

1-1-2001

The Backward Glance: Rilke and the Ways of the Heart

Robert D. Romanyshyn
Pacifica Graduate Institute

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/ijts-transpersonalstudies>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#), [Psychology Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Romanyshyn, R. D. (2001). Romanyshyn, R. D. (2001). The backward glance: Rilke and the ways of the heart. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 20(1), 143–150.. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 20 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2001.20.1.143>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#). This Article is brought to you for free and open access by International Journal of Transpersonal Studies. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Journal of Transpersonal Studies by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact the editors.

The Backward Glance

Rilke and the Ways of the Heart

Robert D. Romanyshyn

Pacifica Graduate Institute
Carpinteria, California, USA

This article is a presentation of the backward glance as the gesture of the heart's ways of knowing and being. Drawing on his background in phenomenology and Jungian psychology, the author develops this gnosis of the heart via the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke. The backward glance is an invitation to linger in the moment in order to recollect what we have lost, left behind, or forgotten. The gnosis of the heart is an act of mourning, which invites us into the terrors and joys of loving in the face of death. Loving in this way is our vocation. In the risks and failures of love, we begin a journey of homecoming. Heartwork is finally homework.

Prelude

I AM SITTING here at my computer, the day already quite far along in its journey towards the night, and thinking about this article, knowing that the deadline, itself a curious word to describe the art and process of writing, is fast approaching. It is not that I do not know what I want to say, for the backward glance has been a gesture that has haunted me for many years and has been a theme of many lectures and articles. Rather, it is the title as I wrote it just now. It warns me to be wary of following dead lines. It makes me pause to wonder who has written those words and who is writing this article.

The backward glance presumes a pause, an arrest of one's forward motion in the world, even if only for the briefest of moments. Who makes such a pause now? I do. But who is this "I" who seems so familiar with this gesture? In this moment I realize something that I have never seen before. It is myself as phenomenologist for whom the pause is the natural pre-condition for the gesture of the backward glance.

What is phenomenology if it is not the art of lingering in the moment? Lingering in the moment is the prelude to the backward glance, and phenomenology taught me this art. Or, perhaps, it is nearer to the truth of the experience to say that, when I encountered phenomenology many years ago in the person of my friend and teacher J. H. van den Berg, it awakened the dormant tendencies of my own heart and soul. To linger in the moment, to be content with idling away an hour or two in reverie (Romanyshyn, 2000a), an attitude that is so easily judged and dismissed as wasting time, even perhaps on occasion to allow oneself to be useless (Romanyshyn, 2000b), is the gift of phenomenology.

When one lingers in the moment, mysteries unfold. Each moment becomes a haunting and one begins to experience the invisible and subtle shapes and forms that shine through the visible, that sustain it and give it its holy terrors and its sensuous charms. Lingering in the moment, each moment is stretched beyond its boundaries, until suddenly the moment itself falls out of historical time into some timeless realm. The horizontal line

of time collapses and one falls into vertical time, where moments belong together not by virtue of any causal connection, but because of an emotional affinity and kinship amongst them. So, one day while sitting with my back against the cold, damp, stone wall of an old and ancient French Gothic church in Venasque, a tiny village in the Luberon valley of southern France, the warm sun on my face and the quality of the air and the light opened a portal to another world that I once knew but had forgotten, a world that does and does not belong to my biographical history (Romanyshyn, 1999, pp. 151-155).

In such a moment, one is neither in time and space nor outside time and space. Rather one is in a nowhere realm, a no-where world that is now-here. To linger as a phenomenologist in the moment is to open oneself to these breakthroughs of the timeless into the timebound, breakthroughs that are experienced as ontological surprises, that is, as breakdowns of our usual and familiar ways of knowing the world and being in it. And in this regard I realize that I am as much a depth psychologist in debt to the work of Carl Jung as I am a phenomenologist so much in debt to my old friend and teacher J. H. van den Berg.

Phenomenologist and depth psychologist, then, gather around the title of this essay. They pause there, lingering in the moment that seems to promise some epiphany. Or, perhaps it is better to say that I am drawn here in these two guises, and that I am stopped by some soft whisper, which hints that something more is to come. And there is more. There is Rilke, who is a poet.

What does the poet bring to the backward glance, whose prelude is a lingering before a fall? The poet brings the heart and its ways of knowing and being, the heart that Pascal said had "its reasons which reason itself does not know" (Pascal, 1995, p. 158). The heart, too, that the poetry of the Sufi mystics celebrated as the organ of perception for the subtle worlds of the imaginal realm that are no-where now-here (Corbin, 1969). The mind races ahead, but the heart waits. It lingers, just long enough on occasion to be penetrated by the mysteries of the world, by the numinous presence of the sacred in the ordinary, when, for example, the song of the bird at dawn reveals a great secret of the world: that light and song are one and the same; that the song of the bird is the voice of the morning light.

I know this presence of the poet. Having found my way into psychology through philosophy many years ago, I say now that I have found my way out through poetry. Not that I am no longer a psychologist! Rather, along this arc from philosophy to poetry, I have learned that psychology is a way station, a rest stop, at times an oasis, a halfway house between worlds. Rilke, among many others, has been a sure guide here. So too, Kathleen Raine, poet, teacher, friend.

So, even here at the beginning, I pause, because the few words that announce the title are themselves a pregnancy of possibilities. Here at this threshold, even before I begin, there is a haunting, as if these three guises of phenomenologist, depth psychologist, and poet are the portals through which the ghostly presences of van den Berg, Jung, Raine, and Rilke come to claim authorship of this work. I turn for a moment, glance over my left shoulder, and I feel their presence. They hover here with me, whispering the words that ask to be said, suggesting this or that turn of phrase. This pregnant pause, this brief glance, this dangerous gesture makes me even wonder for whom this work is being done. Whom does it serve?

In his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Jung (1961/1989) confesses that, "In the Tower at Bollingen it is as if one lived in many centuries simultaneously." "There is nothing here to disturb the dead," he adds, and in this place the souls of his ancestors are sustained as he goes about the work of answering "for them the questions that their lives once left behind" (p. 237). For Jung it is the ancestors for whom the work is done. It is the dead of long ago, stretching down the long hallway of time, who ask us to linger in the moment, and who solicit from us this turning.

The backward glance is the beginning of a vocation. It is a moment when one can be given the gift of a calling that designs the destiny of a life. This is the sense of Jung's reflections, but I know it, too, in my heart. This is what van den Berg gave to me—questions that have sustained me over time. He also gave me a way of being with these questions, a way of going about this work of being a phenomenologist. He did not teach me merely to look at the world with open eyes. Any phenomenologist could have done that. No! his lesson was far more subtle. To re-gard the world,

to look again, to linger with open eyes that love the world. This is what he gave me, a way of seeing the world that shifts the locus of vision from eye to heart. In doing so, he prepared me for the poets, who practice this kind of vision.

In his poem, "Turning Point," Rilke says, "Work of the eyes is done, now / go and do heart-work..." (Rilke, 1989, p. 135). This heartwork is a work of transformation, and the heart that Rilke speaks of here is a kind of alchemical vessel whose processes mirror those of the physical heart. Just as the physical heart transforms venous blood into arterial blood with the air of the world, the alchemical heart transforms the dense material of the seen world into its more subtle forms with the breath of the word. This mirroring is, I believe, the secret intuited by the phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard, whose *Poetics of Reverie* (1969) is a heart's sure guide in the art of lingering. For Bachelard, poetry helps one breathe better because through it word and world flow into each other. "The man who reaches the glory of [this] breathing," Bachelard says, "breathes cosmically" (p. 181). To practice the art of lingering in the moment as prelude to the backward glance is heartwork, which is good for one's physical well-being.

For Rilke this transformation of matter into language is the very function of poetry itself. Before the word is spoken, we pause, take a breath, and draw into ourselves the open world that lies there in front of our gaze. And then, in-spired by the world, we speak. But who is speaking in this moment? Is it us or the world? For Rilke there is no doubt. "Earth," he asks, "isn't this what you want: an invisible/re-arising in us?" (1939, p. 77). In the ninth elegy Rilke offers us the image of the wanderer who brings back from the mountain slope not some handful of earth, "but only some word he has won, a pure word, the yellow and blue gentian" (p. 75). Things want to become invisible in this way. They want to realize this destiny of transformation, to become in-spired by the breath of language, to become in words their subtle form.

It is through the language of the heart that the world of nature is transformed. It is also through the eyes of the heart that the dead become present to us, and through these same eyes that the dead and the living are changed into the more subtle shapes of an imaginal presence. So van den Berg,

who still lives, is already for me also a lingering presence who haunts my work and gives to it its style. So too, Kathleen Raine, who also still lives. In this imaginal landscape, they are kin of my soul whose abode is my heart, and in this way they join the dead, Rilke and Jung, to companion me along the way.

The backward glance is a gesture that exposes the heart and opens it to this subtle, imaginal world that is no-where/now-here. To linger in the moment is the prelude to this act, and in this pause you let go of your mind and risk yourself to the heart and its ways of knowing and being. It is a gnosis rooted in the etymology of the word, which relates heart to memory. As an act of heartwork, the backward glance initiates the work of re-mem-bering, a work that is a journey of homecoming to that no-where/now-here imaginal place where one's biography falls into the larger stories of creation. The awe-full beauty of this moment, which begins with the pause that lingers, is the discovery that what matters in a human life is not only what we know, or might yet discover, but what we have forgotten, left behind, neglected, marginalized, and otherwise abandoned. And the awe-full terror of this moment of the heart's awakening is the realization that we are all pilgrims on a journey to no-where, orphans between worlds on a journey of homecoming.

Prelude derives from a root that means to play ahead of or in advance of the opening of a work, usually in the sense of an artistic performance. I want to stay within the mood of this word as this prelude nears its end and the work of this essay is about to begin. I want to keep the spirit of play and the spirit of art in the work, and so I will organize this essay around several scenes of the backward glance. Indeed, in this spirit of play, my intention in what follows is to make a scene, or several scenes. Before, however, the curtain falls on this prelude a final word about it needs to be said.

Just as I have lingered for a moment at this threshold to see who accompanies me as the writer, this prelude invites the reader to wonder who is reading, who is present in the moment when one stops along the way and lingers. The invitation is to enter into a style of reading that goes through the heart. As such, this invitation is into a way of knowing that is about neither facts nor ideas, a gnosis that is an aesthetic sensibility, a gnosis that

opens one to feeling those more elusive presences that haunt the imaginal world. It is a gnosis where one is capable of being touched and moved by the otherness of this world where the dead and the living have already been transformed into matters of and for the heart. It is a gnosis whose arc begins in a turning where you lose your mind for the sake of the heart.

Scene One: The Man on the Hill

THE *DUINO ELEGIES* is, perhaps, Rilke's most famous poem. Filled with numerous figures like angels and animals, lovers and children who die young, acrobats and wanderers, the figure that captures the essence of this poem is, I believe, the one that appears at the end of the eighth elegy. It is the image of a man on a hill that overlooks his valley, the final hill that shows him his home for the last time.

Who is this man? He is each of us, the one who obviously has turned around for the sake of a final glance. All of us know such moments, and we often live them with some passing sense of sorrow. Rilke's poem, however, burns the image of this moment into the soul. His poem turns this gesture into a poetic act through a simple question that he inserts into this turning. "Who's turned us round like this, so that we always / do what we may, retain the attitude / of someone who is departing?" To underscore the impact of this image-question, Rilke (1939) says that just like this man on the hill "will turn and stop and linger, / we live our lives, forever taking leave" (p. 71).

The eighth elegy is a hymn of mourning. There is a very strong feeling tone of lament for something that we have lost along the way, not only in our personal lives, but also in our collective lives as human beings. One reads this elegy and hears a continuous sigh for what we have become, "spectators" who look at the world from a distance, who are never nestled within things long enough in order to look out from them. For us as spectators the world is a display, crowded with "empty, indifferent things, pseudo-things, dummy-life," as he says in a letter a year before his death (1939, p. 129).

In contrast with the spectator we have become, Rilke praises the animal, within whom "there lies the weight and care of a great sadness." The curious

thing about this praise is that this sorrow of the animal is for us, as if the animal somehow knows our spectator condition and mirrors for us what we have lost. Thus Rilke says, "For that which often overwhelms us clings / to him as well,—a kind of memory / that what we're pressing after now was once / nearer and truer and attached to us / with infinite tenderness." Compared to that time and place, a place that Rilke calls our "first home," and which I would call a landscape of the soul, that no-where world now-here, this time and place that is our second home where we are spectators "seems ambiguous and draughty" (1939, p. 69).

In this elegy the backward glance turns us toward this original home, which the animal remembers for us and which we ourselves dimly recall. This other time and place is what beckons us, this calling of that world that once was but never has been, that no-where now-here, that soulscape which is not for the eyes of a spectator, that homeland of the heart.

But who belongs to that homeland of the heart? Who dwells there with the power to turn us round and make us aware that we are always looking at things as if for the last time? These questions take us into the core of Rilke's work and life. To get there, however, we have to go by way of a different question. The gesture itself of a backward glance indicates that there is no direct vision of whoever it is who turns us in this way. The spectator's forward gaze has to be given up for the backward glance. The question of who turns us in this fashion has to yield to the question of who has heart for such a turning.

The eighth elegy says that the child does, sometimes. On occasion, the child can get quietly lost within that first home, but he or she is always dragged back again to the timebound world. In some of the other elegies and in other poems, Rilke portrays this quiet presence of the child to this first home as that faraway look that we sometimes see on a child's face. Moreover, he even wonders if the child who dies young preserves something of that first home, which makes the death of a young child even a cause for some sad joy. Rilke challenges us in this way to re-imagine our lives, and as difficult as this image may be, it is not so without merit that we can dismiss it. I do not want to soften Rilke's image by taking it as only a symbol. Rilke is speaking about the actual death of a young

child. Nevertheless, the image does have a symbolic resonance. We are admonished, after all, to become again like children if we are to enter that other time-place, the Kingdom of Heaven.

Lovers too may have the heart for this turning, but Rilke is too cautious about love to accept its lasting value. Thus, he rebukes lovers for getting in the way of each other. "Lovers—were not the other present, always spoiling the view!—draw near to it and wonder..." he writes. "Behind the other, as though through oversight, the thing's revealed...But no one gets beyond / the other, and so world returns once more" (1939, p. 69).

Although Rilke considers children and lovers as possible candidates for this heartwork of turning, for this change of heart that is the backward glance, the image of the man on the hill overlooking the valley for the last time, the one who is always on the verge of departing, cancels these possibilities, or at least postpones them. A poem, like a dream, demands fidelity to the images, especially for a phenomenologist. The one on the hill is a man, not a child. And he is alone, not with a lover. Who, then, finally has heart for this gesture of re-gard, the courage, a word etymologically related to heart, for the backward glance? "Or someone dies and *is it*" (1939, p. 67). Rilke says this too in the eighth elegy, and the italics are his.

Recall Jung's words about the Tower at Bollingen, that place where he did the work of the ancestors. Those words have the same spirit that is present in so much of Rilke's poetry. His work and his life bear continuous witness to the claim that we owe life a death, and that it is only in living life from the side of death that we most truly exist as human beings. Indeed, the *Elegies* celebrate our place between Angel and Animal and mark that domain as our privilege because, neither like the Angel who is eternal, nor the Animal, which perishes, we die. We perish, as it were, with awareness, a condition which also marks a boundary between the spectators we have become and the innocent child who, in dying young, dies perhaps before knowing what has been lost.

This difference is crucial for Rilke, because the awareness of death also deepens love. While Rilke is eloquent about the difficulties of love, it remains for him our highest calling. He says, "only from the side of death...is it possible to do justice to love." He also says, "It lies in the nature of every ultimate

love that, sooner or later, it is only able to reach the loved one in the infinite" (1939, pp. 122-123). At the heart of love for Rilke beats a passion, a hunger, a desire for the infinite. Thus, in spite of the rebuke that lovers spoil the view for each other, the paradoxical thing about love is that it is only through the other that we glimpse the divine.

So who has the heart for this work of turning? Those who have risked the difficulties of loving, even loving in the face of loss. That is who we are with the man on the hill, lovers whose vision looks upon the world with the attitude of departing, lovers who see things always as if for the last time. If it is the dead who call us home, then it is lovers who have risked the terrors of loving in the face of death whose hearts are attuned to those voices that solicit the backward glance. The next two scenes play out this theme through two of Rilke's most compelling poems about love and death.

Scene Two: The Return of the Dead

"REQUIEM FOR a Friend" is a poem Rilke wrote for Paula Modersohn who died on November 21, 1907, less than three weeks after giving birth to a daughter. Her death disturbed Rilke because he saw in her life and death a vocation that was crushed by the conventional forces of marriage. Paula was a painter, and if it is true that through her Rilke saw something of his own conflict between communal life and the solitude required for creative work, it was still her struggle to hold the tension of work and love that haunted him.

In the opening lines of the poem, Rilke makes it quite clear that she is exceptional among the dead. "Only you / return; brush past me, loiter, try to knock / against something, so that the sound reveals your presence." Others who have died seem "...so contented / so soon at home in being dead, so cheerful, / so unlike their reputation." Paula, however, is not at home in her death, prompting Rilke to say, "I'm sure you have gone astray / if you are moved to homesickness for anything / in this dimension." Addressing her again, he says, "the gravity of some old discontent / has dragged you back to measurable time" (Rilke, 1989, p. 73). Her return is an appeal to Rilke, a pleading, he says, that "penetrates me, / to my very bones, and cuts at me like a saw." "What is it that you want?" he asks (p. 75).

The poem, a conversation between the poet who is alive and the failed artist who has died, is whispered in the night, amongst shadows and mirrors. Rilke confesses to Paula that he has in fact held onto her through the mirror, a presence through the image, which is real but free of the weight of earthly life. But that mirror presence is so different from how she is now present to Rilke that he wonders, somewhat angrily, if she has denied herself the fruits of her death. "I thought you were much further on" (p. 73) he says earlier, but her return fragments this hope. He is forced to attend to her appeal.

"Come into the candlelight," he says. "I'm not afraid / to look the dead in the face." But this invitation and Rilke's boldly courageous claim does not capture the attitude of her haunting return. On the contrary, Paula's return from the dead requires Rilke to look back in order to understand her appeals to him. In the candlelight, he is silent with her for a time, until an invitation arises from that silence: "Look at this rose on the corner of my desk: / isn't the light around it just as timid / as the light on you?" Bathed in the same subtle light, Paula and the rose share the same tension. "It too should not be here, / it should have bloomed or faded in the garden, outside, never involved with me" (p. 77). But it is here, there on Rilke's desk, and in response to its presence he knows that he is called to let it rise up within his heart and take on its subtle form through the breath of the word.

Should we be here? Yes! For being here does matter, and about this fact Rilke has no doubts, as the *Duino Elegies* make clear. It is only that death reminds us that we have come from elsewhere, that we have fallen into time from some other world, a journey into birth, which death reverses and closes as a homecoming. This memory sits in our hearts as a longing. It sits in our hearts, too, as a calling; "...time / is like a relapse after a long illness" (p. 81), Rilke says. A relapse, not a recovery! A relapse into the sickness of forgetting, whose prescription is the vocation to remember.

Paula's return from the dead is an appeal for mourning: "That's what you had to come for: to retrieve / the lament that we omitted" (p. 83). This requiem, however, is not just for her. It is also for Rilke himself, and for all of us. The dead return

to awaken us and in this return they invite us to re-gard again everything in life that we have just simply passed by. So Rilke wonders whether for the sake of Paula he must travel again. He also asks, "Did you leave / some Thing behind, some place, that cannot bear your absence?" He says, too, that "I will go to watch the animals / ...which hold me for a while / and let me go, serenely, without judgment." And, he adds, "I will have the gardeners come to me and recite / many flowers, and in the small clay pots / of their melodious names I will bring back / some remnant of the hundred fragrances." All this he will do and more: "And fruits: I will buy fruits, and in their sweetness / that country's earth and sky will live again" (p. 75).

A catalogue of simple, common, ordinary things and actions. Rilke will do all of this, not just for Paula but also for himself and for all of us. He will return to these things and to these actions that he has done so many times with new re-gard. The dead, like Paula, who have struggled to hold the tension of life and work, return and turn us around, and in their presence we stop for a moment, linger, and take that second look. These dead are our teachers, the ones who initiate the backward glance and inform it as a ritual of mourning. They teach us that we are called to love and to work while knowing that we will and must fail. In this regard, these dead teach us that mourning lies at the core of the human heart, that the backward glance envisions the world through eyes of lament.

Scene Three: The Rose that Fades

ORPHEUS is the eponymous poet, the one whose name when spoken is the presence of poetry itself. For Rilke, Orpheus is the figure who shows us that eyes of lament exercise the mournful heart. Through Orpheus we see that the backward glance opens the heart to the transitory nature of the world, to the fleeting character of all that we hold close to the heart and cherish. No matter what we do the things that we love pass away. Not even art, with its hopefully timeless forms, can triumph over mutability and the certainty of death. Only in the moment and for the moment do we sometimes create a fragile and temporary haven in the midst of loss.

In his *Sonnets to Orpheus*, Rilke (1942/1970) celebrates this paradox of evident mutability and desired permanence that Orpheus embodies. Orpheus is the one who both fades and endures. Thus, in the final sonnet, Rilke says, "And if the earthly has forgotten you, / say to the still earth: I flow. / To the rapid water speak: I am" (p. 127). Orpheus is who and what he is in his flowing, and in this guise he is emblem for who and what we are called to be. Orpheus: *Ich rinne*—I flow; *Ich bin*—I am! Rilke and each of us in the presence of Orpheus: We change, therefore, we are! We die, therefore, we live! This is the Orphic celebration for Rilke, this seed of joy in the heart of lament, this ejaculation of life in the face of loss. Through Orpheus, Rilke transcends the dichotomy of the eternal and the temporal; he surrenders that longing for the timeless in the midst of the timebound, and that despair in the folds of time for the eternal. Through Orpheus, Rilke celebrates the paradox that we can love the world and others because they do pass away; love the rose, which in its blooming is already beginning to fade. Indeed, even for Orpheus himself there can be no record that fails to honor the tension of this paradox. Thus, Rilke says, "Set up no stone to his memory. / Just let the rose bloom each year for his sake" (p. 25).

Rilke's vision of Orpheus is a metaphysics of the heart and its ways of knowing and being, a phrase that I use here intentionally to counter the metaphysics of the mind and its ways of knowing and being. The former embraces death as the other side of life, while the latter flees it. The former nourishes an epistemology of love; the latter spawns an epistemology of power. The lover's lingering backward glance is the emblematic posture of this metaphysics of the heart; the spectator's forward penetrating gaze the posture of the metaphysics of the mind.

In "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes," Rilke (1989) best sums up his poetic vision. The poem re-tells the classic story of Orpheus' descent to the underworld to rescue his beloved Eurydice from death. With Rilke, however, the tale is told from Eurydice's point of view, and in doing so Rilke allows us to glimpse how the supposed failure of the backward glance is our fate. At the last moment, Orpheus stops, and turns round to see if Eurydice, guided by Hermes, is following. In this turning, Orpheus disobeys the commands of the

gods, and he loses Eurydice once again, this time forever.

I do not know if it is true that poetry here attains to a unique level of wisdom, but it seems that this tale of disobedience leaves no doubt that the gods wisely forbid the backward glance. They know Orpheus must fail, and that through the failure he, and through him we, will come to know that the timeless is to be made here in the timebound through loving in the face of loss. Angels are eternal and animals perish, but we die. But because we die we also love in ways that they cannot. In "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes," the backward glance reveals that death is the bride of love. This is why Paula returns. This is why the dead return and solicit the backward glance: to open the eyes of the heart so that we can see through the eyes of love and loss.

Scene Four: The Call of Destiny

THE BACKWARD glance is instruction in the art of holding on by letting go. Orpheus' failure to make love eternal is his success in making love a human act that spans the timeless and the timebound, an act that transforms fate into a vocation, an act that releases each lover to his/her destiny and in doing so manifests the eternal nowhere now-here. This is why Rilke (1989) says in the "Requiem" that the only thing that is wrong is "not to enlarge the freedom of a love / with all the inner freedom one can summon." This is why he says, "We need, in love, to practice only this: / letting each other go. For holding on / comes easily; we do not need to learn it" (Rilke, 1989, p. 85).

In the moment when Orpheus turns, he lets go of Eurydice, just as in her death she has already let go of him. There are, I think, no other lines of poetry that capture this moment of Eurydice's release better than those that Rilke pens for the moment of Orpheus' turning. In her death she had already passed beyond being Orpheus' possession: "She was no longer that woman with blue eyes / who once had echoed through the poet's songs..." Already in her death, she had closed within herself, "...had come into a new virginity." Multiplying the images of her intensified, new interiority, Rilke says, "She was already loosened like long hair, / poured out like fallen rain, shared like a limitless supply." And as if to underscore the significance of

this transformation into her own destiny, Rilke adds as a single line, set off from the previous lines and those that are to follow, "She was already root" (Rilke, 1989, p. 53).

Orpheus had descended into the underworld to rescue from death the woman that he knew and loved. Eurydice, however, is not that woman. When he turns and Hermes puts out his hand to stop Eurydice, and, according to Rilke, tells us with sorrow in his voice that Orpheus has turned, Eurydice, unable to understand, softly whispers, "Who?" (p. 53).

Eurydice then turns round and follows her own path into her destiny. She descends with Hermes back into the timeless underworld, while Orpheus returns alone to the world of time. But he too finds in this return, after the turning round of his backward glance, his own destiny. In the last sonnet of the first part of *Sonnets to Orpheus*, Rilke tells us that Orpheus outsings the enraged cries of the maenads. Though in the end they do destroy him, the vibrations of his songs linger "...in lions and rocks / and in trees and birds. There you are still singing" (Rilke, 1942/1970, p. 67).

The backward glance—so simple, so fraught with peril! A lesson arranged by the gods! A teaching that humbles the mind by opening the heart to the presence of death. A gift brought by the dead who return to show us how to love the moment because it flows away, like water held in the palm of one's hand. Orpheus is the archetypal image of this gesture: his "failure" our hope; his songs, which linger after his death, our joy. Moreover, in his lingering songs the destiny of Orpheus, which he is given in a backward glance that only seemingly fails, becomes our vocation. "Only because at last enmity rent and scattered you / are we now the hearers and a mouth of Nature" (p. 67). In the backward glance we hear through the heart's lament over loss the singing of the world. Then the backward glance becomes a homecoming, homework that is also heartwork, a song of lament that swells into a hymn of joy.

Afterword

THE PRELUDE is finished, the scenes are done, the curtain has fallen, the lights have been dimmed. But someone lingers in the corner, inviting a final backward glance.

In a letter that he wrote in 1918 shortly after the war, Rilke says, "The scale of the human heart no longer applies and yet it was once the unit of the earth, and of Heaven, and of all heights and depths" (Hendry, 1983, p. 122). We have forgotten the gnosis of the heart. Our hearts no longer seem large enough to be the measure of the heights and depths that bless and wound a human life. At this exit should we not wonder if our hearts are failing today because we have no re-gard for the world and have grown deaf to its appeals to stop and turn and linger. Perhaps we need to learn the backward glance as a gesture of mourning so that we can be released into song.

References

- Bachelard, G. (1969). *The poetics of reverie* (D. Russell, Trans.). Boston: Beacon Press. (Original work published 1960)
- Corbin, H. (1969). *Alone with the Alone: Creative imagination in the Sufism of Ibn' Arabi*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1958)
- Jung, C. G. (1989). *Memories, dreams, reflections*. New York: Vintage Books. (Original work published 1961)
- Hendry, J. F. (1983). *The sacred threshold*. Manchester, England: Carcanet Press.
- Pascal, B. (1995). *Pensées and other writings* (H. Levi, Trans.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rilke, R. M. (1939). *Duino elegies* (J. B. Leishman & S. Spender, Trans.). New York: Norton.
- Rilke, R. M. (1970). *Sonnets to Orpheus* (M.D. Herter Norton, Trans.). New York: Norton. (Originally published 1942)
- Rilke, R. M. (1989). *The selected poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke* (S. Mitchell, Ed. & Trans.). New York: Vintage Books.
- Romanyshyn, R. (1999). *The soul in grief: Love, death and transformation*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.
- Romanyshyn, R. (2000a). The pleasure of reverie. *Salt Journal*, 2(6), 22-25.
- Romanyshyn, R. (2000b). Psychology is useless; or it should be. *Janus Head*, 3(2), 217-236.

