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IT ALWAYS GIVES WATCHING: THE NOTHING AND THE PARAHUMAN IN RILKE'S *DUINO ELEGIES*

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A well known story has it that Rainer Maria Rilke heard the first sentence of what was to become the first of his *Duino Elegies* while a strong Bora was blowing up from the sea. It was January 1912 and Rilke was staying at the Duino Castle on the Adriatic as a guest of Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe. It is she who provides the anecdote according to which, while Rilke was walking by the sea,

> it seemed to him that in the raging of the storm a voice had called to him: 'Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angelic orders?'…. He took out his notebook, which he always carried with him, and wrote down these words …[1]

A voice from the storm – a disembodied voice without a source – cries out a question to Rilke. Instead of answering – and, indeed, although angelic perception of the world will run as one of the persistent queries of the *Elegies*, whom and in what capacity could Rilke answer regarding the hearing of angels? – Rilke writes the question down. The question does not expect an answer and in a way hopes that there would be no answer: for, we are told, if by any chance an angel would press the poet to his heart, the poet would be consumed in the angel's stronger existence. The question cried out at the poet by nobody is reflected back as the poet's own question to nobody.

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[1] Quoted in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies: Bilingual Edition*, tr. Edward Snow, North Point Press, New York 2000, pp. vii–viii. Subsequent English translations from the *Duino Elegies* will be from this edition or from Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Poems*, 2nd expanded edition, tr. Albert Ernest Flemming, Routledge, New York 1986. I find both translations excellent although, of course, no translation could be perfect for the purposes of analysis, hence I will also sometimes refer to the German original.

The *Duino Elegies*, hence, have their inception in a situation where something is heard although there is nothing and nobody to hear. It is the nothing to hear – "the ceaseless message that forms itself out of silence"[2] – that makes the poet exert himself to listen as only saints have listened. This listening is so intense that the saints are lifted upwards, unawares, by the gigantic call. In "The Forth Elegy" this exertion to listen to the gigantic call of the nothing is restaged as an exertion to watch. There is nothing to see: the spectator is sitting in front of a puppet theatre stage which was set to present parting and which is now, indeed, deserted, the lights are switched off, grey drafts of emptiness come drifting down, the loved ones are no longer sitting next to him and the "distance in their features" is imperceptibly transformed into cosmic space. And yet the silent observer does not give up staring. For "one can always watch."[3]

Es giebt immer Zuschaun. Literally: it always gives watching. The viewer keeps on watching because "it" always gives watching. And then he sees. He sees with the watching given to him by the nothing-to-see the way he hears with the listening given to him by the nothing-to-hear. What he sees is an angel. The angel appears in order to counterbalance the gaze given by the nothing.

Kant with Swedenborg

The angel appears and begins to manipulate the lifeless puppets on the deserted stage. The appearance of the angel as the operator of a doll is only one of the many threads that connect the angel of the *Duino Elegies* to Heinrich von Kleist's essay "On the marionette theatre." With Kleist, the marionette – manipulated as it is by its machinist – is proposed as the epitome of perfect dancing and as the only match of the god in terms of "grace:" "Where grace is concerned, it is impossible for man to come anywhere near a puppet. Only a god can equal inanimate matter in this respect."[4]

In its turn, Kleist's eulogy of the marionette seems to be related to his apparently dramatic reading of Kant and of Kant's separation of the world of phenomena, the world which we can perceive and study, from the realm of noumena, of the inaccessible things in themselves. Kleist's essay, further-

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[2] Flemming, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

[3] Snow, *op.cit.*, p. 25, Flemming, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

[4] Heinrich von Kleist, "On the Marionette Theatre," tr. I. Parry, in: *Essays on Dolls*, Syrens, London 1994, p. 7.

more, may be directly referring to the mention of marionettes in Kant's own writing. In the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant discusses two assumptions which are, for him, unacceptable: the first one concerns time and space as attributes of things in themselves, the second one concerns possessing the capacity – which some, in fact, he notes dryly, *imagine* they actually possess – to come in direct contact with noumena so that "God and eternity with their awful majesty would stand unceasingly before our eyes."[5] In the first case, Kant believes, man would be like a "marionette or an automaton, like Vaucanson's, prepared and wound up by the Supreme Artist"[6] and in the second case man's conduct would be "changed into mere mechanism, in which, as in a puppet-show, everything would gesticulate well, but there would be no life in the figures."[7]

Plato, who banished poetry from the ideal city, and Hegel, who declared poetry a thing of the past, are usually identified as the most salient examples of the philosophical efforts to render poets redundant. And yet, Kant's sanitizing of noumena may have been the deadliest blow that philosophy dealt to poetry.[8] With or without the city, poets knew what they knew: that gods and goddesses would whisper in their ear and open up for them, out of their earthly exiles, the hills and rivers, skies and abysses of immortal lands. "I conversed with you in a dream / Kyprogeneia" – says Sappho, obviously continuing her conversation with Aphrodite also while awake.[9] The positing of noumena as unknowable and, if deemed knowable, as transforming humans into marionettes, renders such conversations not only dubious (the left-handed madness was lurking all along) but, in case we consent to them, pitiful: like the lifeless gesticulations of the puppet. Seen in this perspective, Kleist's taking up the cause of the marionette was a taking up of the cause of

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[5] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason: The Critique of Practical Reason and Other Ethical Treatises: the Critique of Judgment*, ed. Hutchins, Robert Maynard, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Chicago 1952, p. 355.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 334.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 355.

[8] Here is the complaint of another well-informed poet: in a letter from 1825 S. T. Coleridge wrote that "In Kant's Critique of the Pure Reason there is more than one fundamental error; but the main fault lies in the Title-page, which to the manifold advantage of the Work might be exchanged for – An Inquisition respecting the constitution and limits of the Human Understanding." (Earl Leslie Griggs, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 5, Clarendon Press, Oxford, England 2000, p. 421.) Coleridge's reference to the Inquisition, whose job was precisely to take care of improper contacts with the supernatural, has more than one implication here.

[9] F 134, tr. Anne Carson, *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho,* Vintage Books, New York 2002, p. 273.

the poet whose privileged dealings with the divine had now turned him into an automaton wound up by the Supreme Artist. One might remember at this point that Kant developed his critiques not only in order to define the legitimate uses of reason against the procedures of metaphysics but also, not so overtly, in order to barricade thinking against the temptations exemplified by the Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg and his voluminous accounts of routine exchanges with angels.[10]

The Kantian ban on seeing and hearing or otherwise contacting noumena (Swedenborg's angels, in fact, did not need language in order to communicate) was nevertheless compensated for by an important gift – the gift of nothing. One might argue, of course, that the nothing had been there for a long time and that "to be 100% serious about nothing, about absence, about the void which is fullness, is the destiny and task of the poet" at least since the times of Simonides of Keos.[11] And yet, one might argue, too, that never before had the nothing been so potent and full as the nothing produced by the Kantian limitation. I am not referring to Kant's typology of the nothing in the *Critique of Pure Reason* but to the very placeless place (*topos outopos*, utopia) that the thinking of the noumenon opened. The thing in itself could be thought of only negatively, as a lack of whatever predicates, and hence as an absence, a void, an empty place, the place of nothing. There it was. If Kant failed to notice that the thing in itself was a mirage, that limitation preceded transcendence, and that "there is nothing – no positive substantial entity – behind the phenomenal curtain, only the gaze whose phantasmagorias assume the different shapes of the Thing,"[12] it is worth noting that neither did the poets. In fact, the decades after Kant's first *Critique* was published (1781) were marked by a steady growth of phantasmagorias. In literature, phantasms proliferated. As Mladen Dolar observes, in this epoch "ghosts, vampires, monsters, the undead dead, etc. gain an unexpected existence [...] not as a simple remainder of the past, but as something brought about by modernity."[13] There was, in addition, a growing fascination with artificial creatures, dancing, singing, talking automatons whose literary avatars were frequently inspired by the mechanisms of the selfsame famous French constructor Vaucanson, whom Kant mentions in connection with the puppet.

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[10] Cf. Monique David-Ménard, *La Folie dans la raison pure. Kant lecteur de Swedenborg*, Librairie philosophique, J. Vrin, Paris 1990.

[11] Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost (Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1999, p. 108.

[12] Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, Duke University Press, Durham 1993, p. 37.

[13] Mladen Dolar, "I shall be with you on your wedding night," *October 58*, 1991, p. 7.

Phantasmagoria, hence, were not confined to the literary imagination. The nothing gave the watching and the watching took care of the rest.

A note on gravity

Theories on gravitation have changed since Kant and Kleist, but the carrier of the mysterious force that holds the universe together has remained as elusive as it used to be. The black holes of contemporary cosmology, objects closed off onto themselves, of which no positive statement can be made since no information whatever can escape their insurmountable gravitational pull, look like some sort of uncanny literal apparition of the noumenon, of the matchless fullness of the nothing. Isn't gravity the very texture of the all-pervading, invisible, silent, immaterial (since we haven't been able to identify what transmits it) pull of the nothing? In Kleist's essay on the marionette theatre, grace is defined through gravitation and seems to amount to the correct positioning of the center of gravity, a positioning which is always ex-positioned, always external to the marionette (which is "anti-grav," gravitationless), since this positioning is with the marionette's machinist. Gravity hence appears as the Supreme Artist who winds up and pulls the strings of grace: gravity and grace relate to each other as the machinist-god and the marionette. This relatedness, which exhibits the ungraspable strings connecting weight and weightlessness, interiority and exteriority, hidden and manifest, inanimate matter and absolute consciousness, phenomenon and noumenon, is described by Kleist through the relatedness between an asymptote and a hyperbole. This simple yet mysterious, as Kleist notes, relatedness renders the Cartesian non-coincidence of matter (the hyperbolically dancing marionette) and spirit (the straight-lined machinist-god) as the non-coincidence of an infinite approach: an asymptote (from Greek, "not intersecting") is a line whose distance to a given curve tends to zero. I will return to the zero. In Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, this gravitational mystery works as the heavy, irresistible pull of the silent, the absent and the invisible: like the pull of the gigantic inaudible call which lifts the saints, puppetwise, upwards. "Above, beyond us, the angel plays." The background provided by Kleist is necessary to remind us that Rilke's angel plays *with the puppet.*

A project

In his study of the fantastic as a literary genre, Tzvetan Todorov proposes three terms – fantastic, marvelous, and uncanny – categorizing the occurrence, in literature, of an event which challenges what in the text is assumed

to be the normal world.[14] We are dealing with the marvelous if the occurrence imposes a re-conceptualization of the world as a place where the familiar laws do not hold sway. We are dealing with the uncanny if the familiar laws are re-confirmed and the unusual event is denied in one way or another: for example, it turns out to be the result of delusion or madness. And, finally, we are dealing with the fantastic proper if the text does not allow a decision in favor of either the uncanny or the marvelous: the fantastic is the irresolvable hesitation between the two.

Todorov specifies that this categorization implies the rejection of "allegorical as well as 'poetic' interpretations."[15] It means that Todorov's categorization would exclude approaches which, in the spirit of Paul de Man's "allegories of reading," treat Rilke's writing as "a poetry and poetics of sheer figuration that […] thematizes both the self-containment and the radical insufficiency of poetic language, of the poem as a figure articulating and disarticulating itself at the limits of silence."[16] Such readings, which bring forth the nothing in Rilke's poetry with great sophistication, usually point out that his poetry cannot sustain "sheer figuration" at all times and that, by "the reversal of a negativity into a promise,"[17] it topples over (or very convincingly seems to do so) into metaphysics or messianism – thus justifying much of Rilke criticism as well as Heidegger's critique of Rilke. Oscillating between the figurative and the messianic, such readings of Rilke do not cover yet another mode of the challenge to the "normal world," which Todorov's treatment of the fantastic deliberately leaves out. This mode refers to the *topos outopos*, the placeless place of the non-existent, which, if deployed as a genre would assume the name of utopia. Such readings do not take into account the possibility of the "reversal of a negativity into a promise" to be the very placelessness of the place that is utopia; the possibility, that is, for the promise of Rilke's angel to unfold as a utopia or, to put it in the language that Badiou has recently summoned up a propos of the twentieth century, a *project*.[18] More specifically, Badiou speaks of the 20th century project to transform and create anew the human being, to create a *new* human being, to create, we might

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[14] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre,* Cornell University Press, Cornell 1975.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

[16] Véronique M. Fóti, *Heidegger and the Poets: Poiēsis/Sophia/Technē,* Humanity Books, New York 1992, p. 36.

[17] Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust,* Yale University Press, New Haven 1979, p. 50.

[18] Alain Badiou, *Le Siècle*, Seuil, Paris 2005, pp. 20–21. See too the chapters "La Bête" and "L'Irréconcilié", pp. 23–60.

add, something not exactly human, something trans- or parahuman. Most interestingly, Badiou relates projectivity to "an obsession with the real" and, so far as the poet is concerned, to the poet's function as the "guardian of the open" who guarantees that language will preserve its power to name it. The project – which, as Badiou correctly observes, was already in full swing in the 19th century – is clearly manifest in Kleist's essay "On the marionette theatre." The essay envisions entering paradise from the backdoor via the gaining of absolute consciousness qua marionette – a rather extreme and definitive project which Kleist seems to have acted out with his carefully planned and meticulously executed suicide. Later on in the century Dostoyevsky's Kirillov from *The Possessed* unfurls the same logic: "If God is dead, I kill myself, I am God." Shortly before he commits his suicide we see him standing in a corner, motionless, unnaturally pale and staring into space, as if turned into stone or wax. He becomes a puppet by way of becoming god.[19]

The scandal of these examples demonstrates that, with its passion for the real, projectivity is strictly opposed to sheer figuration. The nothing that gives the watching is not exactly about the abdication of "any claim to truth" that Paul de Man finds in Rilke.[20] When Agamben speaks of "poetic atheology" he seems to be referring to the same neighborhood of the nothing with projectivity where we find the "singular coincidence of nihilism and poetic practice, thanks to which poetry becomes the laboratory in which all known figures are undone and new, parahuman or semidivine creatures emerge: Hölderlin's half-god, Kleist's marionette, Nietzsche's Dionysus, the angel and the doll in Rilke, Kafka's Odradek as well as Celan's "Medusahead" and "automaton" and Montale's "pearly snail's trace."[21]

It is by way of the frequently ignored puppet that we can figure out more precisely what Rilke's angelic project is about. The whole arrangement, however, is quadruple: it includes the human and the animal.[22]

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[19] Boyan Manchev analyses this metamorphosis as testifying to the facelessness, imagelessness, and subjectlessness of death: Kirillov cannot have the grand death he plans for himself and is inevitably turned into "naked life" before dying. Cf. "The End and the Message: An Attempt at the Philosophy of Narrative," in: R. Kuncheva, K. Protohristova and B. Zlatanov (eds.), *Engendering Meaning: Volume in Honour of Radosvet Kolarov*, Boyan Penev, Sofia 2004, pp. 66–67.

[20] Paul de Man, *op. cit.*

[21] Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Essays in Poetics*, tr. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1999, p. 91.

[22] I leave out the figure of the child, which plays a part both in "On the Marionette Theatre" and, very prominently, in the *Duino Elegies* and which seems to be caught up, diachronically and in terms of "growing up," in the same ambiguities that the animal presents.

The creature

The animal (*Tier*) is sometimes referred to as creature, creation (*Kreatur*) in the *Duino Elegies*. In *Parmenides*, Heidegger criticizes Rilke "Eighth Elegy" for attributing to the animal – as *Tier* and *Kreatur* – the capacity to see the Open "with all its eyes" and putting it in opposition to the human entrapment by "our eyes" which are always "reversed" and "doubled back by [the] object onto themselves."[23] Heidegger's critique of Rilke's thoughtless use of the word Open as pertaining to the animal, attributes to Rilke a complicity in the biologism of the 19th century and of psychoanalysis. This complicity results in the hominization of the animal and the animalization of man and in the "inversion of the relation in rank of man and animal."[24]

Whatever Rilke's Open, with its functional affinity to Kleist's grace, means, the problem is that there are, in fact, two kinds of animal in the "Eighth Duino Elegy." On the one hand, there is the animal to which the Open is open. Moving like "brooks and running springs" – i.e. automatically, like inanimate entities governed only by the law of gravity – and with its God always in front of it, this animal is akin to Kleist's marionette with its machinist-god and to Rilke's puppet operated by the angel.

There is, however, in the same elegy, a different type of animal, which "zigzags through the air like a crack through a teacup" and whose "trace crazes the porcelain of the evening."[25] Clearly, this creature whose scared flight leaves a crack on the sky is no longer the animal that has its god always in front of it and its death always behind. This animal, frightened and confused because it "has to fly" but is fleeing from a womb, shares the predicament of humans "who live their lives, forever taking leave."[26] Not the open, but parting is its share, the parting which upholds the scenery on the puppet stage of the "Fourth Duino Elegy" – the scenery of the nothing – and which is repeatedly lamented but ultimately retained in the *Elegies* as the human destiny.

This duplication of the animal, which now seems to be on the side of the marionette with its god, and now on the side of the human, always saying farewell, has an analogue in Kleist's essay where we find the same configuration of marionette, god, human, and animal. The fencing bear in Kleist's essay exhibits the perfection of the marionette through its mastery of the human craft of fencing. Like Rilke's *Kreatur* it seems to be now marionette, now human.

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[23] Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, tr. A. Schuwer and R. Rojcewicz, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1998, p. 157.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 154.

[25] Snow, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

[26] *Ibid.*

Curiously, the quadruple of man, god, animal, and puppet makes its appearance in the staging of Kirillov's suicide: not only does the man who would be god become a puppet, he also becomes an animal – he puts off the light, jumps to the ground and bites Verkhovensky like a dog.[27]

What is the significance of this peculiar duplicity in the animal, a duplicity that now seems to place it on the side of the puppet, now on the side of the human? It seems to mark the emergence of the artificial creature, the autonomization of the automaton. If, as Giorgio Agamben has recently argued, the animal was crucial to the proper functioning of the anthropogenetic machine that produced man,[28] and if, at least since Descartes, animals have been viewed as mechanisms and machines, the emancipation of the pure mechanism from the animal shook the anthropogenetic status of the animal. In so far as it is a pure mechanism, it no longer relates to man but is related, as is the case with Kleist and Rilke, to some other entity, the god or the angel, gravity, the nothing, the noumen. *The animal sees the Open in so far as it is a marionette.* The subtraction of the automaton from the animal makes man as the link between animal and god superfluous. It is not a question of the hominization of animal and the animalization of man but, rather, of a subtraction of the puppet-and-angel (where the angel brings in the nothing of noumena) from the animal-and-man: the drama of this subtraction with its indefinable residue destabilizes the anthropogenetic machine, challenges its product, and fuels the project for a new man referred to by Badiou in a chapter most pertinently entitled "The Beast."

As Mladen Dolar has argued, the autonomization of the automaton and the ensuing fascination with artificial creatures resulted from the Enlightenment ambition to fill in the missing link between *res extensa* and spirit and posit a "zero subjectivity" at the point where the spiritual would directly spring from the material. The drive, Dolar claims, was precisely to do away with the difference between the material and the spiritual and to see the automaton not only in the body, but also in the spirit. The goal, ultimately, was "a subject beyond the Imaginary, singularly deprived of a mirror-phase, a non-imaginary subject from which the imaginary support in the world has to be taken away […] in order to reconstruct it, in its true significance, from this 'zero' point."[29] The point where the hyperbole of the marionette and the asymptote of the machinist-god will finally intersect.

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[27] Boyan Manchev suggests the Deleuzean concept of becoming-animal to describe this last stage of Kirillov. *Op. cit.*, pp. 67–68.

[28] Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2002.

[29] Dolar, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

According to Dolar, the project of a non-imaginary subject can explain, among other things, the literary fascination with blindness. Rilke's angel, it should be noted at this point, is frequently described by him as both invisible and blind.

The focal point

Sooner or later (perhaps always too late, as Dolar believes), the mirror confronts the non-imaginary subject. Frankenstein's Monster sees himself in a pool and is terrified. Stanislaw Lem's thinking machine in "The Mask" stands in front of the mirror and cuts through her female flesh from which a veritable metal automaton emerges. This occurrence acquires a peculiar twist when, with Kleist and, I believe, with Rilke, a concave mirror appears.

Unlike plane mirrors, which can produce only virtual images, concave mirrors can produce both real and virtual images. This, however, is not all there is to the concave mirror. A concave mirror is part of a sphere. For each concave mirror, there is a certain point, situated between the centre of the sphere and the reflecting surface, which is called the focal point. When an object is situated at the focal point, the light rays neither converge nor diverge after reflecting off the mirror. The reflected rays travel parallel to each other. Subsequently, the light rays will not converge on the object's side of the mirror to form a real image; nor can they be extended backwards on the opposite side of the mirror to intersect to form a virtual image. An image cannot be found when the object is located at the focal point of a concave mirror. There is no image! Or rather, the rays will converge in infinity, the image will pass through infinity.

The end of Kleist's essay "On the Marionette Theatre" promises the return of grace as the last chapter in the history of the world. Kleist exemplifies this grand finale of history by an analogy with the disappearance and sudden re-emergence, after having passed through infinity, of the image in a concave mirror. What kind of re-emergence? It seems likely that the image which will "pop up in front of us" will be real and will take us to the center of the mirror sphere where the subject will surf(ace) as a sort of blind hybrid of the image with its source, a body glued to its "real" reflection, a www.centaur: half here, half there. The paradise regained, hence, would materialize as a logon to one's image.[30]

[30] I offer a more detailed analysis of the effects of Kleist's reference to the concave mirror in: "Med bogom in lutko. O 'Über das Marionettentheater' Heinricha von Kleista." *Problemi,* 3–4, 2004, XLII, pp.155–168.

The concave mirror makes its discreet appearance with Rilke, too: in "The Second Elegy", in the midst of a primordial landscape, there is an unexplained mention of mirrors

scooping [the angels'] outstreamed beauty
back into their peerless faces.[31]

These mirrors, popping up as suddenly (*plötzlich*) as Kleist's returning image, "scoop" (*wiederschöpfen*) the Angels' beauty the way a ladle (*Schöpflöffel*) scoops. Furthermore, they scoop the angels' beauty back into their own faces, which seem to be their own (peerless, according to Snow's most pertinent translation) precisely in the sense of not being rivaled or claimed by their own reflection. No image returns here, no image redoubles the own-ness of the angelic face. In spite of Heidegger, who describes Rilke's Angel as "the being who governs the unheard of centre of the widest orbit and causes it to appear,"[32] the angel must be the creature which is always at the ex-centric focal point, the point where the impossibility of the image produces infinity.

[31] Snow, *op. cit.*, p. 11. In German: "… Spiegel: die die entströmte eigene Schönheit/ wiederschöpfen zurük in das eigene Antlitz."

[32] Martin Heidegger, "What Are Poets For", in: *Poetry, Language, Thought*, tr. Albert Hoftstadter, Perennial Classics, New York 2001, p. 131.