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“IN THE SPREADING ROOTS OF EVENTS”

Rainer Maria Rilke and Paul Valéry on Literary Tradition

ABSTRACT: The aim of this essay is to address one of the most frequently discussed aspects of Modernist poetry: the relationship with the literary tradition. Hannah Arendt’s reflections on pre-political authority and its transformations will help us to analyze the way Paul Valéry and Rainer Maria Rilke interact with the models and the forms of the past. Thomas Stearns Eliot’s and Paul Valéry’s theories will allow us to better inquire the stakes of such a relationship and to question the relevance of a notion often used to define Modernist poetry: Classicism.

KEYWORDS: Modernist Poetry, Tradition, Authority, Elegiac Genre, Paul Valéry, Rainer Maria Rilke, Thomas Stearns Eliot, Hannah Arendt.

Le temps du monde fini commence.
(Paul Valéry, *Regards sur le monde actuel*)

Erstaunte euch nicht auf attischen Stelen die Vorsicht
menschlicher Geste?
(Rainer M. Rilke, *Die Zweite Elegie*)

Loosing the Thread: Modernism and the Authority of the Past

In an essay titled *What is Authority* and published in the 1961’s collection *Between Past and Future*, Hannah Arendt claims that the “crisis of the Cartesian model” started in the late nineteenth Century had made clear to people that they inhabited a new world. In such a world, reason was no longer able to “ask adequate, meaningful questions, let alone to give answers to its own perplexities” (91). Since human mind had just deserted its former functions, Arendt continues, individuals found themselves in a kind of interregnum, where the value of experience was altogether determined “by things that [were] no longer and by things that [were] not yet” (92). Industrialization, world wars and the rise of totalitarianisms may serve as explanations for such a collapse in Western tradition of thought. Yet according to Arendt these phenomena are to be considered the consequences of a more elusive one, which belongs from the linguistic sphere. The concept of “authority” from political and, especially, pre-political discourses had in fact disappeared.

Authority in the widest sense has always been accepted as a natural necessity, obviously required as much by natural needs, the helplessness of the child, as by political necessity, the continuity of an established civilization which can be assured only if those who are newcomers by birth are guided through a pre-established world into which they are born as strangers. Because of its simple and elementary character, this form of authority has, throughout the history of political thought, served as a model for a great variety of authoritarian forms of government, so that the fact that even this pre-political authority which ruled the relations between adults and children, teachers and pupils, is no longer secure signifies that all the old time-honored metaphors and models for authoritarian relations have lost their plausibility. (Arendt 1961, 92)

In modern civilization, Arendt argues, the concept of tradition seems more outdated than ever. Ancient models' lack of authority has left people alone with the feeling of having lost "the thread which safely guided [them] through the vast realms of the past" (121). Although distressing, this experience does not prevent them from realizing this same thread is actually an obstacle that fetters people to a pre-determined and deterministic relationship with the past. The awareness of such a bind can not but encourage some of these individuals to build up a new relationship with their cultural heritage.

Thus formulated, Arendt's reflection seems to suggest that, before the rupture between ancient and modern models of authority took place, Western traditions were to be considered as parts of a single conceptual framework. In the case of the lyric tradition, however, such a theoretic and linguistic koine has never been fully achieved. It was in fact not until the end of the nineteenth Century (that is to say, exactly at the time Arendt maintains the crisis started) that the spread of the Symbolist vulgate and the widening of the network between countries ensured a vague homogeneity of themes and forms between European and American literatures. Moreover, between the pole of emancipation and the pole of subjection to the authority of the past indicated by Arendt there seems to be an intermediate position. What strikes us when reading Paul Valéry's *The Young Fate* or Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino's Elegies* is in fact the tension between an extremely modern content – the splitting of consciousness on the one hand, the crisis of communication on the other – and an apparently traditional form. The overlapping of these two time-frames prevents us from considering Rilke's and Valéry's works merely as a fixed objects, composed with pre-defined elements and occupying a specific place in the history of the lyric genre. T. S. Eliot's thesis is well known, whose *Tradition and the Individual Talent* claims that the value of an author can only be established by setting him, "for contrast and comparison, among the dead" (15). Tradition, Eliot argues, can never be inherited: one becomes part of it only "by great effort" (16) in balancing self-denial and mastery.¹

¹ On the importance of Eliot's and Valéry's critical reflection on literature and modernity see Marx 2002.

An "Intellectual Hamlet": Valéry and the Traditional Values

Invited to hold a talk at the International Congress of Aesthetics and Art Science in 1937, Paul Valéry also questions the idea of literary tradition as a linear and almost evolutionary process. That a poet, by the fact of simply being born after others, could overtake his predecessors, seems deplorable to him. To support this anti-linear view of the relationship between writers and their traditions, Valéry chooses the example of the free-verse, a phenomenon that caused as much dispute among poets of previous generations as among his peers.

À l'époque (qui n'est pas révolue) où de grands débats se sont élevés entre les poètes, les uns tenant pour les vers que l'on nomme libres, les autres pour les vers de la tradition, qui sont soumis à diverses règles traditionnelles, je me disais parfois que la prétendue hardiesse des uns, la prétendue servitude des autres n'étaient qu'une affaire de pure chronologie, et que si la liberté prosodique eût seule existé jusqu'alors, et que l'on eût vu tout à coup inventer par quelques têtes absurdes la rime et l'alexandrin à césure, on eût crié à la folie, ou à l'intention de mystifier le lecteur.

At the time (not yet gone) when great debates arose among poets, some standing for the verse we call free, others for the verse of tradition, which are subject to various traditional rules, I sometimes thought that the alleged boldness of the ones, the alleged servitude of the others was a matter of pure chronology, and that if metric freedom had existed alone up to then, and if we had suddenly seen a few absurd minds inventing the rhyme and the alexandrine with a caesura, we would have shout the scandal, or the intent to mystify the reader. (Valéry [1937] 1957, I, 1031. My translation)

On the one hand, we have the boldness of the free-verse experiments; on the other hand, we have the servitude to the alexandrine and to the metrical institution in general. According to Valéry, there is not much difference between, say, André Breton and Charles Maurras, for literature means to him nothing more than a set of operations made possible by the combinatory logic that presides over language. It follows that very notion of literary history, conceived by the Romantics as a series of stages arranged in an order that is both organic and autonomous, universal and progressive, is to be reconsidered.² The works of the past are virtual objects, subject to the retrospective changes produced by their reception.

Valéry's background for reflecting on tradition is this same atmosphere of crisis analyzed by Arendt in her essay. Confronted with the changes studied by the philosopher, three reactions seem possible: mourning, an attitude announced by decadence's ideologists; renaissance, advocated by Futurists and their enthusiastic will of "blowing up all the traditions like worm-eaten bridges" (Marinetti, 4); and, finally, dialogue with a heritage exhumed with the aim of criticize it. During the 1920s and 1930s,

² Romanticism cannot, of course, be reduced to a single phenomenon, but rather to a series of very singular ones, each with its origins and its manifestations. On common themes and differences of European Romanticisms see Hamilton 2016, 10-35 and 2023, 20-42.

Valéry tends towards the first of these reactions. *La Crise de l'Esprit*, one of his most famous essays, is built around a long *ubi sunt* pronounced by “an intellectual Hamlet” (988) who stares at the ruins of the First World War.

Nous avons entendu parler de mondes disparus tout entiers, d'empires coulés à pic avec tous leurs hommes et tous leurs engins ; descendus au fond inexplorable des siècles avec leurs dieux et leurs lois, leurs académies et leurs sciences pures et appliquées ; avec leurs grammaires, leurs dictionnaires, leurs classiques, leurs romantiques et leurs symbolistes, leurs critiques et les critiques de leurs critiques [...]. Nous apercevions à travers l'épaisseur de l'histoire, les fantômes d'immenses navires qui furent chargés de richesse et d'esprit. Nous ne pouvions pas les compter.

We had been told of worlds that vanished altogether, of empires sunken with all their men and machines; descended to the unexplorable depths of ages with their gods and their laws, their academies, and their pure and applied sciences; with their grammars, their dictionaries, their classics, their Romantics and their symbolists, their critics and the critics of their critics. We knew well that all of the visible earth is made of ashes, and that the ashes mean something. We could glimpse through the thickness of history the ghosts of huge vessels loaded with wealth and spirit. We could not number them. (Valéry [1919] 1957, I, 992. My translation)

Choosing to give voice to Hamlet, that is to say one of the most authoritarian figures in Western tradition (but also a classic of the past, supposed here to take stock of the present situation), is part of a conception of literary history as a reservoir of images that can constantly be reinvested with meaning, even if only with a spectral function.

Although Valéry adheres to a combinatory vision of the poem – a vision that constitutes his major filiation with Mallarmé –, he also aims at moving beyond his own formalism towards less impersonal ways of utterance. The “voice” is therefore chosen as the function capable of bridging the gap between the body as a “purely muscular” (*purement musculaire*) regime of action and the mind as a “varied production of images, judgements and reasoning” (*une production variée d'images, de jugements et de raisonnements*). Valéry [1939] 1957, I, 1328; My translation). We are here at the crossroads between the Romantic idea of poetry as the expression of one's own emotions (the “utterance of feelings” referred to by John Stuart Mill) and the still Romantic postulate that sees it as the result of a synthesis carried out by the mind (the “voluntary association of determined symbols with intellectual operations” described by Coleridge in his *Biographia*). Valéry sought to combine these two contradictory features of the lyric heritage by developing a theory of fixed form as compromise between expressive and reflexive instances.³ To this end, he has to make sure the lyric discourse will remain separate from the others in its tools and tasks. That is why in his *Cahiers* we can read such

³ On Valéry's apparently contradictory poetics see Marx 2012. The author himself will later discuss both perspectives (although without referring to his own poetry) during his *Cours de poétique*, held at Collège de France between 1937 and 1945 and recently published by Gallimard (Valéry 2023, I, 116-134 and II, 245-259).

aphorisms as "I loathe every confused mixture of animal and angel... I like both quite apart" ("J'ai de la répugnance pour tout ce qui est mélange désordonné d'animal et d'ange. Mais j'aime l'un et l'autre bien séparés." Valéry [1929] 1973, II, 373. My translation).

Valéry is well aware of the lack of meaning formal values have undergone. Yet he has not ceased to feel nostalgic over them:

Peut-être avons-nous un sentiment si marqué de la distinction des genres, c'est-à-dire de l'indépendance des divers mouvements de l'esprit, que nous ne souffrons point les ouvrages qui les combinent.

Perhaps we have such a strong feeling for the distinction of genres, that is, for the independence of thought's various movements, that we can not suffer works that combine them. ([1923] 1957, 856. My translation)

Despite his awareness of the external restrictions that force the practice of writing into compartments as tight as they are obsolete, Valéry will keep embracing the literary axiology built by the Romantics. To him, lyric must be placed at a higher level than other discourses. One can therefore imagine that his contempt for all the poems he wrote in a non-fixed form – a large number of texts, to which he refers as "raw poetry" (*poésie brute*) or as "lost poetry" (*poésie perdue*) – stems from the fear of not finding a place in a literary space that has just undergone a profound reorganization of hierarchies. If Pierre Bourdieu has chosen the second half of the nineteenth Century as the exemplary field for his sociologic study, it is because this field is more than ever crisscrossed with what he calls "structural gaps" (*lacunes structurales*), i.e. with hybrid and growing forms that do not yet have the right to be assigned a generic label (Bourdieu 1992, 327).

This not-yet-labeled poetry, which Valéry kept private for a long time (it was not until 1922 that the first extracts from *Cahier B* were published) did not easily submit to Bourdieu's determinism. The rupture of the social consensus accorded to form as a potentially objective structure does not imply the suspension of the demand for meaning that is to be found at its origin. On the contrary, this demand is reactivated any time the author accepts the conventions of the lyric genre with the intention of displaying them as such. Respect for metrical constraints is just as necessary for reaching a precise position within the space of knowledge as it is for the development of a personal poetics. As for Valéry, this poetics is based on the famous and often misquoted principle of "indissolubility of sound and meaning" (Valéry [1926] 1957, II, 636). In *The Young Fate*, his most celebrated effort in at the same time honoring and challenging the tradition, fixed form and alexandrine in particular were justified by an anti-denotative and anti-utilitarian conception of language. At this stage, Valéry believed that the more the rules of French prosody (among others, the position of the caesura or the counting of syllables) are respected, the more it is possible to widen the gap between the moment

when thought involuntarily manifests itself to the subject and the moment when the latter manages to transform it in an highly controlled discourse.

Valéry claims about *The Young Fate* that he tried "to put into a quasi-traditional form and language an imagery that is, in short, modern" ("de mettre dans une forme et un langage quasi-classiques, une imagerie en somme moderne" Valéry [To Pierre Louÿs, 9.12.1916] 2004, 369. My translation). And yet it is almost only the quasi-traditional features that one remembers of this author. Why is it so? if we compare the finely chiseled verses of the poem with the apparently unformed fragments collected in the *Cahiers* and written in parallel with it we realize Valéry does not consider aesthetic experience as separated from other cognitive phenomena. All thought can be potentially used as a lyric source, all the more so if it presents itself to the mind in an incomplete, raw and even forgotten state. Poetic form needs to integrate the traditional values of fixity and mastery with those of movement and elusiveness. The model of the author as creator (*artefice*) of his text has therefore to be confronted with the opposite model: one in which it is the poem that modifies his author's thought, showing how much the latter resembles a non-immediate and well-shaped artifact (*artefatto*).⁴

"Among the Fallen and Mute Ruins": Rilke and the Elegiac Genre

The tension between anxiety towards historical events – *The Young Fate* was completed in 1917, while the prose texts began to appear in the *Cahiers* right after the

⁴ Adorno claims that Valéry's actuality lies precisely in the contradictions of his thought, torn between order and disorder, conservatism and deviation from the dominant norm. According to Adorno, he is one of the first to have grasped the phenomenon for which "The subject must depend upon itself, may rely only on what it can develop from within; for it, the critical path is truly the only one open. It can hope for no other objectivity. Thrown back upon itself, this subject is of necessity what is closest and most immediate to itself artistically [...]. After Valéry, the tension in art between contingency and the law of construction was intensified to the breaking point; similarly, deviation was a constituent of his own anachronistic insistence on concepts like order, regularity, and permanence. For him, deviation is the guarantee of truth. [...]. Mindful of what has been forgotten on the path of progress, of what has eluded the great tendency whose advocate he is as an advocate of the aesthetic domination of nature, Valéry the reactionary has to come down on the side of difference, of what does not come out even". "Dem ästhetischen Subjekt ging die Autorität alles Traditionalen unwiederbringlich verloren. Es muss auf sich selbst rekurrieren, darf nur auf das sich verlassen, was es aus sich herauszuspinnen vermag; ihm wahrhaft ist der kritische Weg allein offen. Auf keine andere Objektivität kann es hoffen. [...] Wie nach ihm die Spannung zwischen dem konstruktiven Gesetz und der Kontingenz in der Kunst bis zum Bersten sich steigerte, so wird schon seiner eigenen anachronistischen Insistenz auf Begriffen wie Ordnung, Regelmäßigkeit und Dauer die Abweichung konstitutiv beigegeben. Sie ist ihm Bürgschaft der Wahrheit [...] Indem der Reaktionär Valéry dessen gedenkt, was auf dem Weg des Fortschritts vergessen wird; was der großen Tendenz sich entzieht, deren Fürsprecher er doch als einer der ästhetischen Naturbeherrschung selber ist, muss er auf die Seite der Differenz, des nicht Aufgehenden sich schlagen" (Adorno [1950] 1958, 110-113. tr. Nicholson, 152-154).

end of the First World War – and defense of the poem as a separate, and therefore potentially sheltered form, is also to be found in Rainer Maria Rilke's work. Rilke is known to have held Valéry as his most illustrious and classic model: Only four years younger, Rilke is not only Valéry's German translator; he has a genuine admiration for him and seeks his attention at all costs.⁵ For his part, Valéry little interest in Rilke, who must seem to him too sentimental and too exalted: in a word, too Romantic. Despite the brevity of their exchanges (six letters from Rilke to Valéry and five from Valéry to Rilke, plus a fictitious one that Valéry wrote on Rilke's death and published in a commemorative work, Lang 1953), and despite the brevity of their unique encounter, Valéry remains a model for him. This is what he writes in November 1921 to Gertrud Ouckama Knoop, the mother of the deceased girl who inspired (along with *L'âme et la danse*, which he will translate in 1924), his *Sonette an Orpheus*:

Und ganz zuletzt wäre mir dann noch Paul Valéry eingefallen, ein Wichtigstes, da Ihnen der Name längst vorgekommen ist; ich kenne ihn, seinen Inhalten nach, erst seit diesem Frühjahr, aber seither steht er mir unter den Ersten und Größten, – ja, Größten [...]. Ein Dichter, der sich in jenen Beschäftigungen nur neue Maße und Präzisionen geholt zu haben scheint, um das Großartige seines Gefühlsraums und die Lage der darin erlebbaren Dinge unbestreitbar auszusprechen.

And then, finally, Paul Valéry would come to mind, a most important figure, whose name has long been familiar to you; I have known him only since last spring, but since then he has stood out to me as one of the first and greatest, – yes, greatest [...]. A poet who, after all his work, seems only to have acquired new metres and new accuracies to express indisputably the grandeur of his emotional space and the situation of what can be experienced in it. (Rilke [To Gertrud Ouckama Knoop, 16.11.1921] 1987, II, 266. My translation)

Together with Valéry's dialogues, Rilke also translates *Le cimetière Marin* and confesses to Clara Rilke that "he has never been so happy and satisfied about a translation" ("nie war ich im Übersetzten genauer und glücklicher"; *Briefe an Clara*, Rilke, 23.04.1923; 1987, 836). Interestingly, what seems to strike him is not only Valéry's apparently traditional work on verse or on figures of speech, but rather his way of conceiving the poem as a battleground where ancient (or even obsolete) forms and modern (or even uncanny) content come into confrontation. This is why, rather than comparing Valéry's reflections that we have mentioned above with those formulated by Rilke in his essays or letters, we will now turn our attention to the way in which this confrontation is put to work in Rilke's poetry itself. In what is considered to be his masterpiece, the *Duino's Elegies*, such dialectics between time present and time past emerges from the very title. On the one hand, we have the elegy with the generic heritage it evokes; on the other hand, we have Duino: a place with its specific and yet tragically known history. This ambivalence is further accentuated by the use of the toponymic adjective "*Duineser*," which encourages to interpret the title both as "Elegies written in

⁵ On the comparison between Rilke and Valéry see Goth 1981, Cox 2008 and König 2014, 194-202.

Duino" (genitive of origin) and as "Elegies written by Duino" (subjective genitive). The contrast between an abstract and immemorial element such as the elegy and a real and biographical referent such as Duino prevents us from tracing the *Elegies* back to the Romantic conception of the lyric as an expression of individual experience as well as to link them to the classical idea of the poem as a representation of an objective order. By choosing to place his work under the umbrella of the elegiac genre (particularly fruitful in the German tradition, where it is marked by the names of Klopstock, Goethe and Hölderlin),⁶ Rilke aims to put its formal and thematic features to the test. What compromises are to be found, he seems to ask himself, for the medium *par excellence* of mourning to host the mourning of modern consciousness?

A first clue in this direction is provided by the poem itself. In the explicit of the *Eighth Elegy* we read:

Und wir: Zuschauer; immer, überall,
dem allen zugewandt und nie hinaus!
Uns überfüllts, wir ordnens. Es zerfällt.
Wir ordnens wieder und zerfallen selbst.

(Rilke [1923] 1996, II, 226: *Achte Elegie*, v. 66-69)

And we: spectators, always, everywhere
looking at everything and never from!
It floods us. We arrange it, it decays.
We arrange it again, and we decay.

(Poulin Jr. 1977, 89: *Eighth Elegy*, v. 66-69)

Beyond the meaning it acquires within the *Eighth Elegy*, often considered as the one with the most explicit philosophical content, this quatrain also lends itself to a metapoetic reading. The fact that, despite repeated failures, human beings keep "ordering" the world seems to suggest that this action holds a coercive character. Cultural creatures rather than natural ones, men cannot but seek to rationalize the apparent chaos of reality by giving name to things around them (Steiner 1969, 250-54). When the simple act of naming is joined by the attempt to inscribe these names in a well-defined architecture such as the elegiac genre, the involuntary servitude to language risks to turn into a bias. For the poetic forms to take back its power to order reality, authors have to become aware of the limits of their own medium.

It should be remembered that, as with English, German metrical tradition is based on the number of accents, not on the number of syllables (as it is the case for French and Italian). The minimal element of a verse is therefore to be found in the foot, a set of short or long syllables arranged around an accented syllable. Pentameters, verses with five stress accents and an extension of nine to fifteen syllables, allow the possibilities of this

⁶ Continuity in the elegiac German Tradition from Klopstock up to the Sixties has been analyzed by Weisenberg 1969.

system to be expanded to its full length. Its plasticity is particularly evident in the *Elegies*. Often classified as free verse, these are in fact largely composed of pentameter, which Rilke uses in its entire span and alternates with irregular lines (Schröder 1992, 31). The result is a poem whose lines vary from one (*Fifth Elegy*, v. 69: "Du,") to nineteen syllables (*First Elegy*, v. 93: "dass erst im erschrockenen Raum, dem ein beinah göttlicher Jüngling"). But the choice of pentameter does not only respond to a need for flexibility. We know that, in the Greek and Latin tradition, this verse is coupled with hexameter to form the elegiac distich. In spite of the evolution that transformed it from a verse couplet into a thematic sub-genre, elegy has kept a close relationship with this meter. The most purist poets have sought to fit their statements into the distich, sometimes by forcing syntax; while the less willing to simply accept the elegiac tradition's legacy have sought to call into question the authority of the past this form originates from.

From a diachronic point of view, we notice a progressive abandonment of the distich along the *Elegies* (Hardörfer 1954,100). Several of them are found in the *First Elegy*: they turn out to be more or less trustful to the traditional model depending on the content they display. Sometimes the statement fits perfectly into the space fixed by the measure:

Sehnt es dich aber, so singe die Liebenden; lange
noch nicht unsterblich genug ist ihr berühmtes Gefühl.
(Rilke [1923] 1996, II, 202: *Erste Elegie*, v. 36-37)

When longing overcomes you, sing about great lovers;
their famous passions still aren't immortal enough.
(Poulin Jr. 1977, 65: *First Elegy*, v. 36-37)

Sometimes it extends beyond the verse, thus providing the effect of an uninterrupted flow of thoughts:

(Denn das Schöne ist nichts)
als des Schrecklichen Anfang, den wir noch grade ertragen,
und wir bewundern es so, weil es gelassen verschmäh't,
(uns zu zerstören)
(Rilke [1923] 1996, II, 201: *Erste Elegie*, v. 4-7)

Because beauty's nothing
but the start of terror we can hardly bear,
and we adore it because of the serene scorn
it could kill us with.
(Poulin Jr. 1977,64: *First Elegy*, v. 4-7)

This last option recurs frequently in Rilke's poetry and can even be considered a feature of his relationship with the elegy as a genre. Traditionally, the distich is in fact meant to be autonomous in both form and content: while it lends itself well to sentences or aphorisms, it is not well suited to lyrical tirades. But in the *Duino's Elegies*, each element

of the cycle is inseparable from its totality. The choice of the distich will therefore depend on the message such meter is supposed to convey in a specific utterance's situation. A classical topic will, for example, require an equally classical verse:

Ist die Sage umsonst, dass einst in der Klage um Linos
wagende erste Musik dürre Erstarrung durchdrang;
(Rilke [1923] 1996, II, 203: *Erste Elegie*, v. 91-92)

Is the story meaningless, how once during the lament for Linos,
the first daring music pierced the barren numbness.
(Poulin Jr. 1977, 65: *First Elegy*, v. 91-92)

It thus becomes clear why the *Sixth Elegy* (which contains eight couplets, three of them canonic) is the most traditional of the entire cycle. Also known as the "Hero's Elegy," the poem opens with a comparison between the early blossoming of fig trees and that of young warriors when driven by the desire to perform glorious duties.⁷ "In a few," writes Rilke, "the surge of action rises so strongly" that they feel their hearts burn.

wenn die Verführung zum Blühen wie gelinderte Nachtluft
ihnen die Jugend des Munds ihnen die Lieder berührt:
Helden vielleicht und den frühe Hinüberbestimmten
denen der gärtnernde Tod anders die Adern verbiegt.
(Rilke [1923] 1996, II, 218: *Sechste Elegie*, v. 14-17)

when the temptation to bloom touches the youth
of their mouths, of their eyelids, like gentle night air,
they're already standing and glowing with full hearts;
only in heroes, perhaps, and in those destined to die young,
those in whom death the gardener has twisted the veins
differently.
(Poulin Jr. 1977, 73: *Sixth Elegy*, v. 14-17)

The strong dactylic rhythm that follows starkly the assertiveness of the statements introduced by the first stanza:

das uns finster verschweigt, das plötzlich begeisterte Schicksal
singt ihn hinein in den Sturm seiner aufrauschenden Welt.
Hör ich doch keinen wie ihn. Auf einmal durchgeht mich
mit der strömenden Luft sein verdunkelter Ton.
(Rilke [1923] 1996, II, 218: *Sechste Elegie*, v. 25-27)

hiding the rest of us in darkness, suddenly infatuated,
fate sings him into the storm of its roaring world.
I don't hear anyone like him. All of a sudden, carried

⁷ On this specific elegy and its relationship with the Romantic *topoi* see Klienenberg 1988, 288-305.

by the streaming air, his dark song rushes through me.
 (Poulin Jr. 1977, 73: *Sixth Elegy*, v. 25-27)

Achieved almost ten years after the *Sixth*, the *Fourth* and *Eighth* elegies appear to be the poems in which Rilke's fidelity toward tradition is less honored. The distich is here replaced by what, in the English tradition, is called a blank verse, i.e., an unrhymed iambic pentameter. This form, too, has a tradition, dating back to Shakespeare, but which underwent a massive revival between the end of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth Century. The fact Rilke deviates here from the elegiac conventions does not imply, however, that the *Fourth's* and the *Eighth's* metric structures are completely loose and their verses irregular. On the contrary, blank verse is itself more homogenous than the distich: the alternation of descending and ascending rhythms is respected throughout the poem. This unity is striking even for a non-expert reader, for compared to more dactylic-based Elegies, these look more homogeneous. Thus, in the attack of the *Fourth*:

BÄUME Lebens, o wann winterlich
 Wir sind nicht einig. Sind nicht wie die Zug-
 vögel verständigt. Überholt und spät,
 so drängen wir uns plötzlich Winden auf
 und fallen ein auf teilnahmslosen Teich.
 Blühh und verdorn ist uns zugleich bewußt.
 Und irgendwo gehn Löwen noch und wissen,
 solange sie herrlich sind, von keiner Ohnmacht.
 (Rilke [1923] 1996, II, 211: *Vierte Elegie*, v. 1-8)

o TREES of life, when is your winter?
 Our nature's not the same. We don't have the instinct
 of migrant birds. Late and out of season,
 we suddenly throw ourselves to the wind
 and fall into indifferent ponds. We
 understand flowering and fading at once.
 And somewhere lions still roam: so magnificent
 they can't understand weakness.
 (Poulin Jr. 1977, 64: *Fourth Elegy*, v. 1-8)

Freedom from the traditional meters does not mean a complete emancipation from formal conventions. When we look at twentieth-Century poetry, we often tend to distinguish too sharply between innovators and conservatives, or between poets for whom metric represent a barrier to individual expression and those who still believe in its scope. To try to pin Rilke down to one camp or another would mean forgetting that, in the context in which his work was carried out, metrical freedom had itself become a tradition. The regularity of a verse has ever since much more depended on the internal pattern established within the poem than on the allegiance to an immutable principle

supposed to be valid for everyone. As Eliot remarks, "the ghost of some simple metre should lurk behind the arras in even the 'freest' verse" (89). The claim to universality of the fixed form may be obsolete, but it nevertheless keeps haunting Modernist poets. As Judith Ryan notices while reflecting on Rilke's relationship with the elegiac legacy,

The world Rilke depicts in the *Elegies* is a collection of fragments that remain in human consciousness like broken columns from an earlier age. [[...] Traditional poetic themes, love and death for example, are addressed in ways far removed from the imagery in which they have usually been embodied. (Ryan 1999, 200)

From a diachronic point of view, *Duino's Elegies* are marked by the gradual emancipation from the distich in favor of the blank verse. Yet, from a synchronic point of view, the recovery of the forms traditionally linked to the elegiac genre occurs more occasionally (Hardörfer 1954, 174). Apart from the *Sixth Elegy*, where they still seem to be trusted with an objective scope, these meters never impose themselves as an ordering principle. Their appearance in the cycle takes place within a quite loose metric regime. The result is that, paradoxically, the emergence of a canonical distich or a rhyming verse is perceived more as a departure from genre's conventions than a tribute to them. By rejecting the Romantic temptation of an art that would be both linear and accomplished, both present and absolute – in other words, of a poem that could present itself both as a stage for thought's dramatic play and as the result of this same play – Rilke pictures a subject whose destiny is to be trapped in those same form (i.e. language and figures) that he has once used to confine reality.⁸ Thus, in the *Third Elegy*, the child is described as a being whose becoming can only be considered as his cage:

Er, der Neue, Scheuende, wie er verstrickt war,
mit des innern Geschehns weiterschlagenden Ranken
schon zu Mustern verschlungen, zu würgendem Wachstum, zu tierhaft
jagenden Formen.

(Rilke [1923] 1996, II, 209: *Dritte Elegie*, v. 49-52)

How he surrendered. - Loved.
Loved his interior world, the jungle in him, that
primal inner forest where his pale green heart stood
among the fallen and mute ruins.

(Poulin Jr. 1977, 59: *Third Elegy*, v. 49-52)

As it is for the quatrain of the *Eighth Elegy* quoted earlier in this essay, these verses too lend themselves to a metapoetic reading. The image of the toddler fatally "entangled [...] in the tendrils" of its existence may in fact give us a clue for interpreting Rilke's use of the fixed form. Far from embodying an ideal of immemorial perfection, the elements of the

⁸ The way Rilke both inherits and makes himself independent from his Romantic models is explored by Lawrence 1969, 131-151.

generic tradition are conceived by him as the equivalents of those "tierhaft jagenden Formen" (which can be translated as "animal-like hunting forms") that have shaped man's life since his birth. The paradoxical aspect in such a reversal of authority between life and form is that it does not lead to the rejection of the former in favor of the latter. When Rilke chooses to compare the human condition to that of non-human figures such as the angel or the animal, he restores to language its full powers, both referential and poetic.⁹ As a cry of a subject in quest of a form, *Duino's Elegies* are then also the form taken by this quest.

Grafting Modernity on Tradition

In his essay *L'Amérique, Projection de l'Esprit Européen*, Valéry provides us with a striking metaphor of the relationship between the works of the past and that of the present:

La greffe est dans le développement des arts une méthode des plus fécondes. Tout l'art classique, avouons-le, est un produit de greffage.

Grafting is a most fruitful method in the development of the arts. All classical art, let us face it, is the result of grafting. (Valéry [1938] 1957, 988. My translation)

To consider the dialogue Rilke and Valéry entertained with poetic tradition as a form of grafting allows us to question the relevance of a concept often used to define their work, but also that of Modernist poets in general (Eliot, Montale, Moore among others): "Classicism." While relevant in that it refers to an ideal correspondence between the formal values of the work and the cultural values of the society from which it originated, this notion restores an excessively backward-looking image of Modernism. It in fact leads us to think that Rilke's or Valéry's *oeuvres* are completely indifferent to the historical events of their time and locked into an eternal nostalgia for the past and its rules. Moreover, to read these authors through the sole filter of Classicism contributes to widening the gap between a supposedly (and always too generic) Romantic idea of poetry as the utterance of individual feeling and another supposedly (and also too generic) Modernist idea of poetry as a dispassionate product of reason.

Such a gap not only forces the critics who subscribe to it to get bogged down in pseudo-scientific attempts to determine the functioning of these two faculties (reason and feeling) within the creative process; it also participates in the division of the literary field into opposing and often simplistic factions, such as those of the "Moderns" and "Anti-moderns," of the "Avant-garde" and the "Arrière-garde." At a time when Valéry and

⁹ On the relationship between the baby and the animal in the *Eighth Elegy* and in other poems see Steiner 1969, 210-213 and Laermann 2000, 124-139.

Rilke insist on the absolute separation of poetry from other discourses, yet indulge in a strongly lyrical prose of ideas that defies any genre label, this apparent contradiction testifies their belief that there still exists a hierarchical (i.e., axiological) distinction between genres. By placing their verses after the past and before the future, they reflect a hesitation between an ideal of positive knowledge (hence Valéry's systems and axiology of literary genres and Rilke's faith towards poetry's cognitive scope) and the awareness that the forms from which this knowledge derives are no longer capable of representing reality (hence Valéry's hybrid, "raw" or "lost" poetry and Rilke's mourning of the elegiac form).

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