THE FREEDOM OF THE WHALE IN THE MATRIX OF RILKE'S DIVINE

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If Whales Could Fly, by Christopher Michel, taken on 5 February 2014

The book of poems, *Duino Elegies*, by Rainer Maria Rilke, is mysterious and enigmatic.[1] It is disturbing poetry that seeks to say something about humanity via the creative presentation of a relation between the animal and God. It is a poetry that has captivated a number of philosophers including Heidegger, Derrida, Cixous and Agamben. Thus, somehow Rilke's verse becomes even more troubling when read next to essays like Derrida's "The animal that therefore I am"[2] and Hélène Cixous's "Balaam's Ass," "Birds and Women" and "Job, The Dog"[3] and Agamben's treatise on "The Open."[4] These essays continue to lead the reader in

[1] All English translations of *Duineser Elegien* are my own. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duineser Elegien*. Hamburg: Projekt Gutenberg. https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/rilke/elegien/achte.html; See also Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, trans. Vita Sackville-West (London: Pushkin Press, 2022); also *Duino Elegies and The Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage, 2009), Kindle edition.
[2] Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that therefore I am*, trans. Marie-Louise Mallet (New York: Fordham University Press).
[3] Hélène Cixous, *Stigmata* (New York: Routledge, 2005). Ibid, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, trans. Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993).
[4] Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal,* trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

a circle quite surely back to Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, and particularly the Eighth Elegy, as one of the most curious poetries on the question of the animal. This essay seeks to make a poetic inquiry into freedom in relation to the whale and God in the verses of Rilke's Eighth Elegy.

Rilke's elegies could be read in terms of genre as a kind of ecopoetry, perhaps in an even more focussed way, a kind of "theo-eco-poetry." This theo-eco-poetry speaks on behalf of the animal and approaches human being from another side. Ecopoetry can generally be considered eco-centric but also environmentalist. It is eco-centric, in that in terms of art it takes special inspiration from the natural world, but it is also agentic on behalf of the natural world. Thus it is a poetry that is "tethered to the natural world"[5] but ecopoetry is not nature poetry in and of itself. It seeks to do more, it seeks to trouble the rigid assumptions, the destructive behaviours, the superiorities, the entitlements, the vices, the death talk and the fallacies of human civilization. As a category it confronts the old and stale violence of humanity towards the natural world. The ecopoem or theo-eco-poem might take the position of the quasi-prophetic voice, the voice of witness and of watcher, as in the Book of Isaiah, appealing to a binding of broken-hearts, and the setting of captives free (Isa 61:6). The eco-poem seeks to entangle the reader anew into concerns of a life-world, beyond the reader, where humanity is not always already at the centre. It is a sacred task, then, in theo-eco-poetry to amplify the death-chant of southern oceans, to sound the dirge of the whale and to cry like Auden, "stop the clocks" within earshot of such a being as God.[6] But the world according to Rilke is inexpressible. And this kind of Rilkean poetry is a negative ecopoetry that seeks to disclose the unsayable wholeness of the world that is beyond human vision, a "discourse that lies outside of language."[7] In place of the unsayable, the poetry tells a strange theological story of zoological freedom, of the possibility of an animalistic grace caught up in a supraterrestial absolute.[8] This animal is not entirely in an emancipatory vacuum because in some extraordinary way it is caught up "in the matrix of the divine" as Bhibhudutt Dash would have it.[9] It is strange indeed that Rilke's theopoetic animal lives face to face with God. In Rilke's language it might even be a terrifying angel.

Whales are ingrained in cultural consciousness. The whale is lonely, majestic, and mystical. In Māori cosmology, whales descend from Tangaroa, the god of the oceans.[10] Whales are considered with awe, as supernatural, tapu, and sacred. Messengers of the gods, they are a sign and a destiny for iwi. Whales provide whale-sign, marking out the most auspicious place to settle for the weary navigators.[11] In the many other

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[5] John Shoptaw, "Why Ecopoetry?", Poetry Magazine (January 2016): https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/70299/why-ecopoetry
[6] Wystan Hugh Auden and Christopher Isherwood, *The Ascent of F6* (London: Random House, 1937).
[7] Kate Rigby, "Earth, World, Text: On the (Im)Possibility of Ecopoiesis," *New Literary History*, vol. 35, no. 3, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004, pp. 427-42, 437.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Bhibhudutt Dash, "In the matrix of the divine: approaches to the Godhead in Rilke's Duino Elegies and Tennyson "In Memoriam", *Language in India*, 11, (2011): 355.
[10] Department of Conservation, *The Conservation of Whales in the 21st Century Report*, (2004), 12.
[11] Ibid.

collected stories, such as the journey of the Tainui canoe, the whale acts as kaitiaki or guide.[12] They are taniwha, synonymous with water spirits, that calm the waves and give gifts such as seaweed and fish and teeth. In the story of Tutunui, from Ngati Porou, Paikea, like Jonah was rescued from shipwreck by a whale and brought safely to shore perhaps not in its belly but with more dignity, on its back.[13] Waihuka, from the Waikato, also found himself abandoned in the ocean but was saved by a friendly whale. In some stories the whale and Māori heroes of old engaged in play and sport, and these whales even take on names and identities. Te Tahi-o-te-rangi rode the whale called Tutarakauika from Whakaari to the mouth of the Whakatāne. And Tūnui had a pet whale, Raumano, and was seen riding out of the Keteketerau outlet on it to the cape.[14]

In Judeo-Christian imaginary, in the annals of Genesis, the Leviathan is the elder brother of creation. It sings its eerie song in the ocean long before the coming of humankind. Whale sound is like a teruah, like a shofar. Whale song, signals the presence of intelligence and culture deep in the primal seas existent before the coming of humanity. [15] In biblical mythology, whales were created on the fifth day. This was the day or the thousand years (or according to evolutionary history, perhaps 50 millennia), before Adam and Eve arrived with hook and spear. The ocean and the sky at that time in the beginning swarmed with living creatures (Gen 1:20-21): "So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good."

The Talmud tells in Avodah Zarah 3b that God created the whale to play with it, like Tūnui's whale Raumano. This Talmudic fragment is drawn from Psalm 104:26, "There go the ships, and Leviathan, which you formed to play." Thus says the Talmud: "During the [last three hours of the day], [God] sits and makes sport with the leviathan, as is stated: "There is the leviathan, whom You have [made in order to play with it]."[16] Here God engages in a shared joy with this greatest of sea creatures, a creature perceived by humanity as a monster. This monstrous and terrifying being, in its chaotic backdrop of the deep engages in sport with the creator daily.[17] With this creator it shares the experience of being seen "amidst infinities and infinitesimals," and the creator shares with it the "risks of the creatures, the vulnerabilities of birth [and] the passions of beauty."[18] Hence the question that arises in light of Rilke's poetry: is the relation between the creature and the creator even closer than play. In this the nature of the animal is at stake too. Rilke implies the possibility of the free whale, the free leviathan, free and at large in the matrix of the divine, such that it could be said in another bible, "In the beginning, was the whale. And the Whale was with God."

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[12] Bradford Haami, "Te whanau puha—whales—Whales in Māori Tradition" Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand (2006), http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/te-whanau-puha-whales/page-1 (accessed 22 March 2022).
[13] Haami, "Te whanau puha".
[14] Ibid.
[15] Joshua Zeman (dir.) *The Loneliest Whale* (New York: Bleecker Street, 2021).
[16] Avodah Zarah 3b, *The William Davidson Talmud*, trans. Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz (Jerusalem: Koren).
[17] Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep* (London: Routledge, 2003), 27.
[18] Ibid., 140.

In other fragments of the biblical text whales occupy a place of freedom in a posture of grace and praise. The poet Christina Rossetti pictures whales in this way in her own poetic imaginary. In Rossetti's depicting of the face of the deep she precedes Rilke's verse by a few decades.[19] Thus Mason finds, "Rossetti's 'face of the deep' is a cosmos of multiple species, surfaces and beings that find expression and shape through communal participation with each other through grace."[20] This posture of praise echoes the Book of Daniel, for example, in the Prayer of Azariah "O ye whales, and all that move in the waters, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever." (Dan 3:57 KJV) But whales also seem to exist to offer teachable moments and forceable reflection, for example in Jonah 1:17 "And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." (Jon 1:17 ESV) Or, in Job, where the whale shares Job's burden and captivity to fate, "Am I the sea, or a sea monster, that you set a guard over me?" (Job 7:12 ESV) The whale might also offer Job, a metaphor for futility, a grief too great, "finitude carved out by limit and loss"[21] such as in Job 41:1: "Can you draw out Leviathan with a fish hook, or press down [its] tongue with a cord? Can you put a rope in [its] nose, or pierce [its] jaw with a hook?" (Job 41.1f).

Rilke wrote the Duino Elegies in 1912 and did not complete them until 1923.[22] Initially he was staying with Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe at Duino castle, hence their name. This castle sits on the wild coast of the Adriatic, frequently subjected to storms and tempests. Rilke writes Duino Elegies with a mien of awe, describing it as "the most mysterious, the most enigmatic dictation."[23] The poem casts a number of angels, and not benevolent ones. Drawing upon Māori cosmology one could imagine this terrifying angel as a great whale making a dramatic splash. Perhaps the reader of the Elegies could imagine this whale that has come to interrogate them, to seize them like a blazing star, to bend them as if trying to create them, to break them out of who they are, an angel that is one of heaven's hierarchies. Or, perhaps as a crier, the whale's song cries out: "Who, when I cry out, would hear me …."[24] Perhaps beauty: "For beauty is nothing/ so much as the beginning of terrors, which we are yet to endure,/ and we caught up in our wonder as it calmly spurns/and destroys us. Every angel is terrible."[25] And as Rilke will go on to write thirteen years later, the angel he imagined here is indeed a creature that, like love, both plunges and takes flight, a deadly bird of the soul. Rilke goes out to this leviathan like Te Tahi o Te Rangi, "I went out into the cold moonlight and stroked [it] as if it was a large animal—the ancient walls granted this to me."[26]

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[19] Christina Rossetti, *The Poetical Works of Christina G. Rossetti,* 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1908), 2: 140.
[20] Emily Mason, "'Whales and all that move in the waters': Christina Rossetti's ecology of grace" (pp 69-84), in *Victorian Sustainability in Literature or Culture* (London: Routledge, 2018), 70.
[21] Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 149.
[22] Stephen Mitchell, "Introduction", in *Duino Elegies*, xi.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Rilke, "Die Erste Elegie," *Duineser Elgien*. Line 1.
[25] Ibid., line 4-7.
[26] Mitchell, "Introduction", *Duino Elegies*, xii.

Rilke's Eighth Elegy is dedicated to Rudolf Kassner and begins in this way: "With all eyes the creature sees/ the Open. Only our eyes are/ as if in reverse and turned around/ like traps while they enter into freedom./ What is outside of us, we know from the animal's/ gaze alone; because if we turned a young child/ around so they were about face/ they would see the shape of it, not the Open, that/ is so deep in the animal's gaze."[27] In these lines from the Eighth Elegy, Rilke is bringing some sort of critique regarding the position of humanity; its boundedness, its limits and insufficiencies; and fractured human consciousness.[28] Rilke contends that if the moment of the human-animal gaze was pure and free, if it was open, and played the role of mirror for the reader, it would catalyse a future where generations, time and death could be sustained in their tenuous balance.[29] But humanity, proud in sovereignty, its peculiar sentience and the blinkered nature of its technological advancement has lost this innocent gaze, lost sight of the animal other, upon which civilization and technology has been so dependent.

Amazingly, here for Rilke, is the free animal, and more than this, the whale is free from death: "Free from death./ We see death alone; the free animal/ always has its waning behind it, / and before it, God, and when it stirs,/ it streams forever like a spring."[30] The whale doesn't perceive death, and isn't shaped and controlled by fear of it. Death has no victory over the animal. For Rilke, God enters the picture here. The whale is brought up high in its openness. It is brought up to a degree of angelic being, as it does for every other animal. This degree of being is angelic in its radical openness to infinity, to eternity. The whale is connected via this imaginary umbilical directly to the matrix of the divine without mediation. This phenomenon, Rilke counts as the ultimate freedom, "a matrix of possibilities [that] translates the topos of the deep into not a place of before but of beginning."[31]

Rilke proceeds to experiment with all possible human exceptions in his next lines, "… As a child/ in Silence gets lost in this and becomes/ shaken. Or dies and is it./ For close to death one no longer sees death/ and stares out, perhaps with great, animal eyes."[32] As Rilke infers a very small child, might see it, might be it. See what? The Open, which must be in this mise-en-scène some kind of space time continuum, some kind of Real that the whale can perceive but humanity is blind to, the very face of God, a rip in the fabric of the mortal world, an axis mundi that touches heaven. Humanity exists in continual abstraction, but the whale exists in this gaping unconcealedness of being,[33] it sees shards of the divine filling the world, shot through all its vistas—light and luminous. The nearness of death brings Job back to mind. Someone like Job, full of grief and near to death might also see it and be it. The extremities of human life might bring

[27] Rilke, "Die Achte Elegie," Line 1-9.
[28] Dash, "In the matrix of the divine".
[29] Deborah Bird Rose, Thom Van Dooren and Matthew Chrulew, *Extinction Studies: Stories of Time, Death and Generations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 10.
[30] Rilke, "Die Achte Elegie," line 9-13.
[31] Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 161.
[32] Rilke, "Die Achte Elegie," lines 19-23.
[33] Agamben, *The Open*, 58.

the Open near but not face to face as with the animal. So perhaps of all humanity Job did catch a glimpse of Rilke's vast open in the midst of the ashes of his life.

Rilke turns next to the possibility of another way of seeing, seeing freely, something outside of the human-animal relation, something that might be glimpsed during a time of duress or awe: "Always turned towards creation, we see/ only a reflection of freedom,/ obscured by us. Or an animal,/ a silent one, looking up, quietly through us."[34] The human gaze is revealed in Rilke's verse, as poor, captive, dark, a shadow of its possible fullness, full of backward forms, the opposite of freedom. For Marovich, who invokes Santner in her essay on God's animal body, finds that something tragic and traumatic is happening to human life. [35] Marovich describes civilization as entering more and more into a chronic state of agitation and disorientation because of this poverty of sight.[36]

Agamben writes that what Rilke offers here in the Eighth Elegy, is the possibility of a "reversal of the hierarchical relationship between man and animal."[37] In Rilke's next turn of poetry he engages this notion in a brutal dichotomy: "Were we aware of our own being in light of that/ safe animal, when it draws towards us from the other/ direction—it rips us around/ in its wake. Its Being is/ infinite, untapped and without a glimmer/ of its condition, as pure as its outlook./ and where we see the future, there it sees/ everything and itself in everything, healed/ forever."[38] Agamben proposes Rilke sees the technological world as a kind of anthropological machine that has at its core a vast and unassailable impasse between human and animal, where the one will never act the messiah for the other.[39] Derrida too finds a 'wasteland' here in the human world, because both divinity and creatureliness is othered in the face of the indifferent sovereign human subject.[40] But the healing that Rilke suggests here is read by Agamben as kind of Shabbat of both animal and man, Isaiah's utopia, where these kingdoms live in peace.[41]

For Derrida, the whale might be here an animal god, theo-zoological, an angel, a creaturely immortal, the sovereign animal.[42] This excluded subjective space or open that is thus created by civilization is called by Derrida, "divinanimality."[43] But there is an intimacy for Rilke, an immanence of the divine as opposed to a cold and distant transcendence: "And yet there is in the alert, warm animal, / the weight and concern of a great melancholy./ What afflicts it is always what leaves us/ often overwhelmed—the memory, as if what we were invoking,/ was coming closer, more true and the/ connection, infinitely tender.

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[34] Rilke, "Die Achte Elegie," line 29-33.
[35] Beatrice Marovich, "Little Bird Praying in My Hands: Rainer Maria Rilke and God's Animal Body". In *Divinanimality,* ed. Stephen Moore (New York: Fordham, 2014), 137.; Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Seabald* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011).
[36] Ibid.
[37] Agamben, *The Open*, 57.
[38] Rilke, "Die Achte Elegie," lines 35-42.
[39] Agamben, *The Open*, 57.
[40] Derrida, *The Animal*, 132; Glen A. Mazis, "Animals before me", in *Divinanimality*, 19.
[41] Agamben, *The Open*, 92.
[42] Derrida, *The Animal;* see also Marovich, "Little Bird".
[43] Derrida, *The Animal*, 132.

Everything is/ distance here and there was breath."[44] Rilke's emphasis on intimacy, communion, and breath here is beautiful and speaks to an infinite and unfettered Open to the divine. The whale-god whispers something otherworldly to human listeners, something that they have forgotten. This whisper is a breath, an intimate exchange between the voice and world, as pure whale sound.[45] It is kin to the breath of God that first blew on the waters in silence before the waking of speech. It is the trace of the sacred in the cyclical vivification of the world of creatures. It is the signature of the wordless, unsayable all in which we all live lives, that finds voice for the whale in a twenty hertz sonic song.[46]

The winged messenger has gone unnoticed and unheeded, its beauty sunk as deep and dark as the southern sea away from the reader's sight. As a counter, Rilke points to sightless, unheeding humanity in the Eighth Elegy, "And we: spectators, always, everywhere,/ facing it all and never outwards!/ We're teeming with it. We arrange it. It falls into ruin./ We put it back together and fall apart ourselves.// So who turned us around so that we,/ whatever we do, are in the position/ of someone going away? …/ thus we live forever parting."[47] Rilke would have it that humankind are captives to technological success, captives of a world gaze a little lower than the angels. There is no "perfect internality," no beyond of "human contradictions and limitations" in this age of 'men', constant departures, the anxiety of transience.[48] As Rilke casts in prophetic tone here, civilization may well take leave this draughty home altogether if the primal song of the whale goes unheeded.[49] Where is home? The leap of the whale, and all its radiance, its flights and plunges a sign to the watcher to settle, to belong, to desire a return. With Rilke, one must become more than spectators, one must actively fear beauty and allow it to free the human soul. One must turn to the endangered whale with a gaze into the open; as that pure glance by work or power cannot be recreated, it is a kind of grace of which one catches but a glimpse. The poet wants the reader to allow it to transform them, to encounter this beauty, to remember. If the reader might learn the names of the whales, their songs, their unique freedom in the world and their constant communion with the open of God, not just as an extension of humanity, not as lesser forms of life, but perfect and complete in and of themselves, all souls which are quite wildly, gracefully free. The leviathan, for Rilke belongs to angelic hierarchies, and sings within the matrix of the divine.[50]

At this point we turn again to ecopoetry and this grotto where theo-eco-poetry resides. The two aims of this poetry being firstly to tether the reader again to the natural world, that is, to bring the reader's view towards it and secondly to trouble the reader in some way, and all this in light of some divine touchstone. The kind of trouble presented in this kind of poetry is a rupture of the assumed relation that

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[44] Rilke, "Die Achte Elegie", lines 43-50.
[45] James Risser, "Speaking from Silence: On the intimate relation between silence and speaking" *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics* (2019) Online. https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/jah/article/view/68705
[46] Zeman, *The Loneliest Whale.*
[47] Rilke, "Die Achte Elegie", lines 66-75.
[48] Dash, "The matrix".
[49] See also Yael Klangwisan Cameron, "The Sixth Mass Extinction & Genesis" [Blog] *NZCIS*, (2020, June 16).
[50] Dash, "The matrix".

humanity has to the natural world, to destabilise the ancient bases upon which humanity has built the machine of civilization, one of these being belief in gods. Of course, Heidegger will go on to make a critique that what Rilke attempts in the *Duino Elegies* of the nature of the animal cannot even hold in terms of philosophy.[51] Whales might be free but of all creatures only humanity might ever conceive of it. Only humans can occupy the gaze of authentic thought and account for the flickering roll of truth as it discloses and closes upon one. For Heidegger, Rilke makes the terrible error of anthropomorphizing the animal and animalizing the human and God knows what happens to theology in this poetic entanglement.[52] But the appeal that Rilke makes is compelling and disorients the faithful reader. The thought of the free whale is a marvelous diversion. The dream in the Talmud, where the Leviathan plays in the last three hours of the day embraced in an intimacy and a communion with the All is riveting. Thus, if it is true in no other way except that it troubles the human aegis and its troubled relation to the natural world, it is a worthwhile and blessed fantasy. The theo-eco-poetic voice of Rilke can do this kind of magic. It can stoke the imagination and in turn can conjure up something other, something that metamorphoses, that trips the reader into a strange and new theological possibility, straight into the Real of the whale. In doing so, the Eighth Elegy holds up a mirror to an infinity of frames and the most astounding of apparitions leaving one shaking with awe. Rilke's words in ending here are rehoused in a found poem on behalf of the great whale. For this reader it represents a vision of a great whale's scarred tail as it dives down into the deep, the very vision of Rilke's terrible angel at play with God:

> wings radiant and whirling alone
> a thoughtless rapture
> that rises into beauty
> by gathering itself into itself
> I am streaming with you
> mirror of my soul
> who are you?[53]

[51] Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. André Schwuer (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 155.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Rilke, "Die Zweite Elegie," a found poem based on lines 1-17.