subjects have missed in their distractions—and in the sense of unheard. As such, it plays a role analogous to that of the *Weite* (distance) of I.11 and the *Spanne* (span) of I.12, as the space that the figure moves through or organizes; what the *Zug* or *Bezug* of relations drawn through space divide to create form, here described as the space of the resounding lyre. It is thus directly associated with Orphic poetic production, and the ringing (*tönen*) of the lyre seems to find expression in the *erhörte Mitte* created by the palindromic rhyme scheme of the tercets (*gehn*, "to go"; *Leier*, "lyre"; *Mitte*, "middle"; *Schritte*, "steps"; *Feier*, "festival"; *drehn*, "to turn"),[63] concentrating sonic repetition in the middle of the tercets.

62. There is an extensive scholarship on *Mitte* in Rilke, as it is an idea that appears in various guises throughout Rilke's work (e.g., in "Der Panther"); I am not treating it alone or discussing that scholarship here because it is, as I shall discuss, fully incorporated in the conception of figurality I have been advancing throughout.

63. MacIntyre changes the rhyme scheme from *efg gfe to efe ggf*.

The *unerhörte Mitte* is not only associated with poetic production by way of the lyre's link to Orpheus; it also *motivates* Wera's artistic activity, namely, dance: "Für sie versuchtest du die schönen Schritte" (12; "Therefore, / you tried the lovely steps"). But the desire for and power of the unheard/-of center undertake not only to emulate or create a relation to Orpheus. The genitive in the final lines of the poem creates an ambiguity that causes the poem's motions of boundary crossing (from death to life) to move in two directions. In the first reading (rendered easier to hear by the line break between 13 and 14), the lines refer to the hope of the dancer that she might, crossing death, draw the poet's attention to the solemn celebration of her dance: "du . . . / hofftest, einmal zu der heilen Feier / des Freundes Gang und Antlitz hinzudrehn" (12–14). *Freund* refers in the last sonnet (II.29) directly to Rilke/the poet (a note designates it as addressed to *einem Freund Weras*, "a friend of Wera's"); consequently the posthumous appeal of Wera's dance asks him to turn his own steps (*Gang*, "gait," like *Schritte*, "steps," in line 11) and perception toward the unacknowledged and as yet unformed continuity between life and death.

But in the second reading, the dancer would hope to turn her gaze toward the wholeness of Orphic celebration (*Freund* would then refer to Orpheus), across the boundary of death. In this reading, the unity or wholeness of life requires a redirection of human attention toward the unities of Orphic song. The sonnet ends by reaching outward—not only toward the poet (and the final sonnet) but past him toward the reader in an invitation to renewed attentiveness to the kind of holding together of the antinomies of existence that occurs in Rilke's figures. The *unerhörte Mitte* is thus also the space between reader and poet, hearer and speaker, mind and world; the poetology of the sonnets calls on human subjects to shape the relations between them in acknowledgment of the difficult, temporary, and dangerous yet fitting figures of the wholeness of existence.

In this chapter I have returned to the themes of openness to death and embodied subjectivity that form the locus of Rilke's poetic inhabitation of finitude. Human subjects are finite, mortal, and earthly; we can have no final assurances that our attunements either to the external world (in Rilke, to things) or to other minds are "accurate" or of how they will end; nor is there any "beyond" (religious or more generally metaphysical) that can or will intercede or vouchsafe the directions of subjective investment in the world. The crisis documented in *Malte* serves as a reminder of the ease with which human subjects take this uncertainty as precisely *not* obvious; what Rilke repeatedly calls our *Ablenkungen* or *Verdrängungen* represent subjective efforts to find certainty or despair at its absence. I have argued that the Orphic poetology of the *Sonnets to Orpheus* takes up precisely the themes of subjective relations to bodies, to others, to the world, and to death that engage with the problems of human finitude; the sonnets themselves seek provisional, open, and temporary inhabitations of that finitude that do not abdicate the possibilities of aptness, sufficiency, or communal experience.

But precisely because of the virtuosity with which Rilke handles the sonnet form, the poetics of figuration may seem like a flight from finitude into a play of infinitely changing forms. Rilke, further, seems less ambitious than Hölderlin: he never presents programs that strive to reform national or political life in the way that even Hölderlin's late poetry seems to do, and when Rilke takes up a strategy of undercutting traditional hierarchies of thought simliar to that of Baudelaire, he adapts it away from socioeconomic critique toward the self-questioning of the poetic subject.[64] But several attributes of Rilke's oeuvre as a whole—which not only appear but are instantiated in poetic form in the *Sonnets*—belie this apparent solipsism. First, Rilke's lifelong attention to human relations to objects, in particular in the late form of the project of rescuing them from the distraction that reduces them to commodification, indicates a more critical stance toward economic realities than his persuading Hertha Koenig to buy Picasso's *Acrobats* so that he could look at it suggests.[65] Second, his persistent preoccupation with the problems of and for writing *in his era*, marked by belatedness and the inaccessiblity of tradition (in some ways analogous to Hölderlin's treatments of childood and ancient Greece as lost eras of unreflective presence), and his hope that a shifted relation to objects and to death will change that era, show a poet unwilling to retreat to unquestioned tradition in the face of his culture. That his hopes for cultural renewal never take the form of political or national engagement is likely, as I suggested in chapter 4, due in part to the linguistic and cultural heterogeneity of his environments throughout his life (from multilingual Austro-Hungarian Prague to French- and German-speaking Valois). But surely the fact that he had seen and even briefly

64. See the section "Rilke's Epoch and Influences: Problems of Finitude around 1900" in chapter 4; and Ryan, *Rilke, Modernism*, 86.

65. Rilke is further not alone in treating human relations to the most insignificant and unassuming objects as central to a modernity critique that has far-reaching political implications: Theodor Adorno, in an aphorism from *Minima Moralia* even more pessimistic about technology's influence on modernity than Rilke is, makes a provocative link between door slamming and fascism: "Do not knock.—Technology is making gestures precise and brutal, and with them men. It expels from movements all hesitation, deliberation, civility. It subjects them to the implacable, as it were ahistorical demands of objects. Thus the ability is lost, for example, to close a door quietly and discreetly, yet firmly. Those of cars and refrigerators have to be slammed, others have the tendency to snap shut by themselves, imposing on those entering the bad manners of not looking behind them, not shielding the interior of the house which receives them. The new human type cannot be properly understood without awareness of what he is continuously exposed to from the world of things about him, even in his most secret innervations. What does it mean for the subject that there are no more casement windows to open, but only sliding frames to shove, no gentle latches but turnable handles, no forecourt, no doorstep before the street, no wall around the garden? And which driver is not tempted, merely by the power of his engine, to wipe out the vermin of the street, pedestrians, children and cyclists? The movement machines demand of their users already has the violent, hard-hitting, unresting jerkiness of fascist maltreatment. Not least to blame for the withering of experience is the fact that things, under the law of pure functionality, assume a form that limits contact with them to mere operation, and tolerates no surplus, either in freedom of conduct or in autonomy of things, which would survive as the core of experience, because it is not consumed by the moment of action" (Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott [London: Verso, 2005], 40).

participated in the nationalistic fervor of the First World War and lived through its consequences warned him of the dangers of being swept away on the current of nationalist feeling.

Rilke turns instead, I would argue, to the possibility of speaking out of the particularity of an individual, finite, subjective voice, but this voice is not one that isolates itself from the world and speaks to itself regardless of who hears. The weaving together of letter productivity and poem productivity throughout his life lends credence to the thought that the equivocal transformations he strove to undertake in poetic form were intended for his readers as well; I have undertaken to show how the *Sonnets to Orpheus* work to reach and change their readers. In letter after letter Rilke seeks and attempts to offer help and advice, even as he denies the easy consolations of religion, for example, in condolence letters or self-reckonings written to both friends and strangers. While the idea of the poet as a guide to life is surely too simplistic (indeed, Rilke's own reception of Hölderlin is an example of the dangers of interpreting poetry directly for one's current situation), the intersubjectivity toward which his poems and letters persistently strive raises the possibility of a poetic rather than national community of speaking subjects.

Central to the creation of this community is the absence of any prescriptive or universal procedures or rules for its creation and its delineation. This is precisely the kind of community that undertakes what I used Charles Bernstein and Stanley Cavell to characterize as a "convening on its conventions," a calling into question of relations to and in language that uncovers our injustices and seeks "ecstasies of exactness" that change subjective relations both to language and to the world.[66] And because of this absence of rules or prescriptions, the "we" of this community will necessary be one that strives for rather than assumes agreement, aware of its own finitude and fragility. Thus Rilke's figures that display their own uncertainty and transience undertake findings and testings of orientation in the service of a community that "consists of any or all of those persons who have the capacity to acknowledge what others among them are doing."[67] This acknowledgment takes place between finite subjects whose relations to the world and to each other are fundamentally uncertain. The fragility of subjectivity appeared already in the crisis of *Malte* and is openly displayed in the *Sonnets*; as I turn in my conclusion to Paul Celan, that subjectivity becomes ever more threatened even as Celan offers its particularity as the only remaining route to the acknowledgment of finitude in poetic communication.

66. See the section "Language, Grammar, and Forms of Life" in chapter 1.

67. Lyn Hejinian, "Who Is Speaking?," in *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 34.