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Mallarmé, Rilke,
and the orphic trace

TOMBEAU

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Anniversaire-Janvier 1897

Le noir roc courroucé que la bise le roule
Ne s'arrêtera ni sous de pieuses mains
Tâtant sa ressemblance avec les maux humains
Comme pour en bénir quelque funeste moule.

*DER schwarze Block im Zorn, daß Wind ihn rolle,
hält sich nicht auf, selbst unter frommer Hand,
die tastend Menschenleid ihn ähnlich fand,
als ob sie arge Gußform segnen solle.*

Ici presque toujours si le ramier roucoule
Cet immatériel deuil opprime de maints
Nubiles plis l'astre mûri des lendemains
Dont un scintillement argentera la foule.

*Hier immer fast beim Gurrn des Taubers drückt
dies Trauern ohne Stoff mit manchem Falt
der Mannbarkeit den reifen Stern von bald,
des Schimmer einst die Menge silbern schmückt.*

Qui cherche, parcourant le solitaire bond
Tantôt extérieur de notre vagabond –
Verlaine ? Il est caché parmi l'herbe, Verlaine

*Wer sucht, den einsam er im Sprung gefunden,
im grad noch äußern, unsern Vagabunden –
Verlaine? Er ist im Gras versteckt, Verlaine,*

À ne surprendre que naïvement d'accord
La lèvres sans y boire ou tarir son haleine
Un peu profond ruisseau calomnié la mort.

*um zu erspähn, verständigt, wie sichs bot,
am Mund, dem atemlos nicht trinkenden,
kaum tiefen Bach, verleumdeten, den Tod.*

Stéphane Mallarmé

Translation by Rainer Maria Rilke

First, a few facts about these texts and circumstances in which they were written. Paul Verlaine died on January 8, 1896, at the age of 52, utterly destitute, and he was buried on January 10 in the family tomb at Batignolles. It was a “fifth class” funeral. Seven eulogies were delivered, by Lepelletier, Mendès, Coppée, Mallarmé, Kahn, Barrès, and Moréas. (Those of Mendès and Moréas were especially hypocritical.) Mallarmé’s eulogy, heartfelt and brief, was published the same evening in *Le Temps* and in *La Revue Blanche* on February 1.¹ In May a Comité d’Action was formed, Mallarmé accepting the presidency, with the object of erecting a monument to Verlaine in the Luxembourg Gardens. On June 26, Mallarmé asked François Coppée to take over his duties, himself standing down. The committee urged Thadée Natanson, editor of *La Revue Blanche*, to devote a memorial issue to Verlaine; it duly appeared on January 1, 1897, and contained Mallarmé’s sonnet, ‘Tombeau - Anniversaire, Janvier 1897’. On January 15, there was a memorial gathering at Verlaine’s grave and again Mallarmé spoke a few words, about the Shade and the Glory of his very dear friend.² Some slight textual variants appearing in a manuscript of the poem, once belonging to Henri Mondor, need not detain us. The

1. See Lawrence and Elisabeth Hanson, *Verlaine: Prince of Poets* (London, 1958), pp. 350, f., for an account of the ceremonies and of scandals behind the scene.

2. E. Noulet, *Vingt poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé*. Paris, 1967, p. 258, citing H. Mondor, *L’amitié de Verlaine et Mallarmé* (Paris, 1940).

text from *La Revue Blanche* was reprinted in the Deman edition of Mallarmé's poems in 1899 and subsequently in the Gallimard edition of 1913; that is the one to which Rilke attended. It is worth noting that the sonnet is a late work: soon after that January, Mallarmé was composing the ten pages of *Un Coup de Dés*, published in *Cosmopolis* in May 1897; he died on September 9, 1898.

Rilke was engaged on his Mallarmé translations during the second quarter of 1919, the last months of his wartime sojourn in Munich. During February he had been at work on translations from Italian. While through the Spring civil unrest raged in the Munich streets, Kurt Eisner being shot to death on February 21, Gustav Landauer trampled, shot, and beaten to death while in custody on May 2,¹ Rilke was refreshing his relationship with Paris. His acquaintance with Mallarmé's poetry probably went back fifteen years or so, to early times in Paris under the spell of Rodin. On November 22, 1913, he had heard André Gide's lecture on Verlaine and Mallarmé et Le Vieux Colombier; doubtless he had read in 1917 the translation of it in the *Insel-Almanach* for that year. Lou Andreas-Salomé, who came to stay in Munich between March 26 and June 2, 1919, noted in her journal for May 27: "... Über Mallarmé [und Rilke]";² later, on January 18, 1923, she wrote to Rilke about the translations he had read to her: "als Du mir in München Mallarmé-Übersetzungen vorlasest (wir redeten oft davon) hatte ich schon das Gefühl, als löse sich darin in Dir ein Verlangen nach dem „Manne“ in einer geistigen An schmiegung..."³ This was à propos Rilke's much more ample and sustained foray into translation from French, now of Valéry's poems: those later translations, undertaken during the second half of 1921, led up directly to the six weeks in February and March, 1922, during which the two cycles of Orpheus sonnets were written and the *Elegies* completed. So the Mallarmé translations were a stepping-stone toward that poet's principal legatee, Paul Valéry. Even then, it is conceivable that Lou had detected in Rilke's 'Tombeau' translation a male voice altogether distinct from Valéry's, namely that of Mallarmé's self-appointed German viceroy, Stefan George. – Rilke's much more sinuous translation of Mallarmé's 'Eventail de Mlle Mallarmé' was published in *Das Insel Schiff*, 1, 5, 1920, that of the 'Tombeau' in *Das Insel Schiff*, 3, 4, 1922 (thus just a month after the apocalypse of February and March that year). Two other translations were undertaken, but neither appears in the collected *Übertragungen* (1951). They are 'Une dentelle s'abolit' and 'Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui', The latter is cited in Ingeborg Schnack's *Chronik* (I, p. 672) – Rilke transcribed his splendid alexandrines for Dorothea von der Muehl on December 23, 1919.

It might be conjectured that Rilke's mimicry of Stefan George in his 'Tombeau' translation, whether it was altogether deliberate or not, is a homage to George, whose work he did deeply respect. But there might also be a degree of hesitancy here, even uncertainty, mixed with reserve: Rilke regarded Mallarmé as "der sublimste, der „dichteste“ Dichter unserer Zeit"⁴, and, at a time when he was racked by self-doubt, he seems to

1. During the first week of May, government troops killed 457 persons haphazardly in the streets. Military casualties numbered over a thousand. Cf. G. Prüfer and W. Tormin, *Die Entstehung und Entwicklung der Weimarer Republik bis zu Eberts Tod*. Hannover (Verlag für Literatur und Zeitgeschehen), 1960, p. 19. Also Evelyn Underhill, *Hammer or Anvil*. London (Victor Gollancz), 1945, pp. 59-61. The officer responsible for the brutal murder of Landauer, Major von der Gagern, was never prosecuted.

2. Rainer Maria Rilke und Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Briefwechsel*. Frankfurt am Main (Insel), 1975, p. 408.

3. *Briefwechsel*, cit., p. 459.

4. Letter to Rudolf Bodländer, March 23, 1922, cited in Ingeborg Schnack, *Rainer Maria Rilke, Chronik seines Lebens und seines Werkes* (Frankfurt am Main, Insel), 1990, Bd. II, pp. 796-797.

have had qualms about transposing Mallarmé's cryptic sublimity into the registers of his own voice. To Claire Studer, on April 2, he even sent his not quite finished translation of 'Eventail de Mlle Mallarmé' ("an dem ich mich hier versucht habe") and asked if Iwan Goll had done a translation with which he might compare it.¹ What a ghostly crux we have here: a funeral sonnet by the poet who declared poetry to be "l'explication orphique de la terre" being approached with such trepidation by a poet whose own Orphic voices, audible since at least 1903, and whose eccentric but already renowned notions about death, were to be articulated with miraculous richness three years hence in the Orpheus sonnets and the *Elegies*. I will return to the Orphic matter later. For now, let us see what Rilke made of Mallarmé's sonnet.

Although Rilke seems to be emulating obscurities to be found in the original, his diction, at several points, only compounds them. He found no way, either, to deliver in German the sustained counterpoint of the grave and acute vowels (or "dark" and "bright" vowels), *ou* and *î*, which gives to the original its colour. Thus (selectively) the two quartets have their dominants in closely knit sets: "Le noir roc courroucé que la brise le roule" condenses the dominants which, as the poem emerges, proliferate. The three acute *î* vowels in lines 1 and 2 are hardly conspicuous; but in the second quartet that vowel occurs with greater frequency (and accents the "scintillation" which will "silver the crowd"). In the second quartet the grave *ou* and the acute *î* occur as sequences in a precarious equilibrium only assured by their coming to rest in the last word:

Ici presque toujours si le ramier roucoule
Cet immatériel deuil opprime de maints
Nubiles plis l'astre mûri des lendemains
Dont un scintillement argentera la foule.

There is no such grave-acute alternation or equilibrium in Rilke's second quartet. The only brighter (if not acuter) vowels occur in the third syllable of "Mannbarkeit", in "den reifen Stern", and in an assortment of vowels in line 8: "des Schimmer einst die Menge silbern schmückt". However, this rather flickering quality does develop in the sestets into a stronger light, with "einsam", "Verlaine", "erspähn", "wie sichs", "nicht trinkenden", "kaum tiefen". With this summary analysis I mean only to indicate that the translation, as regards its aural modelling, is not, even in terms of German possibilities, as elegantly *durchkomponiert* as the French. It need not matter so much that the Petrarchan rhyme-scheme disappears; the non-rhyme of "nicht trinkenden" is only one of several points at which the German creaks – at cross-purposes with the original.

This aural inadequacy has a counterpart in Rilke's diction. For examples: "arge Gußform", "Trauern ohne Stoff", and "Falt der Mannbarkeit". The obscure "funeste moule" has been vexing critics in quest of its referent for a very long time. Those pious hands, it has been alleged, are those of mourners who lament not so much Verlaine's death as his delinquent life. One critic even proposed that the hands might be those of Christ, outstretched on a crucifix near the grave, and others have wondered if Mallarmé, whose detestation of French Catholicism was intense, might have been hedging around Verlaine's erratic adherence to it. "Arge Gußform" may be a literal translation of "funeste moule", but "arg" is too abstract to be true. "Funeste" has the sense of gloomy, dark,

1. Schnack, *op. cit.*, Bd. I, p. 636-638.

even noxious (not funereal): might it not be that the hands of the pall-bearers holding the coffin would be consecrating, or wishing to, the gloomy mold in which the dead Verlaine is hidden, for good or ill?¹ Or else the hands are pious because held in prayer, joined, thus dark inside, tombstone-shaped, with a darkness akin to Verlaine's disorderly life, but "as if" to consecrate it. "Finstere Gußform" might have been preferred.

"Dies Trauern ohne Stoff" is syntactically uncertain, because there is no antecedent for "dies". "Trauern" for "deuil", meanwhile, isolates one sense only of the complex French word. "Deuil" can mean the act of mourning, the funeral procession, the garments worn by mourners, and one thing more. Here, having opted for "Trauern" as the act, Rilke did not read "deuil" as the *pall* itself, the dark cloth laid with its folds ("nubiles plis") over the coffin. He has committed his reading, further, to a substantivization of the last phrase into "Mannbarkeit", which makes no sense at all, except as a term in vague contrast to "den reifen Stern". One can see here how the indeterminacy of the actual referents, as well as the syntax with its hyperbata and parentheses, perplexed Rilke no less than they have perplexed readers across ten decades. "Dies Trauern ohne Stoff" certainly does not translate the sense of "deuil" as the funeral pall. But why "immatériel deuil"? In fact, the antecedent is the moaning of the dove, but it is also that amorous or grieving sound compounded with a figural aspect of "le noir roc", which must be "cloud". The tombstone is "like" a dark cloud rolled by "la bise" across the sky. Hence, too, the "rolling stone" Verlaine, the vagabond, is soon not to be found anywhere but "amid the grass", a cloud come to earth. This figural aspect, "cloud", is transformed, along with the (aural) "roucoulement" of the dove, in the second quartet, into the pall hanging heavy on the coffin until the poet's glory will shine forth. Then, indeed, it will "silver the crowd" as a rain-shower or sunray in January might do, stippling the dark attire of the mourners with its "scintillement". So "schmückt" in the translation is empty rhetoric, whereas Mallarmé's wording, however oneiric (*rêvé*, as Jean-Pierre Richard would say) has not lost sight of actual phenomena and has "wrung rhetoric's neck". The difficulty here, of course, is that the "cloud" element in the oxymoron "cloud/stone" is *mis en abîme*, for all that the *bise* rolls it.

Why did Rilke not translate "deuil" as "Bahrtuch"? One could conjecture that he had not fully re-imagined Mallarmé's reverie, in which the stone, the coffin, the cloud, the dove's moan, and the pall variously constitute the particular folds of an immaterial (because purely fictive) integument, from which Verlaine's "ripened" poetic radiance was to break free.

I suspect, too, that Rilke may have strangely compacted lines 9 and 10 in the first sestet. "Qui cherche, parcourant le solitaire bond / Tantôt extérieur de notre vagabond..." – "Wer sucht, den einsam er im Sprung gefunden, / im grad noch äußern, unseren Vagabunden..." This "leap outside" of "not long ago" comes exactly at the *volta* of the Petrarcan sonnet, and its sense has exercised the wits of several critics. "Tantôt" must refer to a year ago, when Verlaine made his *salto mortale*. Rilke hardly elucidates by his grammar. Unless I am mistaken, he leaves "Wer" as an uncertain antecedent of "er": the person seeking Verlaine as a dead vagabond has made the leap, whereas the leap was Verlaine's own, albeit external, and now he is hiding, not now the vagabond but Verlaine *lui-même*, his poetic word, not beneath the grass but lurking amid it, gone into that

1. Mallarmé did take Coppée's place as pall-bearer after the service at Saint-Étienne-du-Mont.

nature to which his ingenuousness (“naïvement”), elsewhere praised by Mallarmé, had always belonged.

Even then, Rilke does capture, with the internal rhyme “erspähn”, something of Mallarmé’s closing image: Verlaine happening on (“À ne surprendre que...”) death as a stream not deep at all, and much maligned (“calomnié”).¹ But he misses (and could hardly have felicitously caught) the pun in the near-anagram, “Verlaine”/“naïve-”, which precedes a last roll of the stone, as “roc” is reversed in “d’accord”, and “Ver(t)-laine” comes to rest both amid the grass and finally in his name: Robert Greer Cohn (seldom extravagant) has proposed that the name is separable into “vert” as “green” (for the grass) and “laine” as wool for the (fluffy) cloud.²

Solemn, Georgian as Rilke made his translation to be, such impishly cabalistic word-play could hardly have suited it. – I venture to imagine Verlaine and Mallarmé, both language teachers between English and French, laughing together over their students’ greetings, “Good mo(u)rning” and (after Verlaine’s schoolmastering in the English East Midlands) “Good *deuil*”. Indeed, of all his great funeral poems, beginning with the somber metaphysics of ‘Toast funèbre’ (for Gautier, 1872-3), Mallarmé’s sonnet for Verlaine is the lightest, the least declamatory, the least ceremonious – reminiscent, say, of the *In Paradisum* of Fauré’s *Requiem*.³ Gautier’s mortal remains are housed in porphyry, Poe’s in granite, Baudelaire’s in marble, but Verlaine’s are – occult in transparency.

Mallarmé’s tone here is *sotto voce*, the figures of his reverie, fierce or pacific, cryptic but volatile, are surely too a fit homage from the Mallarmé who subscribed to Anarchist journals and had long since done with bourgeois gravity,⁴ to the irrepressible lyric gusto of Verlaine and to his erratic life. When Rilke translated “Il est caché parmi l’herbe...” did he recognize how the initial oxymoron “stone”/“cloud” has by now settled amid the grasses as a nutrient, elementally akin to the “peu profond ruisseau” in the cosmic circulation of waters? It seems he did not. For the verb “erspähn” keeps the glorified Verlaine apart, as an observer: he does not “surprendre” the stream, or “happen on” it, rather he separately spies it. It might seem that the Orphic trace here – dissolution of the singer into nature – has eluded Rilke. In the French there is a mercurial touch braiding – if “l’astre mûri” implies fire – all four elements (earth, air, fire, water), a touch as light as the “immatériel deuil” of the dove’s moan (which in the second quartet does juxtapose Eros and Thanatos, for not only is it the *colombe* that is sacred to Aphrodite). Yet precisely this motif of life in death and death in life, as the elements crystallize into amorous forms and in time are again dispersed, was the one that attracted around it a kaleidoscopic host of figures in the *Sonette an Orpheus*:

O du verlorenen Gott! Du unendliche Spur!
Nur weil dich reißend zuletzt die Feindschaft verteilt,
Sind wir die Hörenden jetzt und ein Mund der Natur.
(*Sonette an Orpheus*, I, XXVI)

1. It would stretch to breaking-point the notion of the “materiality” of language to interpret this epithet as a glancing allusion to Whitman, author of ‘Calamus’ and *Leaves of Grass*. Besides, sensitive to etymologies as he was, Mallarmé would have known that “calomnie” and *calamus* come from different roots. Yet it is hard to resist the thought that Mallarmé is marrying the Shades of Verlaine and Whitman.

2. *Toward the Poems of Mallarmé*. Berkeley and Los Angeles (University of California Press), 1965, p. 175.

3. Completed 1890-91. The *In Paradisum* was first heard on January 16, 1888 at the Madeleine, a brisk walk from 87 rue de Rome. Sections called the *Little Requiem* were also performed by the Société Nationale on January 28, 1892.

4. Cf. his letter to Villiers de L’Isle-Adam, September 30, 1867, e.g., “We must terrify the monster and I believe I have the perfect plan” (*Selected Letters*, edited and translated by Rosemary Lloyd. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1988, p. 83).

At this point, before exploring certain affinities between Mallarmé and Rilke in the discourse of Orphism, as well as some later variations, I would like to interpose an English translation of the ‘Tombeau’ sonnet. It owes much to scholars who came after Rilke, scholars since Thibaudet (1930) who have proposed various readings, among them Charles Mauron (1936), Gardner Davies (1950), Robert Greer Cohn (1965) and Emilie Noulet (1967). None attend significantly to the vocal sonorities, to the voice which pronounces the ‘Tombeau’ – its aural qualities. But it was a passionate, incantatory, and graveyard voice, spinning mortal words on their semantic and phonetic axes and explaining nothing, that I tried, with assonance rather than rhyme, to suggest in English. At least, if I read it now, listeners will appreciate what a hasardous operation it is to render the filigree French into the sounds of English or German.

TOMB

Anniversary - January 1897

The black stone angered that a keen wind rolls it
Will not be stopped even under pious hands
Which grope for its resemblance to our human ills,
As if to consecrate a gloomy mold of it.

If here the wood dove almost daily moans
This immaterial pall hangs with nubile folds
Heavy upon the ripe star of tomorrows,
Flash as it will a silver through the crowd.

Who still pursues the solitary leap,
Not long ago external, of our vagabond
Verlaine ? He’s hid amid the grass, Verlaine

Naively has consented, only to happen on
– His lips not drinking it, nor dry his breath –
A rivulet, not deep, calumniated, death.

By the aforementioned scholars, every word in the ‘Tombeau’ sonnet has been related to words in other contexts across the whole intricate web of Mallarmé’s poetry and prose. For all their differences, they perform a sort of spectroscopy of the text, with its convex idiosyncracies and concave echoes. Near enough, they elucidate it as a relational system, a verbal *Bezugssystem*, as which Rilke had not quite recognized it: as a microcosm of what Mallarmé calls “la musicalité de tout” (*Musique et Lettres*). But there has been one problem. Most of these critics have been intent on sorting out the syntax and identifying the extrinsic referents, such as the “roc”, the “deuil”, the “ramier”, “la foule”, and so forth. This has entailed a “literalization” of a text which, launched as an incantation into an upper air, and disjunct from reference, obstructs any literal reading, invites attention to itself as “isolated *parole*” (*Crise de vers*), holds that attention under a spell, and does not in the least, as “the flight of song” (*Musique et Lettres*), conform to the object world it envelopes.

Rilke sensed this: Lou Andreas-Salomé recorded in her journal of May 17, 1919, some remarks he made à propos Mallarmé’s imagination of objects:

Rainer sagte: Mallarmé ist so vollkommen, weil er mit dem Objekte zuende kommt und es dennoch in sich behält, etwa wie ein fertig gebildetes Kind im Mutterleib vor der Geburt. Von daher die Erlaubnis, beinah damit zu spielen, das Objekt fort und fort aufzulösen: so sicher seiner vollendeten Bildung – statt des im eignen Subjektiven steckenbleibenden Expressionismus.¹

This “containment” of objective reference, coupled with a ludic spinning of analogies around the verbal axis, was Rilke’s own foible. But the *Neue Gedichte* were behind and beyond him now; before him was “Herzwerk” – the invention of a cosmic relational system, a *Bezugssystem* in which any interior and subjective magnitude, dizzyingly deep, might come into accord with the object world as far as that could extend, spatially into “sidereal distances” (as in his letter of August 11, 1924, to Nora Putzsch-Wydenbruck), temporally into the pre-human back of beyond.

Here we have the curve, I believe, at which Rilke’s Orphic vision intersects with Mallarmé’s. But let us proceed with caution. The figure, no, the presence of death lays a cruelly cold shadow across the horizon of an essential *harmonia mundi*. What, then, are the elementary propositions of the Orphic discourse?

The myth of Orpheus is one of the nuclear myths of the Western world, and counterparts exist elsewhere too, for instance in Japan. Shorn of its rich mass of figures, the myth concerns the liberation of the purified soul from its mortal vesture, from the cycle of birth and death. Replace the figures and there is the “poet” Orpheus, a shaman, as later Pythagoras and Empedokles were thought of, who is reputed to have the power to attract and to soothe wild animals, to charm the trees, to heal, to give oracles, to prophesy, and (as George Luck phrases it) “to descend alive into the underworld and return”² In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the Orpheus who fails to retrieve his bride from the underworld is (after showing a preference for boys) eventually torn limb from limb by infuriated women, and his head floats down the river Hebrus, still singing. (A trace of that river remains perhaps in Mallarmé’s “peu profond ruisseau”, and he might also be alluding to the *Purgatorio* [XVIII, 25-27] where Lethe is a rivulet – “picciolle onde” – which bends the grasses bordering it.) The myth projects, through a maze of polarities, each generating further binary oppositions, also a story about the magic power of song to integrate what is scattered, to make whole what is lacerated, to restore to harmony a hurting world.

One of the most rigorous of modern Mallarmé scholars, Lloyd James Austin, argued some years ago that the only actual trace of Orphic discourse in Mallarmé was his solar myth (which is glimpsed in the ‘astre mûri’ of the ‘Tombeau’ sonnet).³ Curiously, Austin overlooked the entire fiction, or aesthetic, of music, and of verbal music, which occupied Mallarmé’s lifetime, especially after his experience of Wagner (and, I suspect, of Russian orchestral music). Certainly the notion of the poem as song in flight, as a quasi-musical system asymptotically approaching a “sum total” never to be attained, figures in Mallarmé’s work well before the grand sidereal composition of *Un Coup de Dés*. The poetic word in each of the Tomb sonnets – and Mallarmé quotes from or alludes to each

1. *Briefwechsel*, cit., p. 614.

2. George Luck, *Arcana Mundi*. Baltimore (The Johns Hopkins University Press), 1985, p. 11. See also E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Berkeley and Los Angeles (University of California Press), 1951.

3. L.J. Austin, ‘Mallarmé et le mythe d’Orphée’, in *Cahiers de l’Association Internationale des Études Françaises*, No. 22, May 1970, pp. 169-180.

poet's parlance – has a value ascribed to it comparable to that of the deathless soul, the purified soul, in ancient Orphic discourse.¹ The mortal vesture laid aside in the tomb was the man; his death frees the glory which, shimmering or radiant, the poetic word secretes.

Rilke's pronouncements in the Orpheus sonnets point that way too:

Ein für alle Male / ists Orpheus, wenn es singt.
(I, V)

Nur der Tote trinkt
aus der hier von uns gehörten Quelle,
wenn der Gott ihm schweigend winkt, dem Toten.
(II, XVI)

And it might be considered another Orphic trace in the much earlier Mallarmé when Igitur descends the staircase in quest of the “ancestors”. Death and metamorphosis, communion with ancestors, the participation of life in death and death in life, those are aspects of Orphic discourse in remote antiquity which recur in Mallarmé and in the later Rilke, recur and recombine with the theme of the song that integrates and regenerates a broken world.

Whether or not Rilke consciously derived his own Orpheus from numinous, glorified poet-figures or actual poetic practice in Mallarmé, the French poet, “der sublimste Dichter unserer Zeit”, must have inserted into Rilke’s imagination a model, which, at a crucial moment, but in the shape of Valéry’s poems, notably *Le cimetière marin*, set that imagination free to write the Orpheus sonnets. The obstacle – Rilke’s disposition in May 1919 which set him at cross-purposes with the ‘Tombeau’ sonnet – had to have existed, in order to be overcome. Once it had been overcome, or once it simply melted away, Igitur’s paired infinities, of personal interiority and astronomical space, which, once aligned, gave to Mallarmé the notion of being “infiniment sur la terre” (*Bucolique*), flowed directly into Rilke’s grand conjecture, so elegantly phrased in his letter to Nora Purtscher-Wydenbruck (August 11, 1924):

So ausgedehnt das „Außen“ ist, es verträgt mit allen seinen siderischen Distanzen kaum einen Vergleich mit den Dimensionen, mit der Tiefen-dimension unseres Inneren, das nicht einmal die Geräumigkeit des Weltalls nötig hat, um in sich fast unabsehlich zu sein. Wenn also Tote, wenn also Künftige einen Aufenthalt nötig haben, welche Zuflucht sollte ihnen angenehmer und angebotener sein, als dieser imaginäre Raum?²

Or else, in terms of the sonnet for Verlaine, we might think of the Orphic as an ambient principle of song traversing death, an erratically mobile oscillation between infinities

1. For brevity's sake, I give only dates and page references to Paul Verlaine, *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, Paris 1948 (Gallimard: Pléiade), ed. Y.-G. Le Dantec, for images and phrasing that relate to: clouds (1866, p. 63), folds of a veil, star (1880, p. 160), grass by riverside, fields, blessing (1880, p. 177-178), a stream, water imagery, thirst, eternal life (1888, p. 281), bird cooing, sky, fresh wind (1891, p. 493), bird singing summer and winter (1893, pp. 678-679). Mallarmé's allusions to poets he memorialized must have come from wording stored in his memory: in a letter of October 25, 1895, to J.-M. de Hérédia he claims to have memorized long since every poem in *Les traphées*. Conceivably his verbal memory gave him to consider poetic patterns to have a “reality”, even a “materiality”, equal if not superior to that conventionally ascribed to objects in the world. This understanding of the poetic *sign* as an entity, actual not conceptual only, principal not derived, cannot be dismissed as mere fetishism. Memory does not fixate but continually modifies what it stores, drawing from the pool of such patterns vital and nutrient values for work in progress. Russian poets, who got all their poems by heart, are constantly alluding to (or quoting from) their predecessors, as if the *corpus* of tradition meant forever to sprout fresh growth. The energy for renewal flows from transformation, not replication, of the ancestral. The same applies to other traditions (e.g., Arab, Persian, Turkish), where the calligraphic text is an extension of the word-in-mind. Both Mallarmé and Rilke have tentacles deep in oral tradition, and the beauty of their calligraphy shows how the sounds of a poem resonated through their organisms to the fingertips.

2. *Briefe*. Frankfurt am Main (Insel), 1950, p. 871.

external and internal, with simple signs given off for us to trace its whereabouts: earth-bound stone, airborne cloud, erotic dove, funeral grass, and a subterranean rivulet, not so deep, an oblivion of which the ever-thirsting Verlaine for once does not drink. In *Musique et Lettres*, Mallarmé succinctly calls it “dispersion volatile soit l’esprit”.¹

By way of conclusion I want to mention two poems written after the Holocaust which, in different ways, gainsay or at least qualify the visions enjoyed by Mallarmé and Rilke. They are Paul Celan’s ‘Engführung’, from *Sprachgitter* (1959), and Günter Eich’s ‘Fortsetzung des Gesprächs’, from *Anlässe und Steingärten* (1966). Both these poems have for their *matière* a communion with the dead. Both are monologues for the dead, rather than dialogues *cum mortuis*. Yet each is a poem of listening for what those dead might now say.

The gist of ‘Engführung’, sifting through various literary allusions (to Conrad Ferdinand Meyer’s poem ‘Eingelegte Ruder’ and then to the Paolo and Francesca episode in the *Inferno*, V), is that in time “grass” can be “written asunder”; “Gras auseinandergeschrieben” – the natural integument whisked away, the psychic pall of self-punitive guilt banished.

The poem begins as a loose vortex of agitated phrasal overlays, dovetailings, repetitions. Gradually its quasi-musical *stretto* structure tightens to pinpoint successively a “Partikelgestöber” and a “Kugelfang”: in the latter, captives were shot by execution squads (nothing explicit about this in the poem); and in the former are the molecules of the dead, whirled away, but counter-orphanically, into the geometry of matter. That is when “die Welt setzt ihr Innerstes ein”. The “Ho, ho-sianna” episode marks a typical semantic overlap: “Hosianna” is a shout of praise, but “Hoshi-ah” means “save us now, we pray”. In a world become the place of separation, memory itself is the fragile ground of this grinding overlap. The survivor, writing, only just has the outreach of imagination, in memory, to be, and only as the writes to be, together with his dead, among the “injured souls” (Dante), among the spirit voices. For a speech did exist: “Es sprach... / Sprach, sprach. War, war”, and in that speech, now being written, a fugitive bonding has accomplished itself. On the one hand, “die Welt, ein Tausendkristall...”, on the other a haunted, whirling polyphony has become, in the continuum of writing, one ethereal voice. The dead, have they responded in some kind of universal communion? The writer has striven his utmost to transcribe some particles, some granules, of that “speech” that “was” – to “write the grass asunder”, at least by writing to locate in emotion a threshold across which grief and compassion reach out toward those whose mouths were stopped, whose breath was mechanically ripped out of them. Or course, such a reading tends overmuch to “psychologize” the text: it is granular, abstruse, even a distraught babbling.² But detectible here is a resonance, I suspect, of Jewish traditional reverence for the written character, too: in the Kabbalah – those magic letters that secrete cosmogonic power.

In Edwin Muir’s essay ‘The Poetic Imagination’ I find a passage which speaks to this imaginative reaching out. Muir cites Hofmannsthal on the “conservative” nature of imagination, and continues: “It keeps intact the bond which unites us with the past of mankind, so that we can still understand Odysseus and Penelope and the people of the Old Testament”. But there is more to come. Muir writes:

1. Published 1894 in *La Revue Blanche*.

2. The sharp divergence from “conventional” German in ‘Engführung’ carries the implication that this “es sprach...” relates to a mother-tongue utterly other than that of the murderers. There occurs an “isolement de la parole” (Mallarmé): in his *Mediterranean* address (1960), Celan spoke of the task “Mallarmé zu Ende denken”.

... imagination is able to do this because it sees the life of everyone as the endless repetition of a universal pattern. It is hard to explain how we can enter into lives of people long dead, if this is not so. Imagination tells us that we become human by repetition... Or Hofmannsthal may have meant that in the past only is the human pattern complete, that there is the place to which the present turns back to find its finished and timeless pattern. So that the present is a question perpetually running back to find its answer at a place where all is over...¹

It is this passage “through the same ancestral pattern” (*op. cit.*, p. 226) that appears in Günter Eich’s long but laconic poem as the image of the dead man looking at an ammonite, and in the quite breezy but cryptic phrasing of section 1 (‘Remembering the Dead Man’): “Es hieß... / Dorthin gehen wo die Parallelen sich schneiden... / Die Versteinerungen aus den Vitrinen nehmen, / sie auftauen mit der Wärme des Bluts...”

Even then, both Celan and Eich, the younger poet under trial of communion, the older tending, for all his intimate tone and cryptic geographical allusions, to gainsay any possibility of communion, are poets on guard against beautiful cosmologies, who have recent history at heart, relatives and friends to mourn. This accent on the individual and intimate dead we might detect some affinity to Mallarmé, who mourns for Verlaine, and to Rilke mourning for Wera Ouckama Knoop. Yet an unprecedented immediate past, the event of corporate murder on a colossal scale, has transformed the outlook for the later poets. In *The Dry Salvages* (1941), T.S. Eliot pinpointed certain ways in which the living do “fare forward” as they change:

For our own past is covered by the currents of action,
But the torment of others remains an experience
Unqualified, unworn by subsequent attrition.
People change, and smile: but the agony abides.

“Currents of action” certainly brought with them, for the later poets, a difficult conscience, one that no chimera could invade. Although the coiling path through ancestral pattern is not blocked, it is choked – in Eich by the bitter knowledge that memory, weakened by “subsequent attrition”, has to depend on language codes that “stylize” the heart and render pristine emotion mute. A massive and abiding agony could not, of course, efface the Orphic traces of 1897 and 1922. But in large measure the post-Holocaust poems, granular and hermetic, if not entirely bleak, are what Eich calls “salvoes into the snowstorm”. Here the Orphic poet hazards at most an apophatic language of communion with the agonized; the slightest contact is voiced as predictable speech is revoked.²

Precisely here comes the dizzying turn in ‘Fortsetzung des Gesprächs’. It is the dead friend who is asked to remember: “Vergiß aber die Häuser nicht...” (section 2: ‘Inviting the Dead Friend In’). Now it is the dead who take the initiative, if only momentarily. Hatching one apparent nonsequitur after another, stark imagination goads the obstinate

1. *Essays in Literature and Society*. Revised and enlarged edition. Cambridge, U.S.A. (Harvard University Press), 1965, p. 225.

2. In his texts translated as ‘Wordswerves’ Michel Leiris writes: “transcending direct speech” (in pain at the thought of death) “I want to conjure... a sort of language of death: a scrambled language tied to the traditional *upside down* world... a language something like the initiatory languages found in societies that put great emphasis on ceremonies insuring the replacement of a declining generation by an ascending one... a language of the other side... Loosing logical collars and with this break giving me a notion of the strictly unimaginable nothingness beyond the grave... a disjointed, dislocated, danced rather than devoutly dressed-up discourse, helps me feel less wholly disoriented before that NOTHING...” (*Langage langage : ou ce que les mots me disent*, 1985, pp. 106-112, translated by James Clifford in *Sulfur* (U.S.A.), No. 15, 1986). For cognate poems, see Ernst Jandl’s early ‘Im Reich der Toten’: Johannes Bobrowski’s ‘Gestorbene Sprache’ and ‘Kaunas 1941’ in his *Sarmatische Zeit*, 1965; and most recently Simon Perchik’s very remarkable ‘Seven Poems’ in *Shearsman* (Plymouth, U.K.), No. 24, 1995.

mule of memory, Pirna has come into a strange conjunction with the Pyramids. That stark imagination now enables the living to refresh, in the teeth of the absurd, a most vital impulse: not to descend among the dead, but to welcome their touches in our life of feeling and in our conversation –

Während du teilhast an den Gedanken,
das Gespräch lenkst durch deinen Tod...
erstarre Simona zur Steinfigur,
ihre erdachte Wärme
unter der Kälte der Tränen.

Sie erwartet das Moos,
die Verletzungen durch den Regen,
Ranken und Vogelkot.
Verwittert wird sie erwärmt sein
zu einem Leben, das wir teilen wollen,
Geduld!

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