

Animalising Art: Rainer Maria Rilke and Franz Marc

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Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry and prose were deeply influenced by his engagement with visual art. His early poetry has been compared to *Jugendstil* or art nouveau, the works of his middle period were greatly influenced by his connections to the artist colony in Worpswede and, most significantly, his engagement with the French artists, Auguste Rodin and Paul Cézanne. Rilke was also keenly interested in Vincent Van Gogh and Rilke's later works, including his masterpiece, the *Duino Elegies* (*Duineser Elegien*), have invited comparison to the development of abstraction in the visual arts. However, in a letter from 1924 he remarks that Cézanne had remained his supreme example (Rilke, *Briefe* 440). In other documents he criticises cubism, although he admired some of Pablo Picasso's works, and shows a sincere admiration for Paul Klee's paintings but not without certain hesitations (*Über moderne Malerei*). Moreover, there is a noticeable and telling absence of any mention of Wassily Kandinsky in Rilke's writings.

Hermann Meyer in his essay on the relation between Rilke's late poetry and the development of modern art offers a clear explanation for his hesitations towards German Expressionism and more specifically towards abstraction (287-336). While Rilke recognised in Cézanne's paintings a liberation of colour and painterly composition from a mere literal representation of appearances, Cézanne's paintings do not involve the dissolution of objects; rather they reconstitute the objects in a purely painterly language. In other words they maintain a balance between construction and representation, inner and outer, the human and the natural. Rilke was not sympathetic to the complete dissolution of the object and the painting of the invisible that are characteristic, for instance, of Kandinsky's artistic development. While Rilke admired and gained a great deal from Paul Klee's works, he also felt that Klee's abstraction went too far. Rilke's hesitations towards German Expressionism find a significant exception in his appraisal of Franz Marc. His decisive encounter occurred during the Franz Marc retrospective in Munich in 1916, shortly after Marc's death at the age of 36 in WWI. In a letter to Marianne von Goldschmidt-Rothschild, Rilke writes: 'Almost no one foresaw that it [the Marc exhibition] would be so significant, finally once more an oeuvre, an achievement in the work and an attained unity of life, and how blessed, unconditioned, pure. . .' (*Über moderne Malerei* 107).¹ And in a letter to Lou Albert-Lazard, Rilke shares: 'I have, however, solely received reinforcement and encouragement from the Marc-exhibition, which for me was an event [*Ereignis*] . . .' (*Über moderne Malerei* 109)

Why was Rilke so moved by the Marc retrospective? I think there are various reasons, some of which have been elaborated by Hermann Meyer, Klaus Lankheit (167-168) and Dominique Iehl. Firstly, while some of Marc's latest works are entirely or almost entirely abstract he mostly maintains a balance between the constructive and representational aspects of art. While he certainly goes further than Cézanne (who was a significant

influence on him) in the liberation of artistic composition, he maintains a representational and figurative language. Secondly, there is an incredibly organic development and unity in Marc's work. From his early naturalistic and Impressionist paintings to his final abstract works there is a clear and unified progression. Rilke recognized and praised this in his terse exclamation, 'finally once more an *oeuvre*.' The integrity of Marc's *oeuvre* is closely related to the central *motif* that accompanies his entire development, namely *animals*. Rilke and Marc shared an interest in animals as an artistic motif and, I believe, this is a third reason for Rilke's praise of Marc. Moreover, Rilke's mention of the encouragement and reinforcement that he has gained from Marc's works, suggests that they may have influenced his later animal poetry. In what follows, I draw attention to some of the significant connections between Rilke's and Marc's vision of animals. These commonalities include: the claim to a profound artistic vision of animals and their environments, and intermedial stylistic connections. I conclude with observations on the ecocritical significance of their works.

Animalising Art and Poetry

Rilke's greatest poetic work of the middle period, the two parts of the *Neue Gedichte* or *New Poems*, published in 1907 and 1908 respectively, contains numerous animal poems. They include 'The Panther', 'The Gazelle', 'Black Cat', 'Flamingos', 'Dolphins,' and the list goes on. During the middle period, moreover, Rilke's creative process was inspired by the practices of visual artists. A devoted practice of perceiving (Fischer 2007), informed by the example of the Worpswede artists, Rodin and Cézanne, was a central source of poetic inspiration.⁶ Thus, for instance, his poem 'The Gazelle' developed out of his observation of gazelles for an entire morning in the *Jardin des Plantes* in Paris (Fischer 2007). The earliest and most famous of Rilke's 'new poems' was similarly inspired by his observation of a caged panther (as well as a plaster cast of an antique tiger). Analogously to a visual artist Rilke in turn sought to translate a vision of things into the form and content of his poems. Rilke describes the origin of 'Der Panther' in a letter from 1926 as follows:

[F]rom the year 1902 on, Paris—the incomparable—became the basis of my desire for artistic form. Under the great influence of Rodin, who helped me come closer to overcoming a lyrical superficiality. . . through the obligation. . . to work like a painter or sculptor from Nature, relentlessly apprehending and copying. The first result of this strict, good, schooling was the poem 'The Panther'—in the *Jardin des Plantes* in Paris—, to which one might ascribe this provenance. (*Briefe* 517)

The kind of vision that informed Rilke's animal poetry was not a mere everyday perception of things; rather, it was a schooled perception which included a certain mystical dimension that is distinctive of Rilke's work and poetic worldview. In a letter from 1914 to Magda von Hattingberg Rilke describes a kind of vision, which in this case he calls in-seeing or *Einsehn*, that differs from a superficial anthropomorphic perception of animals. He writes:

I love in-seeing [Einsehn]. Can you think with me how marvellous it is, for instance, to see into a dog while walking by, in-seeing (I don't mean seeing-through [durchschauen], which is, in contrast, only a kind of human gymnastics and where one immediately comes out again on the other side of the dog, only, as it were, regarding it as a window into the human lying behind it, not this)—letting oneself [sich einlassen] into the dog, exactly into its centre, to the place where it starts being a dog [von wo aus er Hund ist], there, where God, as it were, would have positioned himself for a moment, when the dog was complete, in order to oversee its first embarrassments and incidents and to affirm that it was good, that nothing was lacking, that one could not make it better. For a while one can endure being in the centre of the dog, one must only watch out and be sure to leap out in due time, before its environment [Umwelt] wholly encloses one, because otherwise one would simply remain the dog in the dog and be lost for anything else [für alles übrige verloren]. (*Briefwechsel* 114-115)

This vision, which Rilke proceeds to describe as a 'divine in-seeing' (115), is not an anthropomorphic projection but a process of spiritual identification with the being that is perceived. It enters into the dog's centre, unites with its essence, with what makes it a dog. This identification goes so far that Rilke speaks of seeing the world from the dog's point of view and jokingly but with a certain seriousness warns of the danger of becoming forever trapped inside the dog.

Rilke was a friend of the influential zoologist Jakob von Uexküll whose main field of research was the relation between animals and their environments or *Umwelten*. According to Uexküll each animal has a distinctive world or *Umwelt* that is correlative to its physiology, behaviour and instincts (Uexküll 1909). Rilke's mention of the dog's *Umwelt* bears a clear allusion to Uexküll's research. With this background in mind I would like to briefly consider the central verse of Rilke's poem, 'Der Panther':

Der weiche Gang geschmeidig starker Schritte,
der sich im allerkleinsten Kreise dreht,
ist wie ein Tanz von Kraft um eine Mitte,
in der betäubt ein großer Wille steht. (*Werke*, vol. 1, 469)

The soft gait of strong and supple steps
that in the very smallest circle turns,
is like a dance of strength around a centre
in which, numbed, a great will stands.

While many interpreters regard the panther as a symbol for a human state of affairs, this interpretation goes against Rilke's own poetics at the time, which was concerned with an objective depiction of things (Fischer 2007). Moreover, zoologist Jakob von Uexküll (Gudrun von Uexküll, *Jakob von Uexküll: seine Welt und Umwelt* 132) as well as the zoologist Hans Mislin (1974) interpret the poem as evincing an exceptional zoological vision. Mislin argues that the poem reveals the panther in a manner that is simultaneously scientific and mythic, and records the detrimental effects of the panther's loss of its

natural environment (47f.). The first two lines of the second verse of the poem present an expressive and dynamic portrayal of the panther's walk. The second two lines of this central verse describe the centre of the panther in a reminiscent manner to the description of the dog's centre in the previously cited letter. The lines open up an interior power and metaphysical depth of the animal. Due to imprisonment, however, the panther's strength and being have suffered. The formal aspects of the poem embody the content. Here I will only note that the steady iambic pentameter suggests the repetitive pacing of the animal, and the poem's shortness (twelve lines) serves the concentrated depiction and functions almost like a cage.

In a similar manner to Rilke, Franz Marc criticises anthropomorphic perceptions of animals (as evinced by earlier paintings) and contrasts anthropomorphism with a deeper vision. In a notebook entry from 1911-12 Marc writes:

Does there exist a more mysterious idea for artists, than that of how nature is mirrored in the eye of an animal? How does a horse see the world, or an eagle, a deer or a dog? How destitute, soulless is our convention of placing animals in a landscape that belongs to our eyes rather than plunging ourselves into the soul of the animal in order to divine its circle of images . . . (Marc, *Schriften* 99)

From 1907 until the end of his short and immensely productive life, the animal (excluding a few late abstract works) remained the central motif of Marc's art. While his earlier treatment of animals in drawings, sculptures and paintings maintained a high degree of naturalism, his works became progressively more abstract. The figures of animals were more and more reduced to essentialised and geometricised features, and the colouration of his paintings grew increasingly distant from realism.

This 'abstraction' grew, however, out of his empathetic perception and detailed anatomical and behavioural studies of animals (Lankheit 39ff.). It was in his effort to capture a deeper and more essential vision of animals and their environments that Marc's works grew increasingly abstract. The above quoted passage shows how Marc's aspiration to paint the animal's world could provide an incentive (along with the major artistic movements of his time) to depart from naturalism; the fact that animals see the world according to their distinctive physiologies, instincts and habitats, throws into question the notion that perceptual realism is the only truthful painting. According to Marc, naturalism only renders the surface or outer forms of nature. The modern artist, in contrast, must penetrate to the interior lawfulness or spirit of nature (*Schriften* 101).

In a Rilkean fashion, Marc claims that the striving to paint the interior side of nature stems from the fact that he and his peers *see* the other side of nature (*Schriften* 102). This vision of the depth of nature necessitates a more radical constructive painting in contrast to a mere representation of nature's surface. Marc identifies the late Cézanne as a forerunner of the painterly construction of the 'organic structure of things' (*Schriften* 12). It is a deeper unity between the animal and its environment that Marc seeks to render in his paintings.

Consider now how this ideal is realised in his painting, 'The Tiger' ('Der Tiger') from 1912 (fig. 1).



Fig. 1 'The Tiger', 1912 (Source: <http://www.franzmarc.org/Tiger.jsp>)

Both the animal and its environment are constructed out of crystalline forms, which integrate the tiger and its surroundings. These cubist shapes transport the viewer into a world that is unfamiliar to ordinary human perception and the hard angular forms evoke the tiger's aggressive nature. The palette fittingly consists of strong, spectral, 'unnatural' colours, which convey internal relations through their expressive value and compositional arrangement. The use of complementary colours in particular suggests the unity between the tiger and its environment. The yellow tiger complements the towering purple form behind it. The red and the green on either side of the animal are complementary. The use of black in the jagged angles of the tiger's body and in the surroundings evokes a sense of mystery and the predator's hiddenness. Furthermore, the tiger's twisted pose is incredibly dynamic. The tiger seems to have suddenly turned its arrow-like head and fixed its sharp eyes on some prey.

While Rilke's panther reveals the detrimental effects of the panther's loss of its natural environment, Marc's tiger is totally integrated with its surroundings which, as Lankheit intuitively claims, convey a sense of its tropical habitat (Lankheit 82).² Both the painting and the poem, however, transport the interpreter into the space of the animal, reveal its relationship to its surroundings, evoke its appearance in a dynamic and expressive way, and suggest a deeper metaphysical or daemonic dimension of the predatory cats. (Incidentally, the pose of 'The Tiger' and its angular form bears obvious similarities to Marc's 1908 bronze sculpture of a panther.) Moreover, both the poem and the painting unite dynamism and structural form. While Rilke's iambic pentameter and alternately

rhyiming quatrains are more traditional than Marc's 'expressionist cubism,' Marc's geometric construction evokes a similar sense of dynamic structure. In turn, Rilke's accentuation of the panther's circular movement reveals a geometricising essentialisation.

Although Marc's painting shows obvious resemblances to cubism, it is important to mention that cubist features are evident in works that pre-date his interest in this movement and, moreover, his goals differed from those of cubism. Marc identified cubism with a human-centred or anthropomorphic perception of space (*Schriften* 99) and his intention in contrast to a main thrust of French modernism was not to diminish content for the sake of a 'pure painting' but to employ the new painterly techniques evolved by his contemporaries in service of an intensified expression of the essence of things or what he called the 'inner truth of things [*innere Wahrheit der Dinge*]' (Lankheit 39, 84).

This difference from cubism can be clearly illustrated through a consideration of Marc's pictures that are constructed out of arcing and circular forms. Marc's painting, 'The Little Blue Horses' ('Die kleinen blauen Pferde', 1911; fig. 2) developed out of sketches of horses and hills that emphasised circular forms—the arc of the horses' necks, the arc of their rumps, the arc of hills etc. These circles and arcs are not artificially imposed on the horses, rather they intensify and simplify postures and aspects of anatomy that are characteristic of horses, while at the same time providing a constructive principle which grants a compositional unity to the picture. By constructing the horses and the landscape out of rhythmic variations of the same geometrical principle the drawings and painting express a deeper unity between the animals and their environment. As Lankheit so well explains, in contrast to a more naturalistic image (as in Marc's earlier works), Marc's 'application of basic mathematical forms' enables, paradoxically (though in this respect Cézanne was an obvious predecessor), an 'intensification of objective expression' (78).



Fig. 2 'The Little Blue Horses', 1911

(Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AFranz_Marc_Die_kleinen_blauen_Pferde.jpg)

In a wide variety of ways Marc's paintings suggest a distinctive and profound relationship between the animals and their landscapes. Marc constructs animals and their landscapes out of the same formal principles and uses colour symbology to express the unity between the animal and its environment.

In the painting 'Red Deer II' ('Rote Rehe II', fig. 3) the arcing bodies and postures of the deer complement one another and are echoed in the undulating landscape, curved clouds and vegetation. The white underside of their bodies matches the surrounding cloudlike shapes and their red fur matches a trail where they walk and complements the green in the landscape. In contrast to 'The Tiger,' this painting conveys a gentle and ethereal quality that is in keeping with the character of deer.



Fig. 3 'Red Deer II', 1912 (Source: Stadtische Gallerie, Munich
<http://www.oceansbridge.com/paintings/artists/m/franz-marc-new/big/Franz-Marc-xx-Red-Deer-II-1912-xx-Staatgalerie-Moderner-Kunst.jpg>)

In Marc's 'Gazelles' ('Gazellen'; fig. 4), the curved shape of the horns is a constructive principle for the gazelles' interlocking bodies and the abstract landscape. This suggests the animals' community and their integration with their *Umwelt*. The painting also captures the gazelles in various poses and suggests movement in a way which simultaneously renders a variety of dynamic behaviours; these features and the vibrant colour harmony reveal how, in service of his distinctive goals, Marc drew on the dynamic colouration techniques of Robert Delaunay's 'Orphism' and the Futurists' innovations in conveying movement by suggesting phases of an unfolding action (Iehl 255-256; Lankheit 105ff.; Partsch 67).³



14 'Gazelles', 1913 (Source: <http://www.philippbauer.de/galerie/franz-marc/werke-gr/gazellen.jpg>)

It is clear from his pictures that Marc was not seeking simply to evoke the world as perceived by the animal, but concerned with a greater metaphysical unity of nature which reveals a clear Romantic heritage. Marc's pursuit of the animal motif was a way of reconnecting the human with the universe. In a letter from 1910, he writes:

I seek to increase my sensibility for the organic rhythms of all things, a pantheistic feeling into the quivering and flowing of the blood of nature in the trees, in the animals, in the air—; to make this into a picture. . . I see no more fortunate means for the *animalisation* of art [*Animalisierung der Kunst*] than the animal-painting [*tierbild*']. (Marc, *Schriften* 98)

In the same letter, written on the cusp of the development of his mature style, Marc identifies the 'animalisation of art' with the works of van Gogh and makes clear that 'animalisation' does not pertain solely to animals, although they are granted a privileged place, but to the whole of nature (*Schriften* 98). The 'animalisation of art' involves the cultivation of a deeper connection to the whole of nature and the rendering of this unified vision in paintings. Marc regarded animal paintings as the most conducive motif for conveying this expanded vision of nature that includes a pantheistic and cosmological dimension. One of his most famous paintings, 'The Tower of Blue Horses [Der Turm der blauen Pferde]' (1913; fig. 5), which went missing in 1945, offers a good example of Marc's cosmological portrayal of animals. The original picture was a large canvas of 200cm by 130cm. The title and the sublime vertical arrangement of horses are suggestive

of an immense church tower rising from the earth into the sky. The horses majestically stride through an abstract landscape towards the viewer and look as if they could stride beyond the canvas. The shapes and colours of the surroundings are imprinted on the horses' bodies and a crescent moon and a cross-like star are apparent on the front horse. (It is important to mention that stars and the crescent moon were also the personal insignia of Marc's friend, the expressionist poet, Else Lasker-Schüler, to whom he sent a new year's [1912-13] postcard with a sketch of what was later to become the painting. I disagree, however, with Partsch's view that these biographical details speak against a cosmological interpretation of the painting [67].)⁴ The angular and rounded geometric shapes constitutive of the painterly construction echo one another in the horses and the landscape. The last horse's mane, for instance, arcs with the rainbow in the sky, which in turn mirrors the arc of the crescent moon on the first horse. For Marc the colour blue symbolised seriousness and the spirit (Marc and Macke 28) and the painting almost gives the impression of a kind of totemism in Modernist form. The various aspects of the picture suggest a unity of the earthly and the heavenly or a cosmological vision.



Fig. 5 The Tower of Blue Horses, 1913

(Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Franz_Marc_029a.jpg)

In 1922, six years after Marc's death, Rilke completed his most significant work, the *Duineser Elegien* (*Duino Elegies*). The *Elegies* thematise the human condition as being placed between the figure of the animal that comparatively speaking is still one with the whole and the figure of the angel whose condition is entirely invisible. The collection of ten elegies reaches a climax in the ninth elegy, which formulates the task of human existence as one of transforming the visible into the invisible. The eighth elegy is entirely devoted to the place of the animal in the universe in contrast to human estrangement from the world. While Rilke had already cultivated a similar view of animals to Marc's in his earlier poetry, it is hard to think that Marc had no influence on the eighth elegy. In a letter from 1926, Rilke describes the eighth elegy as contrasting the way 'the animal is *in* the world' with how 'we stand in front of it [the world]' (*Werke*, vol. 2, 673). According to Rilke, the human being is estranged from the cosmos through self-consciousness, whereas animals are, to a greater extent, one with all things. Here I will only consider the opening of this elegy:

Mit allen Augen sieht die Kreatur
das Offene. Nur unsre Augen sind
wie umgekehrt und ganz um sie gestellt
als Fallen, rings um ihren freien Ausgang.
Was draußen *ist*, wir wissen aus des Tiers
Antlitz allein; denn schon das frühe Kind
wenden wir um und zwingens, daß es rückwärts
Gestaltung sehe, nicht das Offne, das
im Tiergesicht so tief ist. Frei von Tod.
Ihn sehen wir allein; das freie Tier
hat seinen Untergang stets hinter sich
und vor sich Gott, und wenn es geht, so gehts
in Ewigkeit, so wie die Brunnen gehen. (Rilke, *Werke* vol. 2, 224)

With all its eyes the creature sees
the open. Only our eyes are
as though reversed and placed all around it
like traps surrounding its free departure.
What *is* outside, we know from the animal's
countenance alone; for we already turn the early child
around and force it to see form
backwards, not the open, that
is so deep in the animal-face. Free of death.
Only we see *death*; the free animal
always has its ruin behind it
and God before it, and when it moves, it moves
in eternity, the way fountains flow.

These lines challenge our common conceptions of interior and exterior and present the animal as a participant in the cosmos. The creature's or animal's eyes are said to perceive the open.⁷ The open is later identified with a state that is free from death and this in turn is identified with the animal's participation in eternity. The open is thus a state in which there is no division between the temporal and the eternal, the sensible and the spiritual, life and death. It was central to Rilke's poetic and metaphysical strivings to transcend these oppositions (Fischer 2013). The animal is here presented as a figure who participates in this unity, whereas reflective human consciousness estranges us from the world. Elsewhere Rilke similarly describes animals as 'confidants of the whole' ('Mitwiser des Ganzen') and later in this elegy he states that the animal sees 'everything and itself in everything and forever healed [sieht es Alles/ und sich in Allem und geheilt für immer]' ('Rilke an Nora Purtscher-Wydenbruck' 874; *Werke*, vol. 2, 225). The poem states that 'what *is* outside' we know from the animal's countenance or face. The mention of 'the outside' is at first confusing because Rilke is referring, in fact, to an inside for which there is no outside, or what he elsewhere calls 'Weltinnenraum' or 'worldinnerspace' (*Werke*, vol. 2, 113).

In the encounter with the animal, humans are able to glean the open, this state of cosmological unity. The child in Rilke's work, in keeping with the Romantic tradition, is a figure who participates in the wholeness of creation. The claim that we already turn the child to look at the world in the wrong way implies the adult's estrangement from nature. These ideas are elaborated and articulated in a more nuanced way in the remainder of the poem. However, it should be clear that in a very similar manner to Marc, Rilke presents a cosmological vision of animals and regards the human encounter with animals as a significant way of reconnecting to the whole of nature.

Conclusion

Rilke and Marc's visions of animals overlap in many significant respects and offer much stimulus for thought in the present era of the anthropocene. Both Rilke and Marc revered animals and regarded the human encounter with animals—mediated by perception and art—as facilitating a reconciliation with the whole of nature from which humans have become alienated. Their visions are broadly ecological in the sense that they reveal animals and their environments as interdependent and interrelated. However, their holism exceeds the horizon of ecology in the stricter scientific sense and the metaphysical or spiritual dimension of their views transcends scientific reductionism. Their work discloses the interrelation between animals and their environments as not merely functional but also, and primarily, as metaphysical and cosmological (this expansive holism is most evident in Marc's *Tower of Blue Horses* and Rilke's eighth elegy). In short, their regard for the earth embraces the heavens. As pioneering modernists, their work is also challenging at a formal level. For significant reasons, ecocriticism has been concerned with a reinstatement of the 'referent' (more specifically the 'environment' as a reality beyond the text, however much it is intertwined with textual interpretation and language) in contrast to the postmodern view that there is no referent beyond the text. This concern for the referent is linked to the ecocritical endeavour to bridge humanities scholarship and the science of ecology, as well as to the reevaluation of nature writing due

to its engagement with the reality of the biosphere. However, from a formal point of view nature writing is generally far less complex than Rilke's poetry and far less experimental than Marc's abstract animals. The challenge of Rilke and Marc lies in the fact that they offer a highly abstract and spiritual art which also claims to a deeper revelation of the referent; they present the work of art as an immanent and autonomous cosmos while at the same time regarding it as a deeper expression of the 'object' or 'subject matter.' This marriage of abstraction and objectivity presents a higher or deeper form of realism. Moreover, they identify naturalism and what is usually considered realism not with objectivity but with shallowness and anthropocentrism. The ultimate reality is 'worldinnerspace' or 'the inner truth of things'—expressions that defy and transcend the pervasive dualisms between subject and object, mind and world, the human and the other-than-human. These and other aspects of Rilke and Marc's work are deserving of further ecocritical thought.⁵

Postscript

Marc has many paintings which convey a discord between animals and their environments. His painting 'Animal Fates,' 1913 ('Tierschicksale'; fig. 6)—a title suggested by Paul Klee—is the most dramatic in this respect and portrays various animals and their environments as though they are being torn apart. In a letter of 1915 written to his wife from the front after he had received a postcard image of 'Animal Fates,' Marc explains that he does not paint from memory or the past but that his painting is primarily futural; he proceeds to interpret this picture from 1913 as being like a premonition of WWI (Lankheit 124-126). On the back of this canvas he had also written the words, 'And all being is flaming suffering.' A hundred years later it is apt to regard this painting as a premonition of environmental destruction.



Fig. 6 'Animal Fates', 1913
(Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Fate_of_the_Animals.jpg)

Notes

¹ Unless indicated otherwise, all translations of German texts are my own.

² In other paintings such as ‘Hund vor der Welt [Dog before the World]’ (1912) Marc also thematises a discord between the animal and its *Umwelt*.

³ In these respects, Iehl identifies significant intermedial connections between Rilke’s poem ‘Die Gazelle’ (‘The Gazelle’) and Marc’s ‘Gazelles’ (255-256).

⁴ In contrast to Partsch, Lankheit’s discussion of ‘The Tower of Blue Horses’ maintains a cosmological perspective while also appreciating the biographical significance of these emblems (121). Contrary to Marc’s self-interpretation, Partsch mostly interprets Marc’s animal paintings along anthromorphic lines. While human interiority is certainly a dimension of Marc’s pictures and Partsch’s interpretations are to some degree illuminating, I regard her approach as one-sidedly psychologistic and as failing to seriously take into account Marc’s metaphysical views.

⁵ Some aspects of Rilke’s and Marc’s views may also be inconducive to ecocritical concerns. In a letter from the front, for instance, Marc explained his tendency towards increasing abstraction as follows: ‘. . . I found people “ugly” very early on; animals seemed to me more beautiful, more pure; but even in animals I discovered much that was unfeeling and ugly, so that my pictures instinctively . . . became increasingly more schematic, more abstract’ (Partsch, 49). This statement conveys a perspective that is neither straightforwardly humanist nor anti-anthropocentric, but rather involves a reciprocal transmutation of the human and the animal.

⁶ Elsewhere I have explicated a distinctive phenomenology of perception in Rilke’s writings and demonstrated its proximity to the views of the French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Fischer, unpublished ms.).

⁷ ‘The open’ (‘das Offene’) is both a key Rilkean term and an important concept in Martin Heidegger’s thought. There is not the space to offer a detailed discussion of the differences between Heidegger’s and Rilke’s understanding of ‘the open’ (cf. Agamben). Nevertheless, I will offer a few general comments on Heidegger’s well-known critique of the Rilkean ‘open’ in his lectures on Parmenides (45-78). For Heidegger, ‘the open’ refers to the ‘clearing’ (‘Lichtung’) of Being and truth in the sense of ‘aletheia’ or unconcealment. Heidegger privileges human beings over animals; humans are able to glimpse ‘the open’ in contradistinction to animals. Although aspects of Heidegger’s critique of Rilke are illuminating and merit serious consideration, it entails the following problems: a lack of reflection on the Rilkean view of the special significance of the human-animal encounter as facilitating a deeper relationship to the natural world as a whole; the contextualisation of Rilke’s poetry within an exclusively Heideggerian framework (the horizon of the ‘history of Being’) and insufficient elucidation of the meaning of Rilke’s views in their own context; the problem of dualism in Rilke (life and death, the sensible and the spiritual, etc.) is simplified and misrepresented by Heidegger’s conflation of Rilke’s conception of ‘the open’ with ‘unlimitedness’ (Unbegrenztheit). Heidegger’s philosophical reading lacks a sensitivity towards the multivalence and subtleties of Rilke’s poetic language (he interprets lines of poetry as though they were univocal philosophical statements) and does not situate the meaning of the eighth elegy in the broader context of the ten *Duino Elegies*. Heidegger’s and Rilke’s

understanding of 'the open' certainly differ from one another, but I consider this difference to be as unproblematic as the polysemy of many words. An especial weakness of Heidegger's discussion in *Parmenides* is his failure to consider Rilke's conception of poetic language. With reference to Aristotle, Heidegger regards (human) language as a sign of the uniquely human participation in 'the open'. He completely neglects the ninth elegy in its thematisation of the distinctive character of human and poetic language (as the transformation of things and the transformation of the visible into the invisible). Only later did Heidegger favourably recognise the significance of language in Rilke's late work (in 1964, with reference to an earlier lecture [1927] on phenomenology and theology, Heidegger interpreted the words 'song is existence' ['Gesang ist Dasein'] from *The Sonnets to Orpheus* [*Die Sonette an Orpheus*] as an example of non-objectifying thinking and thereby drew Rilke's conception of language into close proximity to the question of Being and truth ['Phänomenologie und Theologie' 78].) Perhaps the greatest weakness of Heidegger's interpretation is the almost contradictory combination of his admission that he ('we') does not possess an adequate horizon in which to interpret the *Duino Elegies* with his totalising statements about Rilke's worldview (cf. Jamme). Heidegger admits that it would not be possible for him, at that point in time, to offer a unified interpretation of the *Duino Elegies* and *The Sonnets to Orpheus*: 'we still lack the "hermeneutic presuppositions" that must first be established on the basis of Rilke's poetry [aus Rilkes Dichtung selbst geschöpft werden müssen]' (*Parmenides* 229). Nevertheless, he has no reservations about reiterating generalising statements such as the following: 'everywhere Rilke thinks the human being in this sense of modern metaphysics [der neuzeitlichen Metaphysik]' (232); 'therefore one can easily describe Rilke's poetry as the last offshoot of modern metaphysics [der modernen Metaphysik] in the sense of a secularised Christianity. . .' (235).

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