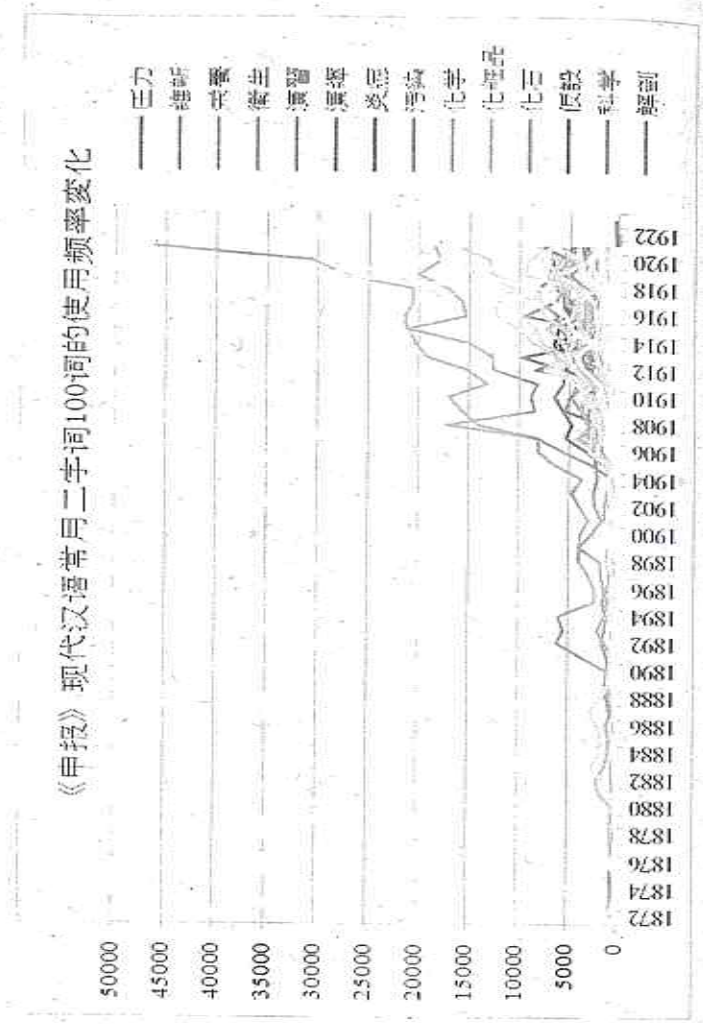

Figure 1: Changes in the frequency of use of 100 frequently adopted disyllabic words of modern Chinese in the Shenbao.

How to Modernize Hermeneutics: Readings of Rilke's Late Poems*

Christoph König

To address the question of hermeneutics' modernization, I propose to read a poem of Rainer Maria Rilke's. My presentation's composition—which follows the rhythm of reflection, reading, and reflection—effectively demonstrates my central thesis, which is this: Hermeneutics, which—following Friedrich Schleiermacher, and in line with the Kantian tradition—has been understood as *the art of understanding written works*, is linked closely with the practical act of reading. Hermeneutics is to be modernized according to how it conceives of ways to engage with praxis. Moreover, hermeneutics benefits from a reading's potential to grasp a (literary) work in its singularity. Hermeneutics thus reveals itself as an art, unfolding in its reflections on reading *qua* practice and not according to any pre-established methodology. This artful approach relies on readings that proceed spontaneously and ungoverned by pre-established rules. Hermeneutics claims, however—despite the spontaneity of praxis—to have a rational basis for its art. It roots its artistry in the process of reflecting upon praxis. The more frequently this oscillation between reading and reflection is carried out in continually updated and ever-new works, the more fully this type of rational hermeneutic craftsmanship assumes its mature form. The question arises, in view of this, how this artisanship, for which no rules exist and whose rationality lies in readings' insistent reflectiveness, can be thought in harmonious relation to the rigorous scholarly principle of verifiability. How can we conceive of the hermeneutic craft as modern in this sense without also seeing it forfeit its great advantage, which is to rely on readings that attach themselves to individual, singular works? Two forms of *reflection* stand at the center of what follows. The first traces the work's singular, unique imperative

* I presented this paper at Princeton University, 22 April 2015, following an invitation by Nikolaus Wegmann. The essay was translated by Leigh Ann Smith-Gary (Chicago); an earlier version of parts of it was published in the series of "Selected Lectures" at the International Consortium for Research in the Humanities "Fate, Freedom and Prognostication" (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg) in 2012. Cf. on the subject also Christoph König, *L'intelligence du texte: Rilke-Celan-Wittgenstein* (Lille: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2016); and idem, *Philologie der Poesie: Von Goethe bis Peter Szondi* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2014).

in—and often enough *against*—its interpretative reading. It reconstructs, in other words, the imperatives (*Zwänge*) inherent in the work that serve to guide serious readings of the same. It tests to what extent its own interpretation is oriented to its object. The second form of reflection provides a variation on this theme by testing to what extent the readings of *others* are oriented to their object. These two forms of reflection are intimately linked by way of persistent debate with previous interpretations, which becomes one of the primary vehicles by which self-evaluation is possible. This dual form of reflection—as will become increasingly clear—is about *insistent* reading and the ways in which this insistence occurs. The second form of reflection, which concerns reflection on others' readings, is carried out, in the best-case scenario, in a historically informed revivification of past interpretative conflicts. Our historical scholarship is familiar with the institutional, social, and biographical conditionals placed on knowledge; it is often practiced today, however, merely to understand the ways institutions sustain and propagate themselves systemically. Its purpose is more rarely that of interlocution with earlier scholarly insights. Engaging with historical precedents presupposes a first-hand interest in and an individually developed viewpoint on a given object. In other words, it presupposes the first form of reflection, for the desire to penetrate the (out-)dated modes of thought and expression in which such insights have become shrouded and to reveal and revitalize them initially arises from a *subjective* point of view. In other words, successful interlocution with earlier interpretations cuts through cultural forms of textual comprehension that have been historically and topographically conditioned. These conditions are pierced with the aim of arriving at some insight which can be entertained seriously once more. My aim is to envision and construct, by way of our disciplinary history, an extensive discursive space of historical— and henceforth re-imagined—readings.

Both forms of reflection bring to light the way in which a critical hermeneutic understanding progresses.

I would like to concentrate first on two examples that I will take from close to home. Secondly, I will continue by identifying the principles of a praxis that is to be improved.

Hans-Georg Gadamer was of the opinion that his own stores of interpretations and experiences were a sufficient basis for comprehending poems. He once settled himself on a Dutch beach with a collection of Paul Celan's poems, and as he read, he came upon the phrase "Wege im Schatten-Gebräch / deiner Hand" ("Paths in the rutted shadows / of your hand"). He looks at his hand, bends his fingers, and sees the lines in the palm coming into profile,

lines that can be "read" with mantic intentions. This he regards as the meaning of *Gebräch* as he continues to read the poem, content to assign the word the meaning of the human hand's unique structure of refractions and folds [*Brechungen und Faltungen*]. He progresses this far on the basis of his personal experience. In doing so, his dialogic model of A's and B's unification, which for him epitomizes hermeneutic experience, provides the necessary philosophic security. In fact, however, Celan had borrowed the word from hunting jargon, according to which *Gebräch* designates a forest floor rutted up and disturbed by wild boars.[1]

A second example. You all know Rilke's self-chosen epitaph: "Rose, oh reiner Widerspruch, Lust, / Niemandes Schlaf zu sein unter soviel Lidern." (Rose, oh pure contradiction, delight / Of being no one's sleep under so many lids.) In Raron, on the church's outer wall, one can read the two lines and observe those who come to pay their respects as they make their interpretations. What do they comprehend? Do they understand how the sentence transforms the meaning of the word "rose"? Initially, one gets along with everyday meanings, as Gadamer has. The rose is familiar as a contradiction between sweet aroma and thorny stem, as well as a symbol of (libidinous) love. But one stumbles soon enough over the word "pure" (*rein*). The principle it points to is unfolded subsequently, in the second line. The rose changes into *sleep,* indeed, becomes *no one's* sleep. In other words, taken positively, it becomes the sleep of a person consigned to oblivion. Now the rose has become—in an elision that sees death as the brother of sleep (from Bach's cantata, "I will gladly carry the cross")—another name for death itself. Such transformations do not exhaust the lines. Eyelids (*Augenlider*) are a homonym with sung verses (*Liedern*)—and the rose is one of their company. After passing through multiple transformations (*sleep, no one, verses*), the rose ultimately becomes a word for art—an art familiar with death. All this was proleptically present in the descriptor "pure" (*rein*). We are no longer speaking of a garden-variety rose. From this brief reading we can see that everyday usage is in some sense a non-starter; on the contrary, our hermeneutic task lies in the reconstruction of the opacity of the text. Preserving its opacity, its strangeness, is only possible when one submits to the regularity and consequentiality of the text, or, as it were, the text's imperative, which is determined by its syntax.[2]

1 Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wer bin Ich und wer bist Du: Ein Kommentar zu Paul Celans Gedichtfolge "Atemkristall"* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, ²1986), 137–56.

2 "Rose, o reiner Widerspruch, Lust / Niemandes Schlaf zu sein unter soviel Lidern", in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Ernst Zinn (Wiesbaden: Insel 1957), vol. 1, 185.

Friedrich Schleiermacher developed the theoretical basis by which one can distinguish the two principle ways of making sense of texts which I've illustrated in these two examples. In his notes for his Berlin lecture on hermeneutics in 1805, he describes two ways in which we can understand texts.

> Two opposing maxims guide understanding. (1) I understand everything until I run up against a contradiction or nonsense. (2) I understand nothing that I cannot appreciate and construe as imperative (*notwendig*). Understanding according to the second maxim is an infinite task."[3]

In the first case, one assumes in advance that texts are basically comprehensible and that the task is simply to clear up any problems in understanding that arise. In this case, the process turns on one's own experiences. Understanding is constrained by the limits of one's own life—limits that may not be transparently apparent. They may not be consciously perceived by the reader/interpreter, and thus pose problematic, for their conditioning presence on the interpretation cannot then be fully comprehended or taken into account. One goes—like Gadamer on the Dutch beach—as far as one can. This kind of understanding is attested to by the current idea that everyone has a right to their own interpretation. In the second case, one proceeds from an assumption of the original incomprehensibility and strangeness of texts. One speaks of "understanding" not only when the strangeness of the text has been sought, but when the philologist, from within the strange text, has also grasped and begun to reconstruct its unique imperative, inner coherence, and consequentiality (*Logik*). Schleiermacher votes in favor of the text's opaque imperative intentionality (its *fremden Zwang*). In doing so, he bestows the appropriate *seriousness* upon the philologic disciplines, which of course concern themselves first and foremost with difficult texts.

Hermeneutics is at a disadvantage in a world of literary criticism which does not always prioritize seriousness, however, for it is at base a praxis, albeit a sagacious praxis. Schleiermacher's hermeneutics developed as a reflection on classical philology as it came to exist at the end of the eighteenth century in German universities. The question as to how the philologists' discipline reflects on itself without betraying itself—the praxis which is at its heart—troubled philologists from the very beginning. A hermeneutically grounded philology, however, maps out its own royal road: it seeks the answer to the

3 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe, vol. II.4: Vorlesungen zur Hermeneutik und Kritik*, ed. Wolfgang Virmond (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2012), 6. "Zwei entgegengesetzte Maximen beim Verstehen. 1.) Ich verstehe alles bis ich auf einen Widerspruch oder Nonsens stoße 2.) Ich verstehe nichts was ich nicht als nothwendig einsehe und construiren kann."

request for its own guiding theory in the reflexivity of its objects. Because poetry *thinks*, its interpreter is already and automatically on its trail in her conceptual reconstructions. The interpreter strives to do justice to the poetic reflexivity of which Schleiermacher speaks, which emerges in the figure of the poetic imperative. And she strives to command and examine her reading discursively, monitoring it in its historical depths.

It is when we speak of practice, however, that we first truly understand the saying "The proof is in the pudding." Let's turn to Rilke's poetry.

"Does it Really Exist, Time the Destroyer?"

Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) is one of the great German poets. Worldwide, in fact, he is the most well-known of German poets, more famous even than Goethe. His collection of poems *Das Stundenbuch* brought him a huge initial readership. With his *Neue Gedichte* and the novel *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910), he laid the foundations for a modern, reflective kind of poetry that reached its high point in 1922, when he wrote, within three weeks—a tempestuous flurry of inspiration, after ten years of silence—the *Duineser Elegien* and *Die Sonette an Orpheus*.

The popularity of Rilke's works is not immediately comprehensible in conjunction with the interpretative difficulties they present. The earnestness of his conceptual labor certainly plays a role. Such labor, while not always fully comprehended, does not fail to fascinate and enrapture readers. Readers often come to harbor, if I can put it this way, "conceptual feelings" (*Gedankengefühle*) for Rilke's texts.

Die Sonette an Orpheus form a double cycle of fifty-five poems.[4] The sonnets' title and subtitle, taken together, supply two dedications. The sonnets are addressed 'to' Orpheus, the central figure of the orphic-mystic tradition of classical poetry, and the subtitle specifies that the sonnet collection is "[w]ritten as an epitaph / for Wera Ouckama Knoop." The Wera addressed by Rilke was a dancer with whom he was friendly and who had died at the age of nineteen. The connection between the two dedications says much about the cycle's purpose: Rilke's aim is to discover the foundations of his poetic

4 Cf. Christoph König, *"O komm und geh": Skeptische Lektüren der Sonette an Orpheus von Rilke* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2014); see also idem, "The Intelligence of Philological Practice," in *World Philology*, ed. Sheldon Pollock, Benjamin A. Elman, and Ku-ming Kevin Chang (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), 285–310.

inspiration and the origins of his creativity. He assumes that he stands in the tradition of the godlike poet-singer Orpheus, yet he realizes this god remains unknowable. He thus takes it upon himself to demonstrate the artistry necessary to resurrect Orpheus. In the sonnets, dance becomes the chosen art form for rendering Orpheus present. The poems are not so much orphic, mythopoetic texts—a popular misinterpretation—as they are a study in the necessary preconditions for orphic poetry.

Rilke creates a self-contained linguistic world in which Orpheus becomes possible again. The sonnets' meaning resides in their creation of this world. Only that space and time exist which are created by the cycle itself. Words, terms, and their originary concepts are the creative material of the poems. As the poet grapples with often entirely ordinary language, he develops the preconditions that must prevail in order for him to be able to speak "from within the spirit of Orpheus" ("*in Orpheus*"). Rilke resists any suppositions that transcend that which has been created by man. The thorough-going skepticism that infuses the cycle seeks an answer—as does all skepticism—by way of an analysis of poetry's conditions of possibility. Orpheus is a condition that is not given and does not obtain—and must therefore be analyzed. Orpheus' non-existence emerges as the cycle's premise and as its "orphic insight." It forces the poet, who is the lyric subject, to create Orpheus himself and to substantiate him in a secular, textual world. In a new, now linguistic, intracyclical reference, doubt of the object is suspended. This is an instance of what I call *idiolect*: the words change their reference and, in doing so, change their meaning. It has ever less to do with the sort of reference one can look up in a dictionary and ever more to do with the world (along with its idiosyncratic meanings) that is being created within the cycle. Rilke has no truck, as I said above, with garden-variety roses.

Since Orpheus is god in a poetically constituted world, the lyric subject frequently treats his address "to Orpheus" as an inner dialogue with the poet *in* Orpheus at the same time. Orpheus has become part of the poetic world that has arisen in the poet. Finally, the conceptual work of the poems develops a poetics of listening that claims that listening and creating are one and the same. Hearing and listening (*Hören* and *Horchen*) are actively construed as *Erhören*—the act of answering a prayer. One creates ("*er-hört*") him to whom one listens and him by whom one is answered: "Sehet, wir dürfen / jenen erhorchen, der uns am Ende erhört" (II.24, V. 7f.) ("And look, we may yet / Come to listen to Him who will finally answer us"[5]). The lyric subject, according to this poetics, is poet and philologist simultaneously, creating for itself

5 Translation is mine, C.K.

that which it subsequently interprets. This construal expresses itself as poetry, which is evident in its idiomatic style, its own pronominal system, the history of the cycle, and its poetics. The skeptical stance the cycle adopts, posed as a question—under what conditions is orphic knowledge possible?—leads to these poetic solutions.

In what follows, I'd like to make three reading attempts that refer to one another. I will take as my material the 27th sonnet from the second part of *Die Sonette an Orpheus*, a chinese translation by Li Kuixian 李魁賢 (Taiwan, born 1937), and an exegesis of the poem by Hans-Georg Gadamer from 1961. In doing so, I'll *concretize* my earlier explication of the two forms of reflection that clarify praxis. I locate the object's imperative in the development of the poem's idiolect, its idiomatic language. (In Sonnet II.27, we'll consider most closely words like "time" and "fate.") In order to hold my own reading accountable, I'll consider Li's and Gadamer's reading (he is, at first glance, entrapped within his philosophy) and then see how far one can follow him.

The poem II.27 prepares us for the following sonnet about a dancer, "O komm und geh," insofar as dance is the consciously chosen means which allows us to hear Orpheus singing again. Overall, this indicates that a new 'time'—thought in opposition to fate—is to be created. The moment made possible in dance is one capable of realizing this poetic temporality in the necessary intensity. In Sonnet II.27 itself, which brings that timescale into being which allows for a dance in the service of orphic revelation, dance itself is barely considered.

The poem reads as follows:

XXVII

Giebt es wirklich die Zeit, die zerstörende?
Wann, auf dem ruhenden Berg, zerbricht sie die Burg?
Dieses Herz, das unendlich den Göttern gehörende,
wann vergewaltigts der Demiurg?

Sind wir wirklich so ängstlich Zerbrechliche,
wie das Schicksal uns wahr machen will?
Ist die Kindheit, die tiefe, versprechliche,
in den Wurzeln—später—still?

Ach, das Gespenst des Vergänglichen,
durch den arglos Empfänglichen
geht es, als wär es ein Rauch.

Als die, die wir sind, als die Treibenden,
gelten wir doch bei bleibenden
Kräften als göttlicher Brauch.[6]

27

Does it really exist, time the destroyer?
When, on the mountain at rest, will it crumble the castle?
This heart, that belongs to the gods unendingly,
when will the demiurge overcome it by force?

Are we really so apprehensively fragile
as fate would have us believe?
Is childhood, so deep, so promiseful,
at the roots of it—later—stilled?

Ah, the specter of transience,
through the simply receptive
it passes as though it were smoke.

As those that we are, with our driving,
we yet count among abiding
powers as a use of the gods.[7]

Four rhetorical questions demarcate the two quatrains of the sonnet ("Giebt es wirklich…," "Wann zerbrechen sie…," "Sind wir wirklich…," "Ist die Kindheit…"). The rhetorical quality of these questions is evident in the repetition of the word *wirklich* (ll. 1 and 5). A doubt, rhetorically articulated, concerns the legitimacy of time and fate. It is resolved only in the second quatrain, when explanations are given in the form of two questions that correspond to the questions posed in the first quatrain. The insertion of "This heart, that belongs to the gods unendingly" in l. 3 helps to build the necessary counterweight to the demiurge allied with time. The poet's heart provides the counterweight. Indeed, the word "heart" carries a specific meaning within the cycle after Sonnet II.21, where it is used to refer to the poet's creative power (cf. Rilke's correspondence with Merline).[8]

Thus, rhetorical means cast doubt on the power of time. This does not denote time in general, however, but time in the specific sense delineated in

6 Rainer Maria Rilke, "Die Sonette an Orpheus," in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 1, 727–71; 769.

7 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton (New York: W. W. Norton, 1942), 123.

8 Cf. also Rainer Maria Rilke and Merline, *Correspondance: 1920–1926*, ed. Dieter Bassermann (Zürich: Éditions Max Niehans, 1954).

the poem. It is a *special kind of time* which is called into question. The adjective *zerstörend* (the translation has "time the destroyer") is decisive here: there should be no 'destructive' time. Instead, the poem takes on the task of redefining time in what follows from this instance. In the end, the *Treibende* (l. 12, "those that we are, with our driving") provide the solution. Those *Treibende* both float passively through time and actively drive time. The German allows for both readings.

The redefinition of time must begin with a more precise rendering of the two entities contained in the question-and-answer pairs of the two quatrains. These entities are said to be exposed to the powers of time, and are the power of the world, represented by the "castle" (*Burg*), and the poet, whose "heart" is his poetical organ. Newly defined time, as will become clear, is able to wreak havoc neither on the outer nor the inner entity (neither *Burg* nor *Herz*). The new poetic time reigns both without and within.

The lyric subject speaks for a group, to whom it belongs by virtue of the power of the "heart." Its questions (in the quatrains) und assertions (in the tercets) are addressed to a second-person 'you' whose identity remains obscure. Is it Orpheus, or is it the singer himself, who is acting in the tradition of Orpheus? In any case, Orpheus is his god, which is established in the sonnet that immediately precedes this one: "Ordne die Schreier, / singender Gott!" (II.26, ll. 12f, "Array the criers, / singing god!").

The same applies to a conversation the poet has with himself, which moves within an orphic system of argumentation (evident by way of the terms "heart" and "still"). This system also includes the gods, who appear throughout the poem. The lyric subject knows that it stands in an acoustic, and therefore orphic, relation to the gods (*ge-hörend*, cf. l. 3, in the double sense of *belonging to* and *hearing*). And towards the end the lyric subject sees its own (poetic) activity in a godly light (as a "use"—or custom—"of the gods," l. 14). The orphic opposition to the notion of *fate* proves decisive for this particular revelation. This is specified most closely in the second quatrain.

The appeal to Orpheus' authority effectively excludes an answer from fate, or (more precisely, perhaps, than Rilke put it), an answer from the *oracle of fate which emerges in the interpretation*. All depends on the line: "wie das Schicksal uns wahr machen will?" (l. 6, "as fate would have us believe?"). The lyric subject could have turned to fate, which represents a potential speaker who could have made the lyric subject believe, but who inevitably proves deceptive. This is made manifest in the double meaning of *wahr machen* in l. 6, which emerges in the English translation as well: "to make believe" is also *illusory, make-believe*. *Wahr machen* is a neologism of Rilke's, from "weismachen" (in the sense of

"to dissemble truth"). It stands as a dismissive comment on all prophecy and every prediction (German *Weissagung*, cf. *weismachen*).

Fate has conspired with everyday time, and with the demiurge (from l. 4), who represents not "God in the highest position," but rather those inferior creators of the misguided material world, which gnostic tradition places in opposition to the pure spirit. The poetic speculation of the preceding sonnets, which is further developed here (keyword: intracyclical history), has already prepared the word "fate" (*Schicksal*). In Sonnet II.19, its meaning was *sociological*. It referred to a social obligation, to which the hand of the *beggar*—audible to the gods—stands in opposition. *Art* is also opposed to fate (in II.21, art is distinguished from haste and obligation by "excesses" [*Überflüsse*], l. 1). Conversely, the gods, whom man creates and who answer his prayers, are threatened by fate in Sonnet II.24, which is particularly programmatic: "Götter, wir planen sie erst in erkühnten Entwürfen, / die uns das mürrische Schicksal wieder zerstört" (ll. 5f, "Gods, – we project them first in emboldened sketches / which crabbed fate destroys for us again"). The threat comes to naught, for in Sonnet II.24 hope rests on an adaption of an Old Testament prophecy—"the coming child" (V. 10, *dem künftigen Kind*), whose name is Orpheus. The word "later" in l. 8 of this sonnet may also point to Orpheus as the Messiah (later, Orpheus will be still, but audible). Here fate appears in a reflective function. Its sociological and anti-artistic reflection of fragility due to transience aims to confirm this very fragility.

The powers threatened by the worldly, destructive temporality associated with society's "fate," that is, the "mountain," "castle," and "heart," are then elaborated in such a way that the poem does away with all common judgements associated with these concepts. "Crumbling"—fragility—is connected with the castle, but is lent its own specific meaning by the insertion of *ängstlich* ("apprehensive") in l. 5 ("apprehensively fragile"). Poets are certainly fragile, but in no way apprehensive—that is, in no way are they victims of an overpowering, fatal force. The interpretation of the poet's "heart" is also elaborated further in Rilke's emphasis of the notion of childhood. The heart in childhood is subject to violation, or at least threatened by it. The connection is created by way of an acoustic vocabulary (*listening, speaking, silence*), while a threat exists as well—that the speaking heart will be "stilled" (V. 8). Silence does not threaten, however, but constitutes the precondition for future speech. The word *versprechliche* (V. 7) signifies an actual potential for speech that is oriented towards the future and functions as a *Versprechen* ("promise"). The orphic *Versprechen* (understood as "promise") also suggests a *Sich-versprechen* ("a slip of the tongue"). Perhaps this indicates that speech in childhood passes from one silence to another, later silence. To return once again to the heart: it is defined by a poetic ability which is innate from childhood and oriented towards a purity (*Reinheit*) that is fulfilled later. This is something we've learned to read in the sonnets. Likewise, we've learned that poeticizing means to be silent, indeed, to be silent in listening to an Orpheus who is to be created (see I.1). And to return to the castle (*die Burg*), which is imperiled along with the mountain and joined to the mountain and heart by this common danger: the castle becomes the citadel of the poets who write from within childhood—i.e., from the *bedrock* of their childhood. They achieve the promise of childhood. That is the positive meaning of the rhetorical question.

Through the topos of transience, the sonnet resumes its reflection on the question of knowledge (*Erkenntnis*), introduced in the poem's discussion of the expression "make believe" (*wahr machen*) (l. 6). The tercets are about the relationship between the knowing and the known. First, the transient, that is the destructed, is dismissed as a ghost, in the everyday sense of "seeing ghosts." The childishly "simple" (*arglos*, l. 3) seems to take its sense from such a ghost. But the fact that Rilke goes through the subject can potentially also mean that he argues in favor of an agreement between ghosts and subject. Is it about a ghost which every poet has already made his own? An occult experience, of the kind which one does not expect in empirical temporality (cf. Rilke's interest in occultism)? An adopted oracle of fate? Now we can see the reason behind the rhetorical questions of the beginning of the sonnet. It was illusory assumptions, oracular sayings in the form of "smoke" (l. 11), like at Delphi, which could give the temporal its true, higher meaning. The smoke is more than it pretends to be. Perhaps even a breeze (*Hauch*), an inspiration, only going by the wrong name. Pneumatological conceptions of modernity invite this mixture of discourses (cf. Hofmannsthal: "nichts als ein Hauch"[9]).

This is no lament. In fact, the "Ah" of l. 9 is an expression of relief. It is the relief of the poets (one thinks of their heart, their speaking in promises, their childhood as place of pure poetry and the ensuing silence). The "are" of l. 12 emphatically turns against fragility, scheming, and gossip. Paradoxically, it is the very instability of his premises that lends stability to the existence of poets: "As those that we are, with our driving" (l. 12). However (and this is the reason most probably why Rilke chose to use the word *treiben*), instability connects productivity and understanding with one another. The poet makes

9 Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "Das Gespräch über Gedichte," in idem, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Ausgabe*, Vol. 31: *Erfundene Gespräche und Briefe*, ed. Ellen Ritter (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1991, 74–86; 85.

use of the two potential meanings of the verb *treiben*, to "drive" and to "drift," to place the active sense of the word next to the passive one, which might seem the more instinctive reading (Herter Norton in her translation of 1942 chooses "our driving" and thus prefers the active meaning of the word).[10] Of course, one sense of the word is to be related to the other. This is the very purpose of Rilke's characteristically idiomatic ambiguity. Thus, one word contains the condition of meaning for another, identical-sounding word. The passive (the imposition of change, the drivenness of the drifting) becomes a precondition for activity. The argument of the lyric subject goes something like this: our own transience is actually accessible to us by poetic means, that is, we can listen to our own drive/urge (to write), or "hear" it in the orphic sense, and find inspiration in it; and by doing so, we take the initiative.

The simultaneously active and passive *treiben* is poetical. The rituals, the convention, what persists—that is godlike. Insofar as poets can muster the power for continuous repetition (Rilke uses a colloquial expression: *bei Kräften bleiben*, "to keep your strength up"), then they can attain a higher, almost sacral recognition. The usual order has been reversed. Poetry becomes the origin from which religious practice is derived. The ordinary view, henceforth, allows for religious custom as an expression of poetry. This is also the meaning of the claim that poetical activity is "a use of the gods" (l. 14). In the sonnets, religion provides an opportunity for Orpheus to manifest himself (the last sonnet, II.29, contains an extended reflection on this very topic). Those previously "valid" religious or godlike customs will now be understood in a different sense *sub auspiciis poetarum*. Poetry is the explicans of the religious. Also mantic practices are defined by a fundamentally poetic *raison d'etre*. The use, or—with reference to fate (l. 6)—the ritual of a mantic activity is a matter for the poet.[11] Thus Rilke connects fate with the stars (I will come back to this later). Rituals display a doubling of creative power and its (subsequent) explication. Poets explicate what they have already done (or are doing). The objects of analysis are their poetic productivity, rather than individual, created works. Their "drifting", their *Treiben* in the sense related to earthly transience, or, in the words of the philosophy of life of the age, their "becoming" (*Werden*), is an almost sacral explication of their own creative powers, or better: of their own creative drive. "Becoming", as is clear here, presumes a *dynamic* creativity.

10 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, 128.

11 See also Sophia Katz's article about the poet and musician Shao Yong, "'Die Prophetie wurde den Toren gegeben': eine konfuzianistische Perspektive auf Zügellosigkeit und Heiligkeit," *fate* 2 (January 2011): 7. Rilke is not alone with his poetic lecture of mantics.

There are few instances in the sonnets of generally recognized practices which combine both art and custom/use. Dance, itself a form of becoming, proves to be the form of the interpretation of the active drive—a ritual proper and peculiar to creativity. In dance, poets in a sense write down and explain their inspirations. In this sense, Sonnet II.28 continues the story. These are the first lines:

O komm und geh. Du, fast noch Kind, ergänze
für einen Augenblick die Tanzfigur
zum reinen Sternbild einer jener Tänze,
darin wir die dumpf ordnende Natur

vergänglich übertreffen. Denn sie regte
sich völlig hörend nur, da Orpheus sang.

*

O Come and go. You, still half a child,
fill out the dance-figure for a moment
to the pure constellation of one of those
dances in which we fleetingly transcend

Dumbly ordering Nature. For she roused
to full hearing only when Orpheus sang. (ll. 1–6)

The orphic world can only be grasped in secular being. Poets explain their drivenness, their own dynamic existence. They do that through dance and connect the progress of the dance (*Gang*) with the dynamic of the orphic world, in the words of the "fleeting" (*vergänglich*) dance (cf. l. 5). As a transient art (an art of progress), in this sense, dance can reach a degree of abstraction which can approach Orpheus. The strong thesis of the poem is that Orpheus could be grasped, in an abstraction. The relationship between dance and abstraction brings us to the relationship between abstraction and Orpheus. Stars become part of the game, as Rilke reads their constellations as forms. The wish is now to possess sidereal relationships with the same dynamic quality as dance, which aims to approach the constellations. Mobile constellations. Dance creates an abstract-sidereal explanation of an orphic world, understood in dynamic terms.

Three Forms of Reading

With this, we proceed a step further in my reading, to what I've called the second form of reflection on our praxis. It is not in order to get a grip on what grips me (Emil Staiger's formulation for what is immanent to the work) that the task of reconstruction is performed, but in order to understand *how the work develops its understanding*. In other words, we aim to comprehend the rationality that guides the creative act in Rilke's poems. For this I'd like to distinguish three sorts of understanding (and, accordingly, three different forms of reflection on the act of apprehension [*Verstehen*] as well). The first is (a) a spontaneous understanding which—as in the act of apperception according to Kant—can be followed by the poetic rationality I spoke of at the beginning. (One can call this spontaneous understanding practical or, if you prefer, non-discursive, in the tradition of James Conant and John McDowell.) The second is (b) the theoretic-conceptual textual analysis, which follows the rules laid down by literary criticism's methodology (and which does not include, methodologically, its own spontaneous understanding in its calculations). The third is (c) exegesis, which is subject to the current interests of the reader and pays little attention to methodological claims.

Reflection on the practice of interpretation (a)—beyond the checks placed on one's own subjectivity—can be deepened in conversation with others. In this, *direct* methodological control (b)—which opposes the spontaneous character of reading—cannot take us further. For this reason, within readings that follow pre-set methodological or contemporizing programs (respective keywords: interpretation and exegesis), those tendencies should be followed which give evidence of readings that trace the particularity or, to be precise, the *subjectivity*, of literary works. The history of the discipline—more an archive of interpretations than of exegeses—plays a crucial role in the critique of interpretative readings. Of course, in each case one must choose the moment at which external methodological or cultural forces deflect from interpretative readings' possible insights. We avoid the suspicion that reading is a static capacity by confronting other readings examined in this way. On the contrary, in a practice that is continually honed by way of reflection, these readings can grow into a kind of *sentimentalistic* interpretation (in the sense of Schiller's "sentimentalische Dichtung").

Counter-Reading[12]—Translation Between Interpretation and Exegesis

In no language are there more translations of Rilke than in Chinese. Thanks to the first great mediator, Feng Zhi 冯至, the *Sonnets to Orpheus* enjoy particular acclaim.[13] A counter-reading of the translation helps to distinguish between aspects that testify of a well-considered reading in the above developed sense and aspects of exegetical adaptation to the new language and culture. These aspects do not necessarily contradict each other, as long as the translation discerns them, holds them apart and attempts to unite them. My reading of the translation will, in this respect, intertwine critique and interpretation, to finally sharpen my earlier interpretation. I will place the translation by the great poet Li Kuixian, who wrote the first complete translation of *Sonnets to Orpheus*, taking into account English and French translations, at the center of my analysis:[14]

第廿七首

時間，這破壞者，真的存在嗎？
何時將搗毀立在靜謐山嶺上的城堡？
永屬於神的此心啊，
何時將受到造物的凶暴？

倘若命運願為我們作證，
我們真的是如此焦慮地脆弱？
深邃，滿擬承諾的童年
在根底——稍後——會平靜無波？

呵，無常的亡靈喲，
像是一陣煙，
通過毫無邪念的感受者。

正如我們這樣，漂泊者，
在永續的力量之間
我們值得神的使用。[15]

12 Thanks to Yang Zhiyi, Na Schädlich and Song Xiaokun for their Chinese translation and their discussions with me.

13 Cf. the entry on Feng Zhi in *Internationales Germanistenlexikon 1800–1950*, ed. Christoph König, 3 vols. and one CD-ROM (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2003), vol. 1, 484–6.

14 Cf. Marian Galik, "Preliminary Remarks on the Reception of Rilke's Works in Chinese Literature and Criticism," in *Transkulturelle Rezeption und Konstruktion: Festschrift für Adrian Hsia*, ed. Monika Schmitz-Emans (Heidelberg: Synchron, 2004), 145–52.

15 "The Sonnets to Orpheus, The Duino Elegies," trans. Li Kuixian, in Rainer Maria Rilke (Lierke 里爾克), *Lierke shiji* (I) 里爾克詩集 (I), with an introduction by Li Kuixian 李魁賢

II.27

Die Zeit, diese Zerstörerin, existiert sie wirklich?
Wann wird sie die auf dem stillen Berg stehende Burg zerbrechen?
O dieses den Göttern / dem Gott für ewig gehörige Herz,
wann wird (ihm) die Vergewaltigung der Schöpfung widerfahren?

Würde das Schicksal für uns gern bezeugen wollen:
Sind wir wirklich so besorgt zerbrechlich?
Wird die tiefe, versprechungsvolle Kindheit
unter den Wurzeln—ein wenig später—wellenlos-(be)ruhig(t)?

Ach, die unbeständige Totenseele
ist wie ein Rauch,
(fährt) hindurch durch den den üblen Gedanken gänzlich fremd Empfindenden.

Gerade wie wir sind, die Umherschwebenden,
zwischen den fortwährenden Kräften,
verdienen wir, von den Göttern / von Gott gebraucht zu werden.[16]

First quatrain:[17] The threat of time is undeniable. In contrast to the original's present tense, Li Kuixian writes in the future tense. This markedly diminishes the rhetorical aspect of the questions and sets them up against the "really" (*wirklich*) of l. 1.[18] This makes the opposition between time and the heart/castle insurmountable. It is only a matter of time, before the violation will occur.

(My contrasting interpretation) The German present tense signals in this poem a general statement, which can apply both to the past and to now. You could put it like this: when does the castle actually crumble? Li Kuixian thus excludes Rilke's transformation of the powers hostile to the lyric subject and their mutation into one of the lyric subject's poetical tasks.

(Taibei: Guiguan, 1994). Cf. König 2014 ("O komm und geh") for more information on the English and French mediations (see remark at the beginning).

16 Translated from the Chinese by Na Schädlich.

17 Here begins a fourth analysis of the poem, in the form of a commentary on the poem as retranslated into German from the Chinese (in itself a third form of the poem), which is followed by a fifth, in the form of my comments. This insistence on the poem asks, in all five analyses, for the conflicts engendered, in one way or another, by the meaning of Rilke's poem. Thus, at the center stands not a philosophically-motivated aesthetics, exploring the possibility of translation, but rather translation as an explicative, philological activity. A *philological* aesthetics, if you wish. This has also motivated the selection of the Chinese translation.

18 In contrast to Li Kuixian, Lü Yuan does not use the future tense. Cf. Rainer Maria Rilke (Lierke 里尔克), *Lierke shicuan* 里尔克诗选, trans. Lü Yuan 绿原, illustrated edition (based on the first edition of 1996) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2006).

Second quatrain: Fate is contrasted with time. A conditional clause determines the syntactical arrangement: if, the translation asks, fate attests for us, are we really so fragile—and, one must add, so exposed to time? (The Chinese translation takes the side of the literary and provokes the Chinese reader to interpret in order to grasp the strange meaning). Fate belongs to a freer sphere than the instance which creates the world (造物/*Schöpfung*, the Chinese translation takes on the Christian conception directly, but it seems to know no difference between god and demiurge), which are bound to (physical) time (and hence affect the physical; see below, on the relevant distinction made by Thomas of Aquinas and known to Rilke). This positive view of fate seems to be decisive also in the translation of ll. 7 and 8: childhood is read as threatened by time and destruction. Yet, it can still find peace. The translator seems to have chosen the image of the waveless rest with reference to the "apprehensive / worried" (*besorgt*) of l. 6. A tetrasyllabic word, a stylistic device from classical Chinese poetry, binds the characters for "flat," "still," and "wave" together. A practically Buddhist sea appears before the eyes (but not the ears) of the reader. The word is not rendered acoustically.

Rilke, on the contrary, makes fate equivalent to time. In his poem fate reflects the fragility of the lyric subject when exposed to time. This reflection, where fate appears as the one reflecting, serves to strengthen the blurted-out, yet ineffective, threat. It aims to make it believable. The contrast with the nurturing, saving childhood remains in place. This contrast is characterized by a means typical of the orphic poetics of the sonnets: the characterization is indeed acoustic.

First tercet: Now exegesis clearly comes into play.[19] The translator picks up on the Buddhist notion of impermanence (Pali: *anica*, Chin. *wuchang* 無常), which is said to be the reason behind all suffering, and perhaps the Chinese veneration of ancestors also plays a part. The word "Totenseele" ("soul of the dead" (*wangling* 亡靈), used to translate *Gespenst* / "ghost," could refer to such customs. The "spirit / soul of the dead without permanence" goes straight

19 Lü Yüan (see above) renders this as "the ghost of the ephemeral," in the sense of shortly-blooming flowers. In his case, too, cultural appropriation sets in in the tercets. The pragmatic conviction (typical in Chinese communist ideology) not to give up trying to grasp the fleetingly good and fleetingly beautiful, determines the logic of the two last stanzas. This pragmatic attitude is turned against the artificial/artistic. Retranslated into German (by Na Schädlich) the passage goes like this:
Aha, das Gespenst des Ephemeren,
aufgrund Leichtgläubigkeit und übermäßiger Gefühle, geht gleichsam ein leichter Rauch verloren und unter.
Kraft unserer (wahren) Natur samt unserem Antreiben, legen wir immer noch / dennoch Wert auf
die andauernden Kräfte der göttlichen Tradition.
Lü Yuan fashions two sides into the tercets, one ephemeral and one lasting (*andauernd*), and opts for the latter.

through; that is, it does not affect him who is himself free from unclean thoughts. This refers to the renunciation of the right path implied by the Chinese word for "evil" (*xie* 邪). Is this meant in a Confucian or in a Buddhist sense (cf. the comment by Confucius, that the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經) is thinking free from any evil thoughts)? However that might be, the lyric subject was himself (ethically) to blame if he strays from his destiny and is exposed to time. The tercet takes the form of an admonition.

Rilke's use of everyday language must not be disdained, although this is effectively what the translator does. To "see ghosts" means doubting the temporal, but, as a reality, the ghost (in the sense of sidereal spirits, or of an idea) refers to a temporality, which is transient. Rilke writes in a poetic colloquial language, which he reshapes and reinterprets. The word "transient" (vergänglich) *contains also the progress of the dancing (and to that extent, of the creative) poet. This is more than anywhere else made clear in Sonnet II.28. Thus, the first tercet is a preparation, through the analogy between the purely accessible and the newly thought-out and formulated temporality. If you wish: Rilke demonstrates how the admonition, which the translator Li Kuixian thinks of, can be taken seriously.*

Second tercet: In the last stanza, a new world is constructed—a purer, higher world, close to the gods, perhaps even astrological. A world of constant, that is continually renewed powers. As long as the speakers travel in this world as "wanderers" (*piaobozhe* 漂泊者 / *Umherschwebende*, the Chinese word contains etymologically the figure of floating above the water and corresponds to the view of the ocean in the second quatrain), they deserve to be used or employed by God/the gods. Or even more directly: when they expose themselves to these powers, then they experience divine force.

In Rilke's language passive drifting (Treiben) *is given an active meaning, and this in a poetic world. Not because they obey the stars, but rather because they construct them—that is, they create the stars as poetry, in order to be able to follow them—the authors can make mediatory use of sacral rituals. The divine world, which the translation only touches upon, is thought through down to its very poetic premises in the original.*

Rilke's Astrology

Poems such as Sonnet II.27, the sonnet of time and fate, are usually read as poetic (and thus, loftier) roads leading to that world with which the poem is concerned—that is, to time, to fate, and eventually to the stars. However, the road taken by interpreters of the poem has often been too easy: they connect its themes with extra-textual matters, in order to supply the themes of the poem with a poetic structure. Rilke's involvement in the astronomy, astrology,

and occultism of his day stands out as a convenient explanation for our poem. In this respect, an interpretative hierarchy of extra-poetic matters arises. Biography[20] ends up below the history of discourses, and that, in turn, below ontology. Thus, Martina King rightly reconstructs Rilke's sidereal interests by looking at how a discourse common around 1900 made astrology and astronomy,[21] and occultism[22] and science, identical, by positing one as the imitation of the other. The most remarkable example was Baron Carl von du Prel, the founder of German spiritism and occultism. Rilke read his works, and du Prel was the *père spirituel* of the spiritist circle in Munich, in which Rilke participated. Du Prel defined occultism as the "unknown natural science,"[23] which could justifiably be spoken of in scientific terms. The parallels of discourse detected by King are as follows: just like astrology, poetry takes the science of astronomy for granted. These parallels are taken as evidence that Rilke was in a better position to attain astrological goals by poetic means, "as only he [the poet] can burst the limits of perception—whether magically or empirically communicated."[24] This associative extension is governed by the indicative mood. The indicative forms the basis for widespread notions in German Studies about the deep-hermeneutic function of poetry. In this scholarly tradition, poetry becomes a privileged understanding of the deeper layers of humanity. From Dilthey to Heidegger and Gadamer, this is the kind of understanding that protagonists can reach. The Rilke expert Manfred Engel, editor of the annotated edition and the *Rilke Compendium*, is also part of this tradition. Martina King's astrological analysis relies on him in one central aspect. Engel relates Rilke's sidereal efforts to anthropological objectives. Rilke's poetic astrology, so Engel argues, would allow insights into the deeper, "mythopoetical" dimensions of man. "The signifying function of the 'sidereal',"

20 Rilke's "Briefe an einen jungen Dichter" (1904) is often cited on this subject: "We must embrace our existence as fully as we possibly can; everything, also the unheard-of, must be possible within it." ("Wir müssen unser Dasein so weit, als es irgend geht, annehmen; alles, auch das Unerhörte, muß darin möglich sein." Idem, *Werke: Kommentierte Ausgabe in vier Bänden*, vol. 4, 541).

21 Rainer Maria Rilke and Erwein von Aretin, *Der Dichter und sein Astronom: Der Briefwechsel zwischen Rainer Maria Rilke und Erwein von Aretin*, ed. Karl Otmar von Aretin and Martina King (Frankfurt am Main, Leipzig: Insel, 2005).

22 Cf. Rainer Maria Rilke and Waldemar von Wasielewski, "Ein Briefwechsel, mit einer Einleitung von Michael von Wasielewski," *Blätter der Rilke-Gesellschaft* 24 (2002): 186–95.

23 "Unbekannte Naturwissenschaft," quoted from Martina King, "Nachwort: Astronomie und Dichtung," in: Rilke and Aretin, *Der Dichter und sein Astronom*, 154–204; 175.

24 Ibid., 204: "da nur er [der Dichter] die physiologischen Grenzen der Wahrnehmung—sei sie magisch oder empirisch vermittelt—sprengen kann."

writes Martina King, "is changeable, and reaches from the frame of orientation of the possible relations between the subject and space [discourse is transferred into poetry] beyond the application of 'constellations' as," and here King quotes Manfred Engel and Gadamer respectively, "archetypically valid basic metaphors of the *condition humaine*."[25] So, poetry should have privileged access beyond the world, or beyond existence, or even both—you cannot get deeper or higher. Poetry has been made serviceable.[26]

This way of applying ontological thought to Rilke's sonnet can only work when neglects the fact that the poetic argument conceives of itself as a critical argument, that is to say, as an argument confined to as radically shaped a poetic world as possible. In fact, three distinctions, current since Thomas of Aquinas's treatises "*De sortibus*" and "*De iudiciis astrorum*," have influenced Sonnet II.27. This is a gradation between (a) fate exerted on the body; (b) the freedom of the spirit in the face of fate (related to Ptolemy's dictum "*sapiens homo dominatur astri*"); and c) angels and demons, who can only be sensed through the stars, which they govern.[27] Thus, the celestial bodies function as higher, but still natural causes, and the constellations function not as forms, but are instrumentalized by separate, demonic substances. This is, however, radically transformed by Rilke in his sonnet. He turns this system into a poetic system: within his poetry, all effects are natural—also by the standards of modern critical consciousness. The stars figure in Rilke's poems as abstract forms, which form the basis for art (be it dance or song), and which can approach those orphic powers (like demons or angels), which have been made possible in the poetry. He claims no less, but also no more.

Rilke's astrology flows into his poetry, and in that sense forms an analysis of the necessary conditions for astrology. Rilke was disappointed by the occult experiments in which he partook at the Duino Castle of Marie von Thurn und Taxis in 1912. Later he recalled the "fatal clumsiness, half measures and …

25 Ibid., 198: "Die Zeichenfunktion des 'sternischen' ist wandelbar und reicht vom Orientierungsrahmen der möglichen Beziehungen zwischen Subjekt und Weltraum über den Einsatz von 'Sternbildern' als archetypisch gültigen Basismetaphern der *condition humaine*."

26 On the relationship between exegesis, interpretation, and reading, as well as insights which can even be found in the exegesis cf. Christoph König, "Hintergedanken: Zu einer Wissenschaftsgeschichte der Textlektüre," *Geschichte der Germanistik: Mitteilungen* 39/40 (2011): 38–42.

27 Cf. Loris Sturlese, "Thomas von Aquin und die Mantik," in idem, *Mantik, Schicksal und Freiheit im Mittelalter* (Köln: Böhlau, 2011): 97–107. On this structure of belief in the stars in poetry, cf. Hellmuth Reitz, "Sternenglaube in der Dichtung," *Welt und Wort* 7 (1952): 1–4.

countless misunderstandings" of the séances.[28] Rilke was less oriented towards the occult of his day, whose center was in Munich, than towards the "historical tradition of astrological astronomy," whose hero was Tycho Brahe, and whose mediator the astronomer and astrologer Erwein von Aretin.[29] Erwein von Aretin and Rilke corresponded between 1915 and 1922. Aretin had written his doctoral thesis in 1912 at the University of Göttingen, concerning his discovery of the "Lambda Tauri" star in the constellation Taurus. He then worked at the Vienna observatory, and ended up abandoning astrology for contemporary history and political journalism. He was one of the early outspoken opponents of Hitler and adopted a monarchist position. In line with the double-discourse pairing of astrology and astronomy, Aretin also prepared horoscopes (in 1922 also for Rilke's daughter Ruth).

Rilke analyses the necessary preconditions for astrology. He tests the extent to which he can recognize astrology as a science, and, thus, as a basis for his art. He would be able to recognize it as a science for his poetry, if the latter were also scientific, that is if it involves reading in the sense of reading a text. Aretin presented him with this reading, when he read the starry sky as a book. In the middle of the First World War, of which he was beginning to despair, Aretin wrote to Rilke:

> when our ignorance of this oldest, gigantic book has closed as worthless, might an attempt to reopen it not seem inappropriate, now that our wisdom has reached its limits.[30]

When the stars are legible, then Rilke can make use of the resulting lore of interpretation. But to what extent is it a science?

Rilke's attempt to make astrology functional is predicated on the relationship between astrology and poetry as the relationship between science and art. He first set out, with the help of Aretin, to acquire the necessary basic knowledge in astronomy and mathematics. His textbook was to be the "Accomplishments of Modern Astronomy based on the Original Research of Leading Scholars" by Hans Hermann Kritzinger, both an astrologer and an astronomer himself.

28 "fatale Unbeholfenheiten, Halbheiten und … zahllosen Mißverständnisse." Rilke to Nora Purtscher-Wydenbruck, in idem, *Briefe*, ed. Rilke-Archiv in Weimar with Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Karl Altheim, 3 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1987), vol. 3, 872.

29 Rilke and Aretin, *Der Dichter und sein Astronom*, 192.

30 Ibid., 68: "wenn unsere Unwissenheit dieses riesenhafte und älteste Buch einmal als wertlos zugeklappt hat, so mag ein Versuch es wieder zu öffnen zu einer Zeit nicht unangemessen erscheinen, wo unsere Weisheit an ihrem Ende steht."

> Clearly I have gone too far from disciplined understanding internally, so I will have to turn myself small and into a schoolboy for some time, and, frankly, I've been thirsting for that. I would find it quite useful if I could find a student, capable of teaching in some capacity, who might simply read through a book such as Kritzinger's with me, and not let me leave a single line which I have only half understood.[31]

Yet, all too quickly, it seems, Rilke subjects astrology to his poetic interests—and tries to widen its scope of application for his own purposes. Two weeks later he writes to Aretin, interpreting his scientific impulses: "No matter if this leads to astronomy or not. Somehow (it seems to me) it is in play anyway, also where we apparently leave it out (after all, it is properly an art of relations)."[32] As a science of forms, astrology contains the promise of a—to use a term from Schlegel—"totalisable" (*totalisierbar*) science, and thereby of art (cf. Rilke's proposed experiment with the *sutura coronalis*, the coronal suture).

Rilke tries to put natural sciences into use in a "philologizing" activity, that is, as textual scholarship (this helps to explain the extraordinary explanatory power of Schlegel's project of a "philosophy of philology"). To "philologize" means to construe the object of study (in this case, the stars) from the points of view of the whole, necessity, and self-reflection.[33] His "Reiter-Sonnet" ("Reiter" refers to sagittarius) is based on a reality, an astronomic-astrological phenomenon, but takes its name as its starting-point. Thus, seeing becomes reading. And both are productive in his view, to the extent that both express an inner experience. This is how the "Reiter-Sonnet" begins:

> Sieh den Himmel. Heißt kein Sternbild "Reiter"?
> Denn dies ist uns seltsam eingeprägt:
> dieser Stolz aus Erde. Und ein Zweiter,
> der ihn treibt und hält und den er trägt.
>
> Ist nicht so, gejagt und dann gebändigt,
> diese sehnige Natur des Seins? (II.37)

31 Ibid., 14 March 1915, 36: "ich bin offenbar von diszipliniertem Einsehen zu weit abgekommen innerlich, da muss ich mich schon klein machen und Schüler werden für eine Zeit und, offengestanden, ich bin ganz durstig danach. Ich stelle es mir schon ganz nützlich vor, wenn sich etwa ein einigermaßen unterrichteter Student fände, der mit mir ein Buch wie das Kritzinger'sche einfach gemeinsam läse und mir keine Zeile durchgehen ließe, die nur halb begriffen bleibt."

32 Ibid., 1 April 1915, 37: "Gleichviel ob es hernach noch zur Astronomie kommen mag oder nicht. Irgendwie (will mir scheinen) ist sie im Spiel, auch wo wir sie scheinbar daraus lassen (ist sie doch recht eigentlich die Kunst der Verhältnisse)."

33 Cf. Christoph König, "Grenzen der Cyklisation: Friedrich Schlegels Notate ›Zur Philologie‹ als Form des Romans ›Lucinde‹," in idem, *Philologie der Poesie*, 36–55.

*

> See the sky. Is there no constellation
> called "Rider"? For this is strangely impressed
> on us: this earthly pride. And a second,
> who drives and holds it and whom it bears.
>
> Is not the sinewy nature of our being
> just like this, spurred on and then reined in?[34]

What Rilke tries to grasp in his reading, is the meaning of the constellations. This meaning, in his skies, is equivalent to the power which urges him to write. It is an inner power (*eingeprägt*). This process becomes particularly clear in times of crisis. On 7 August 1915 Rilke writes to Erwein von Aretin:

> under the circumstances, I am free, idle, if you want to put it in harsh terms. The reasons for my gloominess, which you're lovely enough to care about, is surely fundamentally to be attributed to this sense of "being free", in this lack of an inner command or calling, to which our hopeless kind is destined. Pathmos [the island of John the apocalyptic seer] is an arid island, and its aspect dreary, when one isn't struck with that most monstrous dictate, and can take it down with both hands…[35]

The lore of the stars was to open up that road. But "the attempts at astronomy surely came from an instinct for an antidote [against that sense of being free]. But we aimed too high, that drove us into the vague and limitless."[36] Rilke could not achieve with astronomy what had seemed possible in astrology without giving up astronomy.

Eventually, Rilke gave up studying astrology. He was no longer convinced that it could be justified scientifically, that is astronomically. Instead, he sought to legitimize it by other means, that, is in a poetic form, which is necessary to man.[37] Rilke writes on 19 August 1915 to Aretin:

34 Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, 37.

35 Rilke and Aretin, *Der Dichter und sein Astronom*, 47: "ich bin verhältnismäßig frei, unbeschäftigt, wenn man es streng ausdrücken will. Die Gründe meiner Bedrücktheit, um die Sie sich so liebenswürdig besorgen, liegen wohl am Tiefsten in diesem ›Freisein‹, in diesem Ausbleiben des inneren Befehls und Berufs, auf den unsereiner hoffnungslos angewiesen ist. Pathmos ist eine dürre Insel, und es ist ein trübes Ansehen auf ihr, wenn einen nicht das ungeheuerste Diktat überstürzt, dass man ihm mit beiden Händen nach- schreibe…"

36 Ibid.: "Die Versuche nach der Astronomie hin mögen indessen wirklich aus einem antidotischen Instinkte hervorgegangen sein. Wir haben zu hoch angefangen, das trieb uns dann auch ins Vage und Grenzenlose." Thus Rilke.

37 Rilke held Waldemar von Wasielewski's book *Telepathie und Hellsehen: Versuche und Betrachtungen über ungewöhnliche seelische Fähigkeiten* (Halle: Carl Marhold, 1922) in high regard. He expressed his admiration in a letter to the author from between March and June 1922, i.e., immediately after the composition of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*. His reading of the book was

> For all that the errors of man have always been crude and even pretentious, whenever he took the acts and dreams of nature as a reason for terror or as a warning, these errors somehow corrected the aimlessness of our mind, and strengthened those circumstances, to which we have been assigned, no matter how temporary they might be.[38]

Thus, astrology serves to strengthen some of the formal constitution (if on a different plane) of man, for all that its character is mutable. It is mutable, Rilke says, because our knowledge still stands in a process of acquiring knowledge.[39] For him, as a creator, astrology has no power of persuasion on a scientific plane, but its underlying principle is important, because it is poetic. Rilke's analysis ends in two results: first, astrology can only be written poetically. Given his condition, that it should be a textual science, this is consistent. Second, the principle behind a poetic astrology must be dynamic, as implied already by Rilke's quest for moving constellations.

A poetic astrology is no such thing anymore. Rilke has turned the referents of fate and star inward. In the sonnet, the poet is driven by an Orpheus who forms stars. Orpheus is impossible to grasp, but this quality is not indicative of a transcendent reality. Rather, it has a transcendental, critical function. It is in this sense that Rilke makes use of astrological knowledge in the sonnets and letters. Quite how radical this transformation is, can only become clear to the reader who follows closely the permutation of the meanings of words

directed towards a particular goal: he wished to integrate the inexplicable (*das Unerklärliche*) into his (poetic) world. This, in the end, had "obliged him to an artistic effort" (Rilke and Wasielewski, "Ein Briefwechsel," 191). He recognized three phases in the apprehension of occult knowledge: ambiguity, inexplicability, and scientific illumination. Wasielewski had succeeded in bringing occult phenomena from the plane of the ambiguous to the plane of the inexplicable. Should science be unreachable, Wasielewski at least recognized that such phenomena possessed poetic meaning and could at least attain validity in poetry. Rilke was particularly impressed by Wasielewski's view that telepathy clairvoyance were the "two great and beautiful powers of the human soul" (ibid., 188: "beiden großen und schönen Kräften der menschlichen Seele"). Aesthetics and meaning/reality are characterized by the heavy word "power" (*Kraft*). "Philologizing" forms the basis also for the occult. For a different assessment, see Gisli Magnusson, "Rilke und der Okkultismus," in *Metaphysik und Moderne: Von Wilhelm Raabe bis Thomas Mann. Festschrift für Borge Kristiansen*, ed. Andreas Blödorn and Søren R. Fauth (Wuppertal: Arco, 2006), 144–72, who counts Rilke as one of the occultists.

38 Rilke and Aretin, *Der Dichter und sein Astronom*, 65: "So grob und schließlich anmaßend der Fehler des Menschen seit jeher war, wenn er Erscheinungen der über ihn fort handelnden und träumenden Natur sich zum Schrecken oder zur Warnung nahm, irgendwie korrigiert dieser Fehler diese Ziellosigkeit unseres Gemüths und bestärkt die Zusammenhänge, auf die wir nun einmal hier angewiesen sind, so vorläufig sie sonst auch sein mögen."

39 Cf. the lines critical of the acquisition of knowledge in the "Reiter-Sonnet": "Doch freue uns eine Weile nun, / der Figur zu glauben." (II.11, ll. 13–14) Herter Norton's translation: "But let us now be glad a while / to believe the figure". Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, 37.

throughout the poems. Commonly, however, interpreters impose their own opinions on the meaning of words to achieve clarity. They argue as follows: the poem opens a door to the depths of those notions which are contained in the words used by Rilke. Words are understood as concepts, which the poem explores in turn. This, however, can only occur at the cost of the linguistic materiality of the works, that is, their syntax.

Critique of Interpretations: Or, How Gadamer Cures Rilke with a Comma

Gadamer's view of Rilke can be studied from the vantage point of a single comma. He proposed the introduction of a comma into the poem in a place where there is none. His suggestion disregards the poem's syntax and therefore acts contrary to a hermeneutic craft that is *material* insofar as it relies upon a praxis dictated by linguistic material. Gadamer's considerations on the subject of "Poetry and Punctuation" (1961)[40] bring to a head his hermeneutics' implied provocation to the word-for-word fidelity of philological hermeneutics. We find the provocative suggestion in an exercise that illustrates his classic opus *Truth and Method*, which had been published in the previous year (1960).

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer developed the position that both transmission and tradition are more important than the written word of the text.[41] By "transmission" (*Überlieferung*) Gadamer does not mean the text as transmitted in material terms, but rather the inherited sphere of meaning in which a word acquires its true import and ideality. According to Gadamer, this sphere is constituted by the "continuity of memory."[42] The reality of a given meaning, freed from the "manuscript as a piece of the past,"[43] is argued for within his dialogic model of understanding. Thus, the "written transmission" which is embedded in a tradition of memory becomes associated with the spoken word. Just like dialogue, a reading can cancel out that alienation or reduction which a written text adds to what is being said in it—translation is a case in

40 Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Poesie und Interpunktion," in idem, *Gesammelte Werke, Vol. 9: Ästhetik und Poetik. Hermeneutik im Vollzug* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1993), 282–8.

41 Cf. above all the chapter on "Sprache als Medium der hermeneutischen Erfahrung," in idem, *Gesammelte Werke, Vol. 1: Hermeneutik I. Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1990), 387–400. Cf. idem, "Language as the Medium of Hermeneutic Experience," in *Truth and Method*, trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall, 2nd rev. ed. (New York and London: Continuum, 1994), 385–406.

42 Gadamer, "Sprache als Medium der hermeneutischen Erfahrung," 394.

43 Ibid.

point, a cautionary example of this kind of rational "over-clarification" (*Überhellung*).[44] Gadamer formulates his argument as follows:

> Thus written texts present the real hermeneutical task. Writing (*Schriftlichkeit*) is self-alienation. Overcoming it, reading the text, is thus the highest task of understanding. Even the pure signs of an inscription can be seen properly and articulated correctly only if the text can be transformed back into language. As we have said, however, this transformation always establishes a relationship to what is meant, to the subject matter being discussed. Here the process of understanding moves entirely in a sphere of meaning distinct from, and yet mediated by, the verbal tradition.[45]

Gadamer, with explicit reference to his book *Truth and Method*, addresses the second line of Rilke's Sonnet II.27 from the *Sonnets to Orpheus*:

> Giebt es wirklich die Zeit, die zerstörende?
> Wann, auf dem ruhenden Berg, zerbricht sie die Burg? (ll. 1f)
>
> (Does it really exist, time the destroyer?
> When, on the mountain at rest, will it crumble the castle?)

Gadamer proposes inserting a comma before the accusative object *die Burg*, turning it into a nominative object and transforming, in turn, the transitive verb *zerbrechen* (whose object had been *die Burg*) into an intransitive verb (with *die Burg* as the new subject). In translation, the resulting line becomes: "When, on the mountain at rest, will it crumble, the castle?" The proposed emendation is in line with Gadamer's philosophy, which privileges speech and dialogue in understanding. For Gadamer, sonority and rhythm belong to the domain of dialogue, which, in turn, contributes to the meaning of a text. Gadamer takes his impression of the sonority and cadence of these lines as his starting point. These he prioritizes over punctuation, which he counts

44 On the philosophical preconditions and the consequences for textual analysis of historical distance, cf. Jean Bollack, *Sinn wider Sinn: Wie liest man? Gespräche mit Patrick Llored*, trans. Renate Schlesier (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003), 86–9.

45 Gadamer, "Language as the Medium of Hermeneutic Experience," 392. Original in Gadamer, "Sprache als Medium der hermeneutischen Erfahrung," 394: "So ist fixierten Texten gegenüber die eigentliche hermeneutische Aufgabe gestellt. Schriftlichkeit ist Selbstentfremdung. Ihre Überwindung, das Lesen des Textes, ist also die höchste Aufgabe des Verstehens. Selbst den reinen Zeichenbestand einer Inschrift etwa vermag man nur richtig zu sehen und zu artikulieren, wenn man den Text in Sprache zurückzuverwandeln vermag. Solche Rückverwandlung in Sprache … stellt aber immer zugleich ein Verhältnis zum Gemeinten, zu der Sache her, von der da die Rede ist. Hier bewegt sich der Vorgang des Verstehens ganz in der Sinnsphäre, die durch die sprachliche Überlieferung vermittelt wird."

among "the conventions of *Schriftlichkeit*."[46] Punctuation is a reading aid provided by the author, no more. Gadamer perceives the second line to be "chanted to the point of breathlessness,"[47] and in need of a rhythmic break before the phrase *die Burg*.

Thus, the capacity to perceive a rhythm is immediately connected to the discovery of meaning—for Gadamer, they belong to the same sphere. Through the insertion of a comma, Gadamer insists on maintaining two equally weighted interpretative options, an equilibrium that Rilke himself had already unbalanced by weighting poetic time more heavily. By reasserting an alternative reading for the phrase, Gadamer is insensitive to Rilke's choice. What is crucial, therefore, is the word "time." The first alternative (a) treats time as the agent of destruction (*zerbrechen*), the crumbling of l. 2, whereas the second alternative (b) casts *zerbrechen* as an intransitive verb (with no object). Gadamer prefers the second alternative and claims to follow Rilke's intention in making his choice. He justifies doing so by arguing that time and transience are not violent and destructive, but rather signify the normality of the fleeting and of decay. This is also what—according to Gadamer—is meant by the word *Treibenden* (l. 2, "the driving" / "the drifting") in the last tercet. For Gadamer—who adduces a general, not just a philosophical judgment here—the transience of man is not a violent act on the part of time (which would then cause things to crumble). In fact, this violence does not exist if, as the final tercet implies, transience is normal. Gadamer proposes to follow his experience:

> Is our transience, in the end, of a quite different kind: not a destruction, which occurs when an exhausted resistance finally succumbs, but rather a "regular" process, more like a custom, that is something nourished and cultivated, in any case something without a culprit or an originator, also not "time"?

The irony is that this argumentation annuls Gadamer's earlier defense of rhythm's privilege, along with the need for his imaginary comma in the first place. Actually, Gadamer's account (his perception of the sound of the poem) is based on a reading of the poem which follows the punctuation of the lines I discussed in conjunction with the whole poem. The rhetorical question posed by the first line, which Gadamer recognized, also applies to the second, and the question is continued in the next quatrain ("Are we really so apprehensively fragile / as fate would have us believe?", ll. 5f). Even without a comma, the rhetorical question of l. 2 still manages to achieve the conditions

46 Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke, Vol. 9*, 282.

47 Ibid., 285.

for that comma when Gadamer's philosophy of time is applied. The castle does not crumble because time the destroyer does not really exist. The milder view of time proposed by Gadamer is rhetorically confirmed. The comma was supposed to demonstrate an understanding which already follows from the rhetorical question of l. 1 (and l. 2)—there was no need for Gadamer to insert it.

Be that as it may, by not including a comma, the poem itself denies this result. For all that Gadamer's reading would have been better if he had refrained from the addition of a comma (which depends upon him recognizing the full scope of the rhetorical question), it still would not have taken his interpretation far enough. Here is the point my investigation attempts to analyze and identify: where do theoretical prejudices set in? Thus, my investigation is conscious of and accommodates (as Gadamer's may not) the point at which discursive, philosophic, or even theological perspectives may impinge on or distort interpretations that seek to uncover the intentions or imperatives of the text.

For the poem, in rejecting "destruction," develops a new temporal sense that Gadamer cannot reach by means of his argument's general (philosophical) presumption. Our early consideration of the coexistence of Rilke's popularity and his difficulty comes in useful here. The mainstream material (i.e., the usual descriptions of Rilke's poetry as esoteric, mythic, philosophical, everyday, gnostic, etc.) remains, but is now imbued by the form of poetic rationality and, in one way, impresses its genuine energy on the new form. Gadamer's philosophic (mainstream) presumption regarding time receives a new *rationale* insofar as the poem unfolds a temporality which is meant to harmonize with the poetic drive (*Treiben*). It is therefore "gentle," not destructive. The methodological *fallacies* of Gadamer's dialogic model are revealed. If a work is preceded by an oral agreement with tradition (so the model goes), then the work itself contains a deficit. It is up to the interpreter to correct this deficit. Gadamer's theory does not account for the possibility that a work acquires its meaning by taking up a position with respect to the traditions of time and fate—that is, by virtue of the author's decision to break with a common-sense position. This productive rupture also concerns other views the poem presents initially—only, later, to overcome them. But this is exactly what my reading shows: Sonnet II.27 brings the debate about time and fate into a poetic sphere, which is, in turn, opposed to fate and its "time," and which ultimately serves to overcome them. The castle proves to be the writing poet's citadel, protecting him from time (in its newly acquired sense).[48]

48 Ibid.

But what purpose does the ideology of the reading based on sonority serve? What is the purpose of restricting one's own (that is Gadamer's own) reading? Sonority and prosody are stations on the road to common sense, which is the very foundation of Gadamer's reading. They are in agreement with the broader thesis about human connections (*im Einklang, sit venia verbo*), and open up the door to it. Sonority and prosody entail a philosophical depth-structure. The psychological medium should be "feeling" (which Gadamer takes as his starting point in the essay "Mythopoetische Umkehrung in Rilkes Duineser Elegien"). By this, Gadamer means a textual quality, which Rilke purportedly aims for. The "sonority," which is understood only in its technical, prosodic sense, embodies a kind of atmosphere of the text, which is made possible by "feeling." And this results in the decisive jump of thought: feeling itself is the sum of judgments of perception. Such judgments can go like this in Gadamer: "But everyone knows that pain strives inwards, and thereby goes deeper."[49] The sentence refers to the connection between "night" and "pain" in the fourth elegy.[50] Or "A child refuses to hand over that which chokes it"[51]—this is meant to explain the following lines from the same elegy: "Who makes his death / from gray bread that grows hard,—or leaves / it there inside his rounded mouth, jagged as the core / of a sweet apple?"[52] Common experience, so Gadamer thinks, enters the feelings of the poem, which are transformed, and expressed in sounds (and in poetic language in general). The poet confirms that which he says in the depth of experience, immediately—by appealing to feelings. Experience confirmed in this way turns into mythical experience, and because this confirmation takes poetic form, Gadamer speaks of "mythopoetics," *Mythopoiesie*. By a sweeping judgment, certain of Rilke's stylistic mannerisms observed by Gadamer are made to serve this function. But they basically remain unknown to him, and he does not feel the need to go into detail. In the end, Gadamer bases himself on a particular educational and cultural tradition, and to the particular taste developed within this tradition.

The purpose of a hermeneutic interpretation should therefore, according to Gadamer, be a reversal of the mythopoietic transformation by Rilke, as the experience present in the feeling of the poetic object, a recovery of the now

49 Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Mythopoetische Umkehrung in Rilkes Duineser Elegien," in idem, *Gesammelte Werke, Vol. 9*, 289–305.

50 Cf. ibid., 299.

51 Ibid., 298.

52 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Poems*, trans. Albert Ernest Flemming (New York: Methuen, 2nd ed. 1985).

ennobled cultivated learning and experience. The concept of "presence" is central to this conception, because it provides a means of avoiding an analysis of the evidence by which the written purportedly expresses the felt. In order to explicate difficult passages, reference should be made to colloquial sentences, instead of trying to reconstruct the work in a historical sense. A literally non-committal project.

Authority of Interpretation

I'd like to close with a coda on the *Authority of Interpretation*. Reflexive praxis is the decisive authority for whether a work is revealed to us in its textual entirety, whether I have correctly understood the meaning of the work, whether the work is in fact significant enough to be interpreted at all, given the difficulties that entails, and, finally, whether the critique of other interpretations is justified. Till now, I have spoken of hermeneutics' modernization and have underscored discursive checks within the philological discipline. In my interpretation of Sonnet II.27, I have referred to my reading and articulated its principles: I broaden the poem's reach to include the sonnet cycle as a whole, I take its meaning to lie in a poetic, skeptical critique of the orphic tradition, and I recognize Rilke's (material) strategy in the sonnets idiolect. What, however, is the *form* of this reflective praxis, which itself cannot be taught? What is the *form* that lends readings authority, or, to borrow Friedrich Schlegel's term, gives form to "philologizing" (*Philologisieren*)? My answer is this: the sought-after form is *insistence*, and the practice of which I've spoken is *insistent reading*. Insistence is the key, for only insistence guarantees improvements in interpretation. Insistence is not thought out straight-away but occurs through refraction: "If it is true that it is at the price of an insistent search that one transcends the immediacy of the letter in order to achieve a certain depth, it is not surprising that discussion is part of self-reflexive investigation." (Jean Bollack)[53] Or in words we've had occasion to cite before: I am not interested in grasping that which grips me (Emil Staiger), but in reconstructing the rationality which guides the creative act in Rilke's poem by understanding *how it is it understands*. The word "reading" as it is used here contains a telling double meaning. It is the activity of reading itself as well as this activity's result. It is our task to link the two. A constant return to the *results* of interpretation that

53 *La lecture insistante. Autour de Jean Bollack (Colloque de Cerisy)*, ed. Christoph König and Heinz Wismann (Paris: Albin Michel, 2011), 18.

reflects on these principles—including the history of interpretation in conjunction with works of literature—fosters, over a longer period of time, the quality of the activity of reading itself, and thus its interpretative results. Methodological and historically-minded critique hones one's own intuitions in the long run. Understood in this way, *readings* take the place of preconceived literary and cultural theories. And this reflection, which performs a theory of interpretative praxis, itself becomes an element in insistent interpretation. *And this, finally, implies that insistence* itself must not become the conceptual purpose of a reading.

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