

Interpreting Pain: Gadamer on Rilke

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Abstract

The paper discusses Gadamer's interpretation of Rilke, distinguished by its respectful depth and hermeneutical mastery. Through the principle of mythopoietic reversal, his philosophical approach does not force the poetical utterances, but highlights a meditative project, whose centre is an epic poem on human limits, as admirably represented in the world of the Duino Elegies. In this context, the hermeneutical issue focuses on a few key human experiences, which identify and define man's being in the world. One of the most relevant experiences is pain, conceived no longer as simply one feeling among others, but as an essential horizon of comprehension. The value of this interpretation is demonstrated by the interpretation of the iconic figure of the angel: in opposition to both traditional angelology and even the Heideggerian reading, this figure is interpreted innovatively as a sign not of transcendence but of immanence.

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1. Introduction. The Task of Understanding

At the beginning of the 1940s, at a time when one feared looking one's enemy in the face, for fear of glimpsing oneself, and language was characterized by a logic of intolerance, Hans-Georg Gadamer presented a seminar at the University of Leipzig on one of the poets of twentieth century who conceived that same German language in a relevant and innovative fashion: Rainer Maria Rilke. This choice was neither fortuitous nor oriented by didactic convenience: in the cold, dark rooms of the university building, lacking heating and electricity, Rilke's work was a necessity. In him, the philosopher saw more than a mere representative of a literary epoch, and in his poetry, he saw much more than the proof of an elegant capacity of

expression: in Rilke's poetry Gadamer found a language of resistance. The interpretation of the *Duino Elegies* (hereafter *DE*) was a way to resist history and Nazism, and to at least conceive a different world (see Gadamer 1985). This biographic episode shows the relevance of Rilke's work not only to the academic profession, but above all to Gadamer's formation. Rilke was neither an icon nor an object of study, but a master pointing out a road in the darkness; that is, he showed the way to interior freedom in the darkness of the absolute lack of freedom. His poetry, which more than any other opposed "conformity" (Gadamer 1994, 155), i.e. the acceptance of a unique and certain truth, explored the main questions of human existence by celebrating its greatness and misery, without embracing eternal or deterministic principles. In the Rilkean poetic "I", which undertakes the insane challenge of questioning the angel, man is represented in the extreme solitude of one who cannot belong to any order – order both in terms of command and of *Ordnung*, i.e. hierarchy, spheres of belonging (*DE*, I, 1-2). For this, too, constitutes a difference between man and angel: while angels belong to the community of their heavenly sphere, man is alone in his life, just as the poet is alone before his inspiration and his blank page. We will see that all certainties have been broken before the wall that is the angel, before the question of the meaning of what remains and of what flees runs away, - meanings that, for man, dramatically coincide. Thus, in an age where all truth was subjected to the political authority, Rilke expressed all the laborious freedom of one who accepts his own duty and does not shrink before the unsettling presence of the "strong night" (Rilke 1976, 293).

Gadamer considers Rilke a deeply philosophical poet, though not for the same reason his master Heidegger did, for whom Rilke's poetry was philosophical only because it was metaphysical, by remaining "in the shadow of a tempered Nietzschean metaphysics" (Heidegger 1971, 166). For Gadamer, Rilke's poetry is *essential* because it reveals the horizon of comprehension of human limits, which not even philosophy can express in so compelling and impressive a manner. Beginning in the mid-1950s, Gadamer penned several important essays¹

on the German poet, within the context of a broader philosophical project that has always found in poetry the privileged space for realizing *im Vollzug*² the central perspectives of hermeneutics. However, these essays would emerge only sporadically, because Gadamer never wrote the commentary to the *Elegies* that he had wanted to write since the 1930s, when he was first exposed to Rilke. Thanks to this exposure, he learned that in poetry the hermeneutical praxis always realises itself as an ever-dynamic and open interpretive investigation. One of the most relevant achievements of hermeneutics is the affirmation that knowledge is never immediate, direct, and simply intuitive, but always a mediated, profound, and clouded, an activity which needs to be passed through, not just perceived. Interpretation allows one to achieve this type of “knowledge practice” that is hermeneutics, and since poetry can only be understood when it is interpreted, hermeneutics finds in the poetic saying an essential experience.

These essays show Gadamer’s intimacy with Rilke’s poetry in interpreting it, and his sober respect for the poet’s words, which are not inserted into a predetermined speculative framework, but placed within involved in an open context of sense. The philosopher is not afraid to discuss the heart, feelings, love, etc.: philosophy does not lose its prerogatives before these existential themes; on the contrary, it is enriched by the vividness of the human tension and by practical involvement. For this reason, Gadamer’s interest is purely hermeneutic: the challenge of interpretation has no peculiar truths to prove; it must question a truth already present in the words themselves, without seeking external foundations. The original hermeneutic task, in fact, involves explaining what is incomprehensible is: this may appear an easy task, but is actually the hardest. It is difficult to avoid reducing our attitudes and thoughts to assumptions used to demand the legitimation of what we want to understand. However, understanding is not only an intellectual operation, an act of mental speculation, but is a primary relationship to the world, and philosophy finds in poetry a privileged access to reach it. Among contemporary poets, Rilke seems to Gadamer one of the best to understand this relationship.

2. The Task of the Human

To understand Rilke's poetry and its penetrating hermeneutic significance, especial attention is required to comprehend the *Elegies*, a supreme masterpiece by means of which the poet intended to furnish an epochal fresco of the human being. In this regard, Gadamer considers Rilke's replacement of the poem *Anti-strophes* (Rilke 1989, 116-117), meant to be the fifth *Elegy*, with the actual "Elegy of the saltimbanques"³ an important hermeneutic issue. In this work, written in February 1922, when the poet was "prisoner of himself" in the "propitious" and "beneficial solitude in Muzot"⁴, chronologically following the tenth *Elegy* – which was conceived thought as the conclusion of the "most important work" (Rilke 1937, 246) since 1913 – there is an essential reference, totally absent in the *Anti-strophes*, to death (*DE*, V, 101)⁵. We can go beyond Gadamer's observation and underline that not only does the fifth *Elegy* refer clearly to death, but also, the theme of the unavoidable uncertainty of human existence is quite far removed from the world of the *Anti-strophes*, as the latter is a tribute wholly dedicated to loving women who, surpassing the miserable possibilities of males, can show the power of true, absolute feeling (*Fühlen*). In this poem, a balance has been achieved thanks to this unconditional reverence for the greatness of those women whose heart is so immense it overshadows the span of "distances out to the outermost star".

The main difference between the *Anti-strophes* and the fifth and other *Elegies* is precisely this character of equilibrium, of fulfilment, of stasis from conflict, in which the poet does not have to fight for meaning, as his task is only to recognize and praise one that is already present⁶. The world of the *Elegies* does not lie in the shadow of this grace but is a world full of enduring tension. Whereas in the loving women of the *Anti-strophes* all appears quieted as in the "bread on the altar", in the final version of the fifth *Elegy* this tension emerges in all its corrosive power, erupting into human destiny for which "love and separation" (*DE*, III, 67) coincide, excluding them from their truth and showing the impossibility of reaching any perfection, because perfection is only "god's affair" (*DE*, III, 73).

For this reason, according to Gadamer, the main theme of the *Elegies* is “something universal”, namely “the weakness of the human heart, its failure to surrender completely to its feeling” (Gadamer 1994, 156). All the figures populating the extraordinary world of the Duino manifest the impossibility of any coincidence between men and their own task: in contrast to the angel, who is always “identical with its mission” (Gadamer 1994, 158) and always capable of surrendering to its own feeling, man cannot recognize that dedication (*Hingabe*) is, as we will see, his task, due to the intrinsic inability of the human heart to be fully itself, i.e. to accept (and not refuse) the extreme and problematic absoluteness of feeling. This defeat becomes evident in love and before death, two experiences with which the human heart is rarely in contact, as they can destroy the one who does not understand the strength of his limits, and the fact that precisely these limits constitute his identity. Rilke’s purpose is to ensure that, in poetry as in life, “nothing is ever lost!...” (Rilke 1969, 273): the human heart must be able not to dissipate or lose anything, not to shrink before that which alone can enable us to understand authentic feeling; however, this very capacity not to shrink before such a reality is unachievable for man. This need for authenticity is incessant in the *Elegies*, as it represents the desire for unity and totality of feeling, which had always moved the soul of Rilke’s poetry since the works of his youth⁷. This type of poetry must recuperate through words what the heart cannot achieve. However, no unity exists for man and the poetic “I” of the *Elegies* laments the abyss that exists between its ambitions and their impracticability: “Our nature’s not the same”, “Wir sind nicht einig” (*DE*, IV, 2).

Since the unity of man and world is impossible, the *Elegies* seek to ascertain the possibility of the unity of feeling, outside of any transcendence, which must occur only in a “purely earthly, deeply earthly, blissfully earthly consciousness” (Rilke 1969, 309); this consciousness is possible - even if never entirely - only very rarely, in the profound wisdom of young dead people, in the brave integrity of children, in the unconditional abandon of loving women, because since due to their intrinsic “disunity and violence of all human behaviour” (Gadamer 1994, 161), men are destined intended to be torn.

3. The Task of the Angel

This ordinary incapability of the human heart to live the risk of a full feeling is expressed profoundly in the extreme confrontation, tragically impractical and at the same time ineluctable, with the angel. The Gadamerian interpretation manifests about this main topic of the *Elegies* all its originality and significance. In both past and present interpretations of the Duino cycle, a common point of view identifies the angel with a being representing heavenly transcendence, “made” of a different nature than that of man. Gadamer intends to break the consolidated traditional connection that places the figure of the angel within an iconographic and cultural angelology that views it as a superior, unhuman, ontologically different being. Traditional angelology is insufficient to explain the Duino angel, actually a philosophical concept: and as such, something revolutionary. Gadamer writes that the angel is the “most extreme conception of our own being” (Gadamer 1994, 158), definitively changing the manner of interpreting the Duino epic. The philosopher is not interested in outlining the unhuman essence of the angel, or even its superiority, but what it might mean for man. The angel is “a supreme possibility of the human heart itself, a possibility never fully realized, one that the heart cannot achieve because the human being is conditioned in so many ways, rendering him incapable of a clear and total surrender to his feeling” (Gadamer 1994, 157).

The angel as a possibility of the human heart does not mean it is something at its disposal; conversely, man is unable to use that absoluteness that could call him into his own. To grasp the significance of this interpretation of the Duino angel, we might recall the first lines of the *Second Elegy* (1-2): “Every angel’s terrifying. Almost deadly birds / of my soul, I know what you are, but, oh, / I still sing to you!”. Here Rilke is very clear: angel is an essence that knows neither half-sentiments, nor division of feeling, because it is a soul creature. To be sure, there are biblical and iconographic traditional influences of common memory, but these are incapable of revealing the intrinsic identity of the Duino angel. They cannot highlight the essence of what the poet wishes to show. When by “angel” the poet means the supreme possibility of the human heart, its

capability not to be conditioned or limited in its own feeling, one could assume that man could have a balanced relationship with this angel, because he could somehow attain it. However, this cannot happen; indeed, man feels crushed under the weight of this higher capability, as he is unable to achieve it, because he is accustomed to look for his limits outside himself, to blame something that transcends him, that remains external to his weakness.

Within the Gadamerian interpretation, it is clear that man's incapacity to be an angel is due to nothing but himself alone, because the bounds hindering real feeling lie within him. Rilke does not blame the angel for man's inferiority, since this inferiority is rooted in man's inescapable essence. Man's gravest defect, instead, is his claim to possession. Man relates to his feelings as if they were at his disposal, things he can possess, but the angel, by manifesting a perfect correspondence with feelings, signals the defeat of every claim, the failure of every "endless desire for possession" (Rilke 2016, 146). This desire is visible above all in love, when man wants to possess his lover like an object. In this regard, Gadamer harshly criticises Romano Guardini and his explanation of Rilke's "doctrine of love" as the latter is not a theory, but a praxis of learning to love (Gadamer 1994, 142). This praxis overcomes the subject-object relationship, because loving someone does not mean reducing him to our identity but respecting the necessary distance.

Thanks to the tension towards the angelic nature, Rilke's poetic "I" shows how human feeling is anonymous, evasive and elusive due to its intrinsic limits, and can find no equilibrium before that which is capable of plenitude and authenticity. For Rilke, poetry is a way to redeem all that fades away in man's life because of his limits; the major purpose of the *Elegies* is always to achieve a recovery or, as Peter Szondi would say, a salvation (see Szondi 1975) through poetry of what is temporary, and thus provisional. It is important to point out that this salvation has no religious connotation, it is a secular and courageous salvation, which accepts its universal loneliness.

Yet how could this recovery take place in reality, beyond the words? For Gadamer, this constitutes at least one

inescapable question, as Rilke does not stop before the failure of the human heart, contenting himself with a word celebrating its ruin. To read Rilke's work as simply the umpteenth lamentation on the limitations of human existence is not to do him justice. The poet points to a recovery that does not end with the rhythm of a line, but becomes possible for life itself, when the human heart does not dissipate the extreme and challenging experiences of life but converts them into something of its own.

4. The Task of Mythopoetic Reversal

In this regard, Gadamer proposes a concept with which it is possible to interpret the poetic project of the *Elegies* in depth: the hermeneutical principle of "mythopoetic reversal". He is not afraid to apply hermeneutical proceedings to understand poetry; this philosophical concept does not suffocate the poetic word but respects it and helps achieve the interpretive aim. This conception contains an implicit critique against his mentor Heidegger, who strongly disagreed with the use of all philosophical paradigms to read poetry, though his own interpretations of poets' works were always "violent". Gadamer wishes to read poetry in a manner that respects it, and the principle of mythopoetic reversal helps him understand Rilke's world. He clarifies that this principle is in no way a rhetorical proceeding, a closed, predetermined and useful concept which, starting from an impeccable assumption, continues until reaching a rigid conclusion: the mythopoetic reversal must be followed because the open risk of a meditative correspondence is better than the closed rigour of speculative certainty. This does not mean that philosophy must abandon its rigour when used to interpret compared to poetry, but that philosophy must change if it wants to understand poetry. This becomes clear when we consider that Gadamer does not take up this challenge by constructing a poetics of the Rilkean *oeuvre* but chooses an intervention directly "on the ground". He interprets the lines of the *Elegies* by discussing their refined and even deliberate complexity. The true hermeneutic answer is not speculation about the interpretation, but the interpretation itself; its only purpose is to show how important

it is that “the interpreter, who gives his reasons, disappears and the text speaks” (Gadamer 1989a, 51).

The first moment instance of the mythopoetic reversal relates to the Rilkean poetic word, which “demands a clarification of the horizon surrounding it” (Gadamer 1994, 155). Its purpose is to gather the powerful message of the *Elegies* into a unity - one which, however, does not reduce it to a hierarchical structure, but to allow all its vivid projectuality to emerge. The hermeneutical task is not a simple matter of images and metaphors; the reversal consists of the interpreter retranslating into concepts of his own understanding what has been elevated in poetic reflection. All the famous figures of the Duino world – dead young people, sad lovers, artists, mourners’ lamentations – act and suffer, and their action and suffering are not extraneous to the reader but are the reader’s own pathos. In the reversal, a twofold movement occurs: that which allows the reader to interact with the poetic world in question, after this world has reawakened the power of the poetic saying itself.

When the actions and passions of the figures of the *Elegies* do not indicate nothing other than our own actions and passions, they push us to a peculiar level (*Niveau*), in which it is possible to root a reflection (*Reflexion*). When we look at a man who, by entering a church in Naples or Rome, is terrified before the absurdity of the death of young people (*DE*, I, 62-63) – who should be a promise of the future, not the tragic evidence of the lack of any future – before the destiny of one who knows that death overcomes all injustices because it is the only justice which exceeds man by imposing upon him an incapacity to choose, in that moment the poetic word carries us to a *Reflexionsniveau* that amplifies our interpretative possibilities, by going beyond the misery of our fears.

This reversal is described as “mythopoetic”; it is important to underline that this mythopoiesis of Gadamer is not a theoretical construction that can combine the logical connection between myth and poetry into a single, unique concept; it indicates a hermeneutical approach able to open up a horizon of visibility onto the unity of the Rilkean *oeuvre*. In this work, the term “myth” does not mean that poetry recounts the actions of heroes or the sagas of gods, but that it is able to

reawaken the consciousness that finds its truth in nothing but its own being-said. For Gadamer, a myth is that which can be considered valid and persuasive, even if needs no rational demonstrations to confirm it, or scientific proceedings to support it⁸. Poetry is a type of myth because it is based on its own word, it must not be taken within a context of cultural genres or aesthetic frameworks, because this is the task of the literary science (*Literaturwissenschaft*) and not of real thought. In this critique, Gadamer follows his mentor Heidegger (Heidegger 1991, 77), who sees in aesthetics as philosophy of art an articulation of the metaphysical program of the interpretation of the essent and of reality as such, but in contrast to Heidegger, Gadamer's interpretation is free from predetermined philosophical assumptions, because his interest is only in what Rilke says, not in what Rilke's saying represents for philosophy.

What unites myth and poetry? For Gadamer, the answer is simple: the word, the "authentic word", which he defines admirably as the "universal human task" (Gadamer 2007, 88). This definition, too, manifests the difference from the Heideggerian "poetic word"; the latter is the centre from which the truth of being irradiates itself, authenticity as the warehouse of the *Event* as *Ereignis* (i.e. the only being outside an ontic theory) (see Heidegger 1972); the former, instead, is a task, the hermeneutical search for authenticity. Myths establish the primacy of the saying over the demonstration, of the word over the fixed concept, and poetry indicates that this primacy of the word has been directed toward the truth – not understood as a normative prescription, but as an essential openness.

The relevance of this hermeneutical principle consists in its indicating a point of view that cannot be something objective, such as a principle of determination, but only something subjective, taken up by the observer, transforming him and involving him. It all takes place thanks to this principle according to which in approaching poetry, there is no claim to bring the poetic sense closer to the reader, and that on the contrary, it is possible to bring the reader closer to the poetic sense. This principle does not insist on transforming the poetic saying in something easier to comprehend but aims at

transforming how one relates to it. The poetic saying remains at its distance, in the richness of its continuous reference to something not at one's disposal. Such a proceeding does not upset the essence of the world of meanings we must reverse in our own heart to understand it. To better understand this mechanism, consider the reversal that, in the process of sight, the brain effects on the image, turning it upside-down on the retina. The brain must overturn the image before it, not to possess it, but simply to process it and convert it into something in which it can take part, that is, simply to see it: "the world of our own heart becomes, for poetic saying, objectified for us as a mythical world, that is, a world of acting beings. Whatever surpasses the range of human feeling appears as the Angel; the terrible shock over the death of young people appears as one recently diseased; the lament that fills our heart and pursues the deceased appears as a creature pursuing the one just deceased. In short, the full range of experience in the human heart is poetically liberated as the activity of one's own personal existence" (Gadamer 1994, 159).

The reversal as an approach to Rilkean poetry is actually already employed in Heidegger's interpretation⁹, and we find some references even in Romano Guardini's¹⁰, but in neither of these it is thematised or chosen as an interpretive principle, primarily because it already entails the substitution of one point of view with another; in Gadamerian reversal, our heart is led before a mythological matter, which in the poetry involves our limits, making us walk the street opened by the words.

It should be pointed out that Heidegger does not address the *Elegies*, save for some mention of the eighth; he is convinced this should not be attempted because contemporary thought is not yet capable of do it¹¹. It may seem strange for an author who believes philosophy can find its future in the dialogue with poetry to ignore one of the most relevant poetic experiences of the twentieth century. He perhaps is hindered by his own prejudice that Rilke's work is influenced by the "derailed Christianity" (Heidegger 1992, 158)¹² – in terms of his concepts of animal and man – entailed by Nietzschean metaphysics. This prejudice prevents him from seeing the peculiar character of this poetry, which, though possessing accents typical of the

religious and mystical tradition, is, as Gadamer clearly shows, not subject to any religious authority.

5. The Task of Pain

From this point of view, too, it is clear that with the principle of the reversal, Gadamer reaches the centre of Rilkean poetry without violating it, attaining a high level of discourse in addressing the question of pain, one of the most important questions not only of the *Elegies*, but of the entire Rilkean *oeuvre* from the time of his young poems and the novel about Malte. Gadamer recalls that in the tenth *Elegy* Rilke proposes an impressive definition of men as *Vergeuder der Schmerzen*, squanderers of pain (*DE*, X, 10), because they habitually see pain as an enemy, a threat, without recognizing its real essence. In a letter to Ilse Blumenthal-Weiß dated back to 29 December 29, 1921 Rilke talks about “his” Marianna Alcoforado (the Portuguese nun whose letters to her unfaithful lover he had translated) and writes that women have the art of reaching a full activity of the heart; men, instead, are always distracted and amateurish, or worse, they are *usuriers* of feeling. Before the shocking intensity of feeling, Rilke can only define men as usurers of pain (Rilke 1937, 77). However, pain is actually a horizon of comprehension (*Verständnishorizont*) of human life; without pain, the truth of existence would elude us. Pain is thought as an essential experience that enables us to discern and ponder. “Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional” (Murakami 2008, 4): we have to learn how to earn our pain.

However, this horizon seems unreachable: when, along his path, man encounters the death of a child or of a young person, he feels devastated before his incapacity to discover the meaning of a destiny that so terribly cuts short the promise and horizon of a life, and so he cannot stop opposing this pain. In the face of the irreversibility of another’s death, man feels powerless against what ineluctably transcends him, also because in his ordinary life he is used to the reversibility of his daily affairs. Nevertheless, in this paralysis in which he can nothing, at least he can endure precisely that which he does not bear, *he can pain*. Yet this must not be considered a debilitating condition or an expression of deficiency but reveals itself as a

human capability to understand the essential nature of the experience of another's death. What allows us to think of death meditatively, without being tied to a rigid rationality or an elusive emotionality, is precisely pain, because it makes it possible for the human being to do something before the impossibility of everything. Thus, pain is man's *Reflexionsniveau* on death; while feeling it, he can reach a level of reflection that allows him to think of death not as a definitive loss, nor as a hostile forcefulness that cannot be accepted, but as the other, necessary, side of life¹³. Therefore Rilke, in his most famous work about the mutual belonging of life and death, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, explains cogently the essentiality of pain. In sonnet II, 29, the poet asks us to identify the most painful affair, the most terrible experience – “Was ist deine leidendste Erfahrung?": “What experience has been painful to you?” (Rilke 1977, 195). The answer is unusual: he does not refer to a peculiar event, but instead indicates the very centre of this experience. The answer to this fundamental question is: “Ist dir Trinken bitter, werde Wein”, “if the drinking's bitter, turn to wine” (Rilke 1977, 195). This line shows us that the reversal is not only a way to read Rilke's work, but even a possible goal and law of his poetry; in these words, indeed, an overturning occurs, the same overturning that the poet must effect if he wishes to open himself to a more authentic relationship with the essentiality of pain. He does not avoid the suffering by trying to escaping its source; rather, he merges himself totally with it, with its truth. From this merger a new comprehension derives, in the search for that depth that can be reached only through pain. This pain is not only a means of knowledge and identification; it is *metamorphosis*, in which man does not reverse the pain into joy (this cannot be an authentic reversal, as it is a mere substitution), but reverses the pain into the authenticity of his own existence. Pain as lamentation shows us that a mythical figure of the poetic imagination becomes the essence of the reader, who can reverse in his own existence the truth of this fundamental experience. It is essential for human life because it is the unique guarantor of the authentic *Hingabe*, that “dedication” that is fundamental¹⁴ to understanding Gadamer's interpretation of Rilke. The *Hingabe* confronts us

with all our limits, with all that we cannot reach; it is, indeed, the capacity to abandon ourselves to what it is different and far from us, the unlimited abnegation of people and things, contact with the open that knows no influence, no conditioning. When pain possesses man, he has no space or time for anything else; real pain is so absolute that, despite its unbearable devastating power, it teaches man the authentic *Hingabe*, the authentic absoluteness of feeling. Therefore, when man feels pain, he arrives at a truth of existence that would otherwise have been denied him, a truth in which nothing essential has been lost. Only if man does not avoid pain, and become capable of that abandon that pain requires, will he cease to be a squanderer of own feeling.

6. Conclusion. The Task of Poetry

This question reminds us of the point from which Gadamer started, i.e. the consideration of Rilkean poetry as a deep meditation, inspiring a consciousness that does not bend to the sense of emptiness of totalitarian temptations. Before such a message, it is the task not only of hermeneutics, but, for Gadamer, of all humankind, to explore and defend, against all the ideological damages of homologation, the language of resistance, which can familiarize us with a thought that does not submit to authorities, spreading universal and objective certainties, but which indicates the authentic word. A word such as the one present in the ninth *Elegy*, in which man finally realizes he cannot compare himself to the angel, competing with him, placing himself on the same level. It would be ridiculous for him to want to sing the greatness of the universe, the miracles of the celestial spheres, or even the illusion of his knowledge. The poet reminds us that one cannot try to express the inexpressible to the angel: such an attempt would be poor and useless before the magnificent completeness of the angel's "overwhelming presence" (*DE*, I, 4). One must only speak of simple things to the angel, express the immense simplicity of a little thing:

You can't impress him with your grand emotions. In the
cosmos
where he so intensely feels, you're just a novice. So show

him some simple thing shaped for generation after
 generation
 until it lives in our hands and in our eyes, and it's ours.
 Tell him about things. He'll stand amazed, just as you did
 beside the ropemaker in Rome or the potter on the Nile.
 Show him how happy a thing can be, how innocent and
 ours;
 how even grief's lament purely determines its own shape,
 serves as a thing, or dies in a thing – and escapes
 in ecstasy beyond the violin. And these things, whose lives
 are lived in leaving – they understand when you praise
 them.

If we follow and develop the Gadamerian viewpoint, the angel should not be understood as the symbol of a religious tradition, nor taken to represent transcendence in an age when spirituality appears always more distant and inaccessible, because “in no way does it appear as a messenger or representative from God. And it certainly does not testify to any kind of transcendence in the religious sense” (Gadamer 1994, 157). Gadamer convincingly proposes an interpretation of the angel not by utilizing an ontological or theological foundation, but by presenting it as a sign of the human limits that hinder the absoluteness of feeling. The angel of the *Elegies* does not represent any cultural or traditional paradigm, but is a limit signalling the incapability of men to give themselves to the fullness of their own feelings. Men are accustomed to hiding themselves before the extremity of their experiences, “always insufficient in giving love, uncertain in making decisions, and powerless regarding death” (Rilke 2012, 13). The angel is the extreme limit of human feeling, the sign not of transcendence but of immanence.

In this way Gadamer is able to overcome the prejudicial reading offered by Heidegger, who includes Rilke's poetics in the field of modern western metaphysics also because of the angel: “Rilke's Angel, despite all difference in content, is *metaphysically the same* as the figure of Nietzsche's Zarathustra” (Heidegger 1971, 131). Heidegger, of course, does not propose a mere superimposing of the figures, but sustains they belong to the same main conception and tradition, which avoids thinking outside of metaphysics. This claim notwithstanding, Heidegger's interpretation is wrong, because

Zarathustra is indeed one who, while maintaining the integrity of his solitude, walks among people, teaching them; he looks on their imperfections and points out their weaknesses. The angel is just the opposite. He lives high above men, and does not look upon their deficiencies, nor point out anything to them, but simply *is*. Zarathustra mourns human incompleteness, and sometimes ridicules it; the angel, in contrast, states this incompleteness, grounds it as real and ineluctable, without feeling the need to dispute or exalt it. Zarathustra is a bridge (Nietzsche 2006, 7), the angel is a wall. The former is someone who still must realize himself, the latter, one who is already realized and who does not involve men in this untouchable realization. Zarathustra tries to overcome man, while the angel attests that all such overcoming is impossible for men. The angel is the sign of extreme human finitude, which, as nothing, cannot fight against it to will itself, as stated by Nietzsche. Both are points of arrival, but while man could one day *become an overman (Übermensch)*, he can never *be the angel*.

In its unicity as an insurmountable wall and multiplicity as an order of angels among whom one cannot tread, the figure of the Rilkean angel is free from a characteristic element of traditional angelology, i.e. he is free of the element of mediation between men and gods (mediation always present, even in the tremendous angels of the biblical *Book of Revelation*). The Duino angel loses entirely this function of approaching and interaction, condemning man to the abyss of a fatal loneliness. He is very different than the angels of Hölderlin's poetry, which maintains the traditional angelology intact, as in the poem *Homecoming (Heimkunft)* (Hölderlin 2004, 31-32). Hölderlin's angels are "preserver", mediators between sky and earth, making men feel safe. For this reason, they are "Angels of the House", and even "Angels of the Year", because they can fill the void of human precariousness that arises from man's dislocation in space and time. The eternity of these angels does not terrify, even if it states the impossibility of human eternity. In Hölderlin's angels man can find a meaning for his existence; in Rilke's angels, only the absence of a univocal meaning. Rilke's angels are less comforting and more frightening, they cause a deep and indelible anguish while indicating not a

chance, but the extreme limit of being excluded from any reassuring contact with the divine. Hölderlin's angels can relieve human weaknesses; Rilke's angel is the insurmountable and rigid guarantee of the impossibility of any transcendent reassurance. Instead of bringing man closer to the gods, the Rilkian angel repels every demand to possess the divine. Thus, in losing the main function of mediation typical to angels, the Rilkian angel has also lost the trait of being a source of consolation.

Rilke's angel indicates an absoluteness impossible for men, influenced as they are by mediocrity and fear; it indicates a task to be performed. *Task (Aufgabe)* is one of the most important concepts of Gadamerian philosophy (see Gadamer 1989b), because this philosophy is not meant to be an intellectualistic contemplation of ideas but practiced as an activity of interpretation immersed in the world it means to understand. This task is, for hermeneutics, essentially the task of the word, especially the poetic word. This is the great and unique chance of humankind, the treasure before which even the angel's haughty perfection might concede an expression of wonder, before that treasure which cannot be a property but is an interrupted and tenacious task: the word we call poetry.

NOTES

¹ Gadamer's essays focused on Rilke are the following: *Rainer Maria Rilke's Interpretation of Existence: On the Book by Romano Guardini*, dated back to 1955 (Gadamer 1994, 139-151); *Poetry and Punctuation*, dated back to 1961 (Gadamer 1994, 131-137); *Mythopoietic Reversal in Rilke's Duino Elegies*, dated back to 1967 (Gadamer 1994, 153-171), and *Rainer Maria Rilke nach fünfzig Jahren*, dated back to 1976 (Gadamer 1993, 306-319).

² It is no coincidence that the subtitle of the volume *Ästhetik und Poetik II is Hermeneutik im Vollzug*. In Gadamer's works we find a continuous confrontation with classical poets such as Hölderlin, Goethe and Kleist, a massive dialogue with Paul Celan, and numerous essays dedicated to Stefan George, Eduard Mörike, Hilde Domin, Karl Immermann and Ernst Meister.

³ Rilke recalls this important substitution, for example, in a letter to Lou Salomé of February 20, 1922; see Rilke 1969, 242-243.

⁴ The quotations are from Rilke 1937, 193, 109, 122.

⁵ Gadamer 1994, 156. Gadamer argues that the *Antistrophes* are too "direct" and "immediate", as opposed to the artistically mediate world of the *Elegies* (Gadamer 1994, 155). In this regard, we may recall how Romano Guardini

emphasizes that the name of *Lamort*, the main character of the sixth strophe, must be read as “La mort”, i.e. the person of death; see Guardini 1961, 154.

⁶ According to Rilke and his *Sonnets to Orpheus*, the poet’s essential task is to praise: *To praise, that’s it!* (I, 7); see Rilke 1977, 98 (all the translations of the *Elegies* and the *Sonnets* come from this edition).

⁷ See, for example, the lines of the first strophe of the *Spanish Trilogy*, in which the poet asks God to make him and all the things “one thing”, i.e. to bring all the fragments populating the earth to the unity of the earth itself; see Rilke 1989, 83.

⁸ “All mythical consciousness is still knowledge”; see Gadamer 2004, 286.

⁹ Heidegger 1992, 151-161. In his interpretation of some lines from the eighth *Elegy*, Heidegger discusses “reversal” in reference to the visual representation of the animal, as a being that is able to see the open, in contrast to man, who has too many obstacles to see the horizon of the open without prejudices. Heidegger mentions the eighth *Elegy* also in *Heraklit*; see Heidegger 1994, 210-211, 220.

¹⁰ See Guardini 1961. F.J. Brecht, too, referring to lines 81-86 of the fifth *Elegy*, indicates the *Umschlag* as basilar characteristics of the reversal of the human capability (*Können*) of the heart; see Brecht 1949, 159.

¹¹ “We are unprepared for the interpretation of the elegies and the sonnets, since the realm from which they speak, in its metaphysical constitution and unity, has not yet been sufficiently thought out in terms of the nature of metaphysics. (...) We are not only unprepared for an interpretation of the elegies and the sonnets, but also we have no right to it, because the realm in which the dialogue between poetry and thinking goes on can be discovered, reached, and explored in thought only slowly”; see Heidegger 1971, 87-140.

¹² In his maturity, Rilke defines himself a fervent anti-Christian, however, according to Heideggerian interpretation, an anti-Christian still moves within a Christian horizon precisely when he insists on abandoning it.

¹³ “Affirmation of life-AND-death appears as one in the ‘Elegies’. To grant one without the other is, so it is here learned and celebrated, a limitation which in the end shuts out all that is infinite. Death is the side of life averted from us, unshone upon by us”; see Rilke 1969, 309.

¹⁴ Even Hans Urs von Balthasar recognizes the *Hingabe* as the highest point of the Rilkean meditation; see von Balthasar 1939, 316.

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