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Examining the work of four poets—Else Lasker-Schüler, Georg Trakl, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Paul Celan—this dissertation reveals surprising conjunctions between these poets’ sustained engagement with religious images and concepts and their attempt to organize individuals into collective bodies invested with political agency. It thereby uncovers a political valence within those elements of German modernist lyric that draw upon mytho-poetic and religious traditions to model the formation of political communities. Lasker-Schüler’s poetic revisions of the biblical garden myth explore a form of abject subjectivity that seeks to harness anti-authoritarian energy while simultaneously expressing vulnerability and solidarity with the outcasts of society. Trakl’s poetry prophesies the end of Western civilization on the brink of the First World War and develops mystical practices of kenosis (emptying one’s particular will—or in the case of Trakl, the normativity of collective forms—as preparation for receiving the divine) within the social and political sphere as a response to apocalyptic temporality. Rilke’s poetry uses mystical tropes to undermine the authority of institutions and the naturalization of economic relations while establishing poetry as a gathering place for human communities. Celan’s poetry not only confronts personal, but also political trauma, and in doing so ultimately gestures towards the possibility of liturgy as a mode of association, of solidarity with unknown others. More generally, this dissertation considers the way that poetic practices draw on religious operations and images in novel ways to reimagine emancipatory politics.
To the unloved things.
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INTRODUCTION: ON POLITICS, LYRIC, AND RELIGION

Der modische Wechsel, das Ewig-Heutige
entzieht sich der »historischen« Betrachtung,
indessen es wahrhaft überwunden nur
von der politischen (theologischen) wird.
Die Politik erkennt an jeder aktuellen Konstellation
das Echt-Einmalige, Niewiederkehrende.
~Walter Benjamin

a) Towards an Understanding of the Political in Lyric

The claim that lyric poetry can take on a political valence without explicitly investing itself in political content is itself controversial. Jean-Paul Sartre famously defended the political nature of his own writing by distinguishing prose from poetry. Poetry, he claimed, operated differently than prose and was not concerned with the political practice of communicative speech. Poetry maintained a certain purity that prose could not afford: a separation from the realm of the political in the intimate, subjective form of its expression. In his “Rede über Lyrik und Gesellschaft,” Theodor Adorno invokes the conventional suspicion that treating lyric as a societal—and in this sense, also a political—artifact constitutes a malpractice of literary criticism:

Das Zarteste, Zerbrechlichste soll angetastet, mit eben dem Getriebe zusammengebracht werden, von dem unberührt sich zu halten im Ideal zumindest des traditionellen Sinnes von Lyrik liegt. Eine Sphäre des Ausdrucks, die ihr Wesen geradezu daran hat, die Macht der Vergesellschaftung sei’s nicht anzuerkennen, sei’s, wie bei Baudelaire oder Nietzsche,
Such an objection could be easily quelled, depending on the object of study, its historical context, and the greater corpus of the author’s work if the lyrical artifact contains an explicitly political contribution. Surely, for example, no one would object to treating a poem from Heine or Brecht as a political artwork. However, in the case of the sensitive lyric such as that of Lasker-Schüler’s early poetry or Rilke’s *Elegien*, the mere suggestion that these poems have a political character may (at first glance) seem to be entangled in an insensitivity toward the muse, implicated in an abuse of the lyrical artifact. And yet, it is precisely because of this subjective nature of lyric that these objects offer such a fruitful field for thinking about politics. As Adorno remarks, “der Gehalt eines Gedichts ist nicht bloß der Ausdruck individueller Regungen und Erfahrungen. Sondern diese werden überhaupt erst dann künstlerisch, wenn sie, gerade vermöge der Spezifikation ihres ästhetischen Geformteins, Anteil am Allgemeinen gewinnen.” The lyric poem, precisely understood in its historically conditioned form (at least since Romanticism) as artistic expression which claims something universal in its particular and subjectivist manifestation, offers us an exceptional aesthetic sphere in which to examine the most seminal relations that make up political associations, movements, and organizations.

Lyric can therefore be thought—despite what the traditionalist critics may claim—to be an inherently political genre insofar as its formal character confesses a subjectively contingent claim to universal expression. Adorno understands lyric to thus be capable of maintaining a purity in its subjective form of expression: “die Versenkung ins Individuierte erhebt das lyrische

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1 Adorno, Theodor W, “Rede über Lyrik und Gesellschaft,” *Gesammelte Schriften* (hereafter GS), Vol. 11. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 49.

2 Ibid, 50.
Gedicht dadurch zum Allgemeinen, daß es Unentstelltes, Unerfaßtes, noch nicht Subsumiertes in die Erscheinung setzt.”

Such a purity is not guaranteed, but the associative force of lyrical form thus possesses a critical power to assert relationality that is conditioned only by its own form, not yet assumed into the political relations given by a certain society or historical era. To think the genre of lyric as possessing a political quality is thus not to examine the lyric artifact at the level of mere content: a communication of a political message or manifesto (i.e., not *political* in the way Sartre conceives it), but rather to examine the method in which the lyric poem brings itself into relation with what it is not: the way the lyrical I relates to the thou, to the them, to the we.

It may be thereby helpful to qualify what I am speaking of when I refer to politics in the context of this study. Contemporary theorists and literary critics have introduced the term *metapolitics* to speak of the way in which literature can be thought of in a political sense. Such a sense of speaking of the political nature of literature emphasizes those relations that evade our standard conceptions of politics: the party, the voting box, the particular political movement. Instead of an explicitly praxis-oriented politics, *metapolitics* happens within the realm of imagining what is possible, what Jacques Rancière describes as, “la subjectivité politique globale, l’idée de la virtualité dans les modes d’expérience sensibles novateurs d’anticipations de la communauté à venir.” Rancière’s terminology here is important; political organization is conflated with the idea of “a community to come.” This aspect of *metapolitical* thought allows us to think politics more broadly; not only do we include political parties and legal collectives in

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3 Ibid.


5 Rancière, Jacques, *Le Partage du Sensible: Esthétique et Politique*, (Paris: La Fabrique-éditions, 2000), 45. (“the global political subjectivity, the idea of virtuality in the innovative sensible modes of experience of anticipations of the community to come.” Translation mine.)
our conception of the political, but localized communal organizations can be understood as prefigurations of a larger, globalized communal form that has not yet been actualized. Lyric form is certainly capable of intervening in a *metapolitical* way, but this would seem to already presume an almost more important political contribution: the lyrical subject itself.

By focusing on the lyrical subject in a political understanding of poetry, we can re-locate the political beyond the standard stages upon which politics is acted out. Recognizing that political movements are not born out of policy, revolutions are not linked to governance, nor is a political demonstration a self-evident form of "doing politics," this dissertation seeks for political contributions within a genre of literature that is often considered inherently apolitical because of the way lyric poetry contributes to our conceptions of the human subject. All of the above-mentioned forms of politics (movements, revolutions, and demonstrations) presuppose a political subject in its own particular fashion. Indeed, most political differences (liberal vs. illiberal, communist vs. capitalist, left vs. right) are already presupposed in their conception of the individual political subjects out of which their associations are formed. The radical revolutionary assertion in the eighteenth century that all humans are equal required a revision of the western conception of the individual before being actualized (in imperfect manners) by the American or French revolutions. Likewise, claims made by communist theorists such as Karl Marx presuppose a political subject that participates in a common human substance—a *Gattungswesen*—a conception of the human that he derives from the thought of Aristotle.6 How we define the political subject—how we draw the contours of who *counts* in thinking the

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political—leads us to draw consequences as to how we think about structuring the relation between the individual and the collective.

I would therefore like to introduce a new term into thinking the political together with lyric: that of the protopolitical, the imaginative function that explores the necessary conditions for a new politics to emerge, particularly at the most primal level of relations. Such a conception of proto-politics is thereby strongly connected to the idea of metapolitics, but as a subgenre thereof: a way of re-imagining the field of political possibility through subject formation, what is necessary prior to the emergence of an identifiable political field or movement. In this way, protopolitics bears a resemblance to the concept of aesthetic education in the thought of Friedrich Schiller, which also serves a general political purpose. However, while Schiller’s aesthetic education is concerned with a formal process (that is, aesthetic education is non-normative, empty, and not concerned with the particularities of its content), the proto-political is directly connected with concrete practices of subject formation and establishing a network of human relations. Metapolitics, at least as defined by Rancière, is concerned with the unity of these subjectivities into a global political community. The realization of the latter relies upon the former. Protopolitics thus concerns the genesis of subjectivity such that it takes on a political character. This dissertation thus examines the role of the work of art—and lyric poetry in particular—in the generation of political subjectivities.

This particular approach to political hermeneutics allows us to reconsider and concretely characterize the contribution of lyric poetry to the political imagination. Else Lasker-Schüler, Georg Trakl, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Paul Celan—the poets featured in the analysis of the present study—have rarely been examined as political authors. In the case of Lasker-Schüler, her prose has recently been the object of many studies in the intersection of literature and politics,
but at the expense of a focus on her lyric production. The first chapter, which investigates the early poetic production of Lasker-Schüler, attempts to provide a more holistic vision of the political imagination that we find in her work by examining how her alternative conceptions of poetic subjectivity take on a political valence that can be recognized explicitly in her later prose. The second chapter of the dissertation examines the poetry of Georg Trakl, whose entire poetic production occurred within the 10 years preceding the outbreak of the First World War, arguing that his idiosyncratic, expressionistic, and apocalyptic lyric models a mode of subjectivity that strives for solidarity with the downtrodden and forgotten members of society. The third chapter begins a novel direction in Rilke scholarship; I provide a reading of Rilke’s poetry—a figure whose personal life is characterized by privileged relations with elite and noble members of European society—as having a certain, formal anarchistic quality. Reflecting on the way authorial authority functions in Rilke’s poetry, I argue that the hermeneutic epistemology embodied by his lyric is involved in a process of imagining possible communities without central authority. Treating Celan’s poetry as having a political dimension may not be surprising to readers familiar with recent trends in Celan scholarship; however, adapting an understanding of the protopolitical nevertheless enables novel insights into how his most personal, intimate poetry also contributes to political imaginaries.

The tenuous relationship between poetry and politics is one of the classic problems of philosophical discourse; already Plato (who famously sought to exclude poets from his ideal republic) referred to the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry.7 Plato's anxieties hint at an idea opposed to his own vision, namely, that the world-constituting power of poetry also has

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the potential to shape collectives or at least generate possible alternatives to status quo collective forms. Thinkers such Jacques Rancière, Alan Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, or Charles Taylor have recently been lending increasing emphasis to the ways in which lyric poetry contributes to thinking about politics and political communities. This dissertation argues that lyric in general—but the lyric of German modernism in particular—contributes to the proto-political imagination by mobilizing mytho-poetic and religious orientations to model the formation of political subjects and communities. In doing so, this study reveals surprising conjunctions between poets’ sustained engagement with religious images and concepts and their attempt to organize individuals into collective bodies invested with political agency. More generally, I consider the way that poetic practices draw on religious operations and images in novel ways to reimagine emancipatory politics.

b) Why Religion?

In literary criticism, the field of spiritual studies has gained an increased significance in recent years by investigating the linkage between spiritual traditions and literary production: particularly in the intersection of subject formation and community building. Peter Atkinson describes Spiritual Studies as “a dialogue between the interpreters of literary texts and the ‘practitioners’ of spirituality, not least in the cases where a well-rooted spiritual tradition has a cherished collection of sacred scriptures and its own developed body of theory.”\(^8\) Such an approach to literary criticism focuses on the interplay of literary texts and spiritual traditions,

insofar as this intersection is produced by the texts themselves. As Atkinson puts it, “[s]piritual studies is only ever a response to the text. Its justification lies in the extent the text is illuminated by its insights.” 9 Likewise, the present study seeks to illuminate the contribution of the spiritual and religious character of German modernist poetry to the political imagination. This is not an imposition of religious concerns onto the texts at hand, but rather a lens with which to approach the selection of texts for this study; the presence of religious imagery, allegories, or form indicates the potential of a proto-political contribution. This dissertation seeks to explicate the specific ways in which religious traditions supply rhetorical strategies for the expression of political possibilities in German modernist poetry.

In the western tradition, religious writings have played a significant role in subject formation. Since at least Augustine, the quasi-mystical preparation of the subject for union with the divine community has entangled the production of literature—especially when concerned with a subjectivist genre—with a process of subject formation. Michel Foucault’s recently published study on the moral writings of the Church Fathers, *Les Aveux de la Chair*, teaches us that early Christian religious practice—particularly concerning the teachings and praxis surrounding sexual expression—had a stark influence on the development of the technologies of the self. Concerning early Christians, he writes,

Ils ont défini et développé un certain mode de rapport de soi à soi et une certaine relation entre le mal et le vrai — disons plus précisément entre la rémission des péchés, la purification du coeur et la manifestation des fautes cachées, des secrets, et des arcanes de l’individu dans l’examen de soi, dans l’aveu, dans la direction de conscience ou les différentes formes de ‘confession’ pénitentielle.10

9 Ibid, 231.

10 Foucault, Michel, *Les Aveux de la Chair*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2018), 60. (In English: “[Early Christians] defined and developed a certain mode of relation of oneself with oneself, and a certain relation between the wrongful and the true—let us say, more precisely, between the remission of sins, the purification of the heart, and the revealing of
Religious practices—and particularly the novel moral demands on the subject that religions introduced into history—led to the development of new technologies of the self, new possibilities for subject formation (or as Foucault would term it, "subjectification"). Within discourses surrounding personal and communal prayer that develop in early Christianity, for example, the focus on controlling one’s inner temptations and desires—through reflection, meditation, and contemplation—also facilitate “la reconnaissance de l’autre et des figures intérieures qui le masquent.” In short, religious praxis amounts in many ways to a proto-politics and therefore offers a wealth of rhetorical strategies for expressing the same.

In the medieval ages, mystical authors such as Bonaventure, Bernard of Clairvaux, or Hildegard von Bingen turn to lyrical poetry to communicate the disposition of the subject in divine union. In doing so, mystics tied the genre of lyric to specific practices of subject formation: the proto-political process of preparing for entrance into the community of the saints. It was commonplace in this time that mystics would resist writing about their experiences and only produced this poetry after being explicitly requested to do so by their superiors. They would often preface their writings, like Bonaventure for example, with a warning to their readers of the dangers of reading mystical poetry. This mystical poetry is thus less about practicing a form of divine union—that is, the mystic is not experiencing this union while writing—and more about communicating their spiritual disposition during their ecstatic experiences of prayer. This connection between religious practice, lyric poetry, and communal gathering is not only a

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[1] Ibid, 296. ("a recognition of the other, and of the interior figures that mask it." Ibid, 177.)
historical development in the Middle Ages, but rather becomes a constitutive form of the development of the genre of lyric poetry: the transition from the ancient lyric of Sapho or Cicero to the poetry produced in the late medieval and early modern periods. In some of the earliest examples of lyric poetry written in the German language, the minnesongs of courtly romance, poets played with mystical formulations to express modes of secular, banal, and erotic modes of human relationality. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, German poets such as Klopstock, Schlegel, and Goethe assimilate and renew the roots of German lyric poetry in both religious and relational practices.

Among the serious systematic contributions to German literary scholarship on the subject of religion and literature, Wolfgang Braungart’s 2016 *Literatur und Religion in der Moderne* examines the remnants of religion in modern German literature (beginning in the late 18th century) as the attempt to mobilize religion’s ability to enable the subject to conceptualize their world as whole and meaningful. The endurance of religion within ‘secular’ literature, Braungart argues, points towards a need of humanity to conceptualize the world with inherent meaning—which stands threatened in the wake of Enlightenment philosophy. Modernism, he contends, “führt in vermeintlich postreligiösen Zeiten sogar wieder näher an das Religiöse heran: weniger über die *Institution* ‚Religion’, eher über das Subjekt.”¹² The present work contributes to this discourse by arguing that a third ‘node’ is present in literature during the ‘post-religious epoch’, namely the political. The interplay of religion and politics in German Modernism can thus be understood to create concrete modes of relating religious concepts to an increasingly secularized world.

In the following chapters, each of which functions as a paradigmatic investigation of a single author, I provide a preliminary sketch of how the remnants of religious imagery in German modernist lyric poetry contribute to radical political thought. From Rilke's angels to Lasker-Schüler’s Edenic allusions, the persistence of religious engagement in German modernist lyric reimagines political association beyond (and sometimes against) the nation-state. By revealing how this imagery animates the concerns of modernist lyric, often associated with avant-garde radicalism, this dissertation illuminates the ways in which traditional, religious attitudes overlap with alternative political thought in modernist lyrical works. While the influence of religious traditions on conservative political movements in the twentieth century have been well studied, this project traces progressive politics that emerge from modernist literature’s engagement with multiple religious traditions stemming from the tradition of Abraham (Judaism, Protestantism, Catholicism, Eastern-Orthodoxy, Islam, etc.). An important result of this investigation thereby shows how religiously inflected lyric poetry from the twentieth century can serve as a model of relationality that opens up into the political and incorporates devoutly religious as well as secularized, modern subjects into a cohesive community.

In many ways, it is unsurprising that poets turn to religion as a source for political thinking; Abrahamic religion has always been intimately connected to the political. Already in the beginning of Genesis, the connection between religious faith and the nation is foreshadowed in the covenant that God makes with Abram: “No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.”

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13 Genesis 17: 5. (The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006. All bible translations will be from this edition unless otherwise stated.)
extent, the story of Exodus and the origins of the ancient Jewish kingdoms are the story of an alternative, divinely inspired mode of politics—as well as the failure of humans to maintain the divine order when given the opportunity to rule. Ancient Christian thought is equally positioned against the Roman Empire: many scholars argue Jesus of Nazareth was executed precisely because he was suspected of being a political revolutionary. Early Christian writings, much like apocryphal writings of the pre-Christian Jewish Diaspora, speculate about a divine politics that surpasses, but is also eclipsed by secular political order. Paul, for example, writes that Christians are not properly citizens of Rome, nor of any contemporary régime, but rather he writes, “our commonwealth is in heaven.” The political nature of Abrahamic religion can also be seen in the Muslim tradition, perhaps most acutely in Mohammed’s attempt to establish his Caliphate as the kingdom of God on earth.

Abrahamic religion—at a minimum—and religious movements in general have therefore long been the source of radical changes in political systems. In many ways, the Enlightenment’s self-distancing from religion (in favor of “purely rational” forms of social organization) has been the historical anomaly with regards to major political changes, rather than the rule. Modernist authors are also not the first who turn toward religious concepts to think about alternatives to the nation state; Romantic thinkers such as Novalis, Schlegel, or Schleiermacher turned to religion as a wealth of symbolic functions to think about mediating human relations. The fact that

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15 Phillipians 3:20

16 For more on the radical politics emerging from Romantic fascinations with religion, see: Gill, John, “Religionspolitik,” *Wild Politics: Political Imagination in German Romanticism*, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2020. For a more general study on the way in which traditional religious symbols are adapted as a
religious imagery lies behind the political imagination of modernist authors is perhaps only surprising because standard “criticism of the Modernists tends anachronistically to read back into them a blithely secular point of view.” But recent scholarship has turned precisely towards emphasizing and conceptualizing the religious components of the modernist period. If one opens any collected work from a German-language modernist poet—be it Hugo von Hofmannsthall, Emmy Hemmings, or Berthold Brecht—the prominence of religious and biblical themes becomes self-evident. It is then, in my opinion, more surprising that one would ever have conceptualized modernism as having a secular, anti-theist component; despite the aggregate blasphemous expressions, an obsession with religion remains front and center. The task that this work takes for itself is to begin the process of understanding the specifically political contributions of the accumulation of religious imagery in the works of modernist lyric.

Modernism’s simultaneous conscious break with cultural traditions (seen most drastically in the avant-garde’s complete and utter rejection of aesthetic traditions, and its intentional distancing of itself from religious traditionalism) combined with the persistence of religious imagery signals that certain tendencies to conflate religious thinking (both its orthodoxies and its heterodoxies) with a regressive cultural politics suffer from a secular bias in scholarship. The present work argues to the contrary: I demonstrate that the religious visions often invoked by Lasker-Schüler, Trakl, Rilke and Celan, far from comprising the residue of outdated, traditional, or dogmatic forms of belief, become a medium of their most bold and progressive political experiments. Understanding modernist poetry’s fascination with religious themes as a cultural resource for artists and thinkers, see: Frank, Manfred, Der kommende Gott: Vorlesung über die Neue Mythologie, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982).

contribution to the political imaginary demonstrates that some of the most theologically or religiously inflected modes of thought expand the domain of possibility of the political. The consequence of such an imaginary politics is two-fold: focusing on the proto-political element—the mobilization of religious thinking towards the preparatory formation of the subject to participate in alternative communities (c.f., Rancière’s “community to come”)—does not entail a religious undertaking in itself; the religious form becomes a way of forming religious and secular subjects alike. On the other hand, the insistence on the contribution of religious thinking to a politics that extends beyond dogmatic institutionality signals the latent possibility of religion to contribute to the goals of secular, democratic societies.

The poetry that I examine thus contains a wealth of rhetorical strategies for mediating the religious and the secular, the relevance of which becomes ever more prominent with the rise of conflicts involving religious convictions in contemporary political discourse. In the pages that follow, I locate movements toward gender parity, associations with the outcast, more unmediated forms of democracy, and resistance to totalitarianism within heterodox, but certainly culturally relevant resurgences of religious thinking within German modernism. The interplay of religion and politics in modernist poetry can thus be understood to enact concrete modes of relating religious concepts to an increasingly secularized discourse. Joining contemporary thinkers who question the tenants of secularization theory, this dissertation resists a view of the modern age as a progressive disenchantment that entails the diminution and privatization of the religious within the public sphere. I argue that the relationship between religion and politics that comes to light in German modernist lyric 1) takes seriously the claims of religious concepts but 2) also mobilizes religious concepts toward the formation of a political imagination.
Towards a Post-Secular Political Imagination

This bipartite understanding of modernism’s relation to the religious could be characterized as having a *post-secular* component. By "post-secular," I mean to invoke a reaction of thought against the secular distinction between religious forms and political organization. This is not a return to religion from a secular point of view, but rather an acknowledgement of the richness that religious thought has to offer to non-religious perspectives: religious form without theological content. What remains is a form of gathering that does not exclude transcendental codes of meaning, but also does not require them. The interplay of religion and politics in German Modernism can thus be understood to create concrete modes of relating religious concepts to an increasingly secularized world, providing secular thought with a source of re-thinking political agency. This thesis stands in contrast to theoretical positions on the relation between religion and modernism, like Charles Taylor for example, who argues that modernist poetics can be understood as motivating a return to Jewish and Christian morality. Instead of motivating a "return" to a previous conception of moral thinking, these remnants of religious imagery—which Taylor theorizes as ‘epiphanies’—are channeled into a rethinking of the logic of association: that which binds collectives together. We find instead, the immersion of an alternative form of thinking that neither reifies religious dogmatic thinking, nor professes the

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18 Hent de Vries, for example, writes that, “A society is ‘post-secular’ if it reckons with the diminishing but enduring—and hence, perhaps, ever more resistant or recalcitrant—existence of the religious.” (*Political Theologies*, New York: Fordham UP, 2006, 3). This “reckoning” is an acknowledgement of the conflict between secularity and the persistence of religion, a dialectical postulation that religious parties have enlisted secular tools (free markets, media, liberalism, etc.) for their own ends and secularism, in turn, has obtained a flavor of fundamentalism, which it previously identified as a purely religious phenomenon (ibid. 10). This dissertation seeks to identify the historical constellations which escaped this negative dialectical formulation. Rather than focusing on the forces of religiosity and secularism as oppositional, the attempt here, as we find in Habermas, is to look at the complementarity of the religious and the secular when thinking about *meta-* and *proto-*politics.

diminution of the religious in favor a pure, secular reason. Modernist aesthetics—by both breaking from tradition and sustaining engagement with religious modes of thinking—present us with a way to mediate religious thought with secular subjects, as well as a way to integrate dogmatic thinking (that is, a type of normativity derived from a religious authority) into a democratic societal organization.

I must here note that Taylor rightly emphasizes the structural affinity between the Romantic preoccupation with religion and that of the modernists. As previously stated, the Romantics turned toward religious concepts in order to think radical politics differently. However, there are differences that must be acknowledged as well. Whereas Romantic thinkers like Novalis, Schleiermacher, and Schlegel emphasized heterodox aspects of Christian belief in order to further their political ideals, the modernists separated religious ideas, concepts, and forms from dogmatic modes of belief. When reading Lasker-Schüler, Trakl, Rilke, or Celan, for example, we do not find a concept of religious belief underlying their use of religious imagery. Religion functions as a rhetorical strategy for expressing alterity, but the poetry that this study concerns itself with does not communicate a belief in God, the confession of a creed, or rely upon a conception of divine revelation. Modernism’s relation to religious traditions can thereby be understood to similarly locate a resistance to contemporary politics in past traditions but should in no way be understood as "returning" to these traditions. Instead, the form of religion becomes the focus; the actual content is, in turn, emptied of its reliance on transcendence for meaning. Gathering takes precedence over dogma.

The present study locates two basic models of a political imaginary formed through the accumulation of religious imagery: the heterodox presentation of religious ideas and the inversion of religious forms. The first two chapters (on Lasker-Schüler and Trakl) correspond to
the former, examining the way in which revisions of biblical myths (Lasker-Schüler),
materialistic mobilizations of messianism (both), and the application of religious spirituality to
societal critique —for example, a concept like *kenosis* in Trakl’s poetry—expand the
possibilities of thinking collective politics. Playing with religious concepts in creative ways,
these authors locate emancipatory political potentials within the traditions of Abrahamic religion.
The latter two chapters (on Rilke and Celan), pick up on this heterodox play with religious
concepts and emphasize the formal elements of their mobilization. Rilke’s fascination with
religion inverts the hierarchical structures of authority that are inherent to biblical (and monastic)
hermeneutics, whereas Celan’s engagement with Jewish and Christian liturgical forms results in
an inverted mode of spiritual praxis: non-confessional, non-identarian liturgical organization as
politics. In all four paradigms, the function of religious imagery is separated from any particular
tradition; these poets turn toward the religious for a wealth of organizational principles,
mobilizing the transcendental, revelatory, and spiritual aspects of religion towards social,
material, or critical ends.

This mode of engagement with religion is not restricted to lyric; we find the roots of an
attempt to think the post-secular already emerging from German Idealism. Kant’s attempt to
show the compatibility between his own moral theories and the moral teachings of the bible
could be understood as a similar type of olive-branch from the realm of a philosophy that rejects
the rational nature of revelation back toward religious subjects. Still, Hegel’s understanding of
religion is more congruent with the critical nature of the post-secular. Rather than first excluding
the possibility of religious revelation from the scope of his philosophy, he builds revelation into
the narrative of the actualization of absolute spirit: revelatory religion was a necessary historical
precursor to the emergence of a rational, enlightened age. Still, although both Kant, Hegel, and
other enlightenment figures attempted to show a compatibility between the enlightenment project and the existence of religious subjects, they ultimately revise the understanding of religious thinking in the process, relegating the category of divine revelation to the realm of the irrational.20

Later thinkers in the tradition of German philosophy take up these same questions of faith, reason, and revelation, seeking to give an account of how a critical system of thought that does not rely upon divine revelation also does not exclude the possibility of revelation. Thinkers like Ludwig Wittgenstein, Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, or Theodor Adorno resist and criticize the overwhelming secular movements in the history of German philosophy. In the case of Adorno, himself by no means himself a religious figure, he held that the problem of mediating religion and society—of the potency of religious concepts to motivate human subjects and their de-rootedness from critical philosophy—was a uniquely historical problem. Adorno writes, “Warum einer den Glauben annehmen soll und nicht einen anderen, dafür ist dem Bewußtsein heute kein anderer Rechtsgrund gegeben als einzig sein eigenes Bedürfnis, das Wahrheit nicht verbürgt.”21 The plurality of seemingly equally valid religious claims combined with a lack of rational capacity to motivate the assent to faith prohibits the move from reason to faith or the rational acceptance of revelation—but this is characterized as a historical problem unique to secular modernity.

Adorno does not reject the category of revelation entirely. He does, however, question the viability of revelation within concrete history. Appealing to Kierkegaard’s Prefaces, where the

20 For more on the rejection of divine revelation by the theories of reason promulgated by Kant, Hegel, and other enlightenment figures, see Haydt, Joseph, “The Fate of Revelation in German Idealism,” Revelation and Thought: A Study in the Age of Goethe, University of Chicago, 2022.

question of the medium of revelation is examined, Adorno argues that revelation should be relegated to the status of a historical *nota bene*.\(^{22}\) Revelation, as a pure concept, need not be held contradictory to reason, but the historical revelation of Christianity and Judaism holds within it internal contradictions when confronted with the historically contingent nature of modern rationality.\(^{23}\) He claims that he envisions, “keine andere Möglichkeit als äußerste Askese jeglichem Offenbarungsglauben gegenüber, äußerste Treue zum *Bilderverbot*, weit über das hinaus, was es einmal an Ort und Stelle meinte.”\(^{24}\) His choice of language, here, is very important. Adorno does not reject the category of faith in revelation; instead, he argues for an extreme ascesis towards it. He even dialectically employs a revelatory concept, the *Bilderverbot*, in the process of distancing himself from revelation. Adorno’s appropriation of the prohibition of images is, admittedly, just that: an appropriation. But this translation of a commandment given

\(^{22}\) “Würde man aber schlechterdings von all jenen konkreten, gesellschaftlich-historisch vermittelten Bestimmungen absehen und buchstäblich dem Kierkegaardschen Diktum gehorchen, das Christentum sei nichts anderes als ein NB, das *Nota bene*, daß einmal Gott Mensch geworden wäre, ohne daß jener Augenblick als solcher, nämlich als auch seinerseits konkret geschichtlicher, ins Bewußtsein träte.” Adorno, "Vernunft und Offenbarung," *GS* 10b, 616.

\(^{23}\) Earlier in the essay, Adorno writes that, “Ist einmal die Religion nicht länger Volksreligion, nicht länger im Hegelschen Sinne substantiell, wofern sie das überhaupt je gewesen ist, so wird sie zu einem unverbindlich Ergriffenen, einer autoritären Weltanschauung, in der Zwang und Willkür sich verschränken. Die Einsicht darein wohl hat die Theologie des Judentums dazu vermocht, kaum Glaubenssätze zu stipulieren und nichts anderes zu verlangen, als daß man dem Gesetz nachlebe; was Tolstojs Urchristentum heißt, ist vermutlich ein sehr Ähnliches.” (Ibid. 614) This points to a sense at which religion of the people—i.e., pure belief in claims of revelation, with the caveat that this revelation does not set itself as opposed to reason—would be theoretically compatible with reason. The problem of religion today is, however, that it attempts to re-establish authority over a reason that has rejected it. It should be noted that while in the context of this essay, Adorno seems to focus on the contemporary, it could be argued that he problematizes the movement from reason to faith through a critique of the capacity of the mind to know truth. This is certainly the case in his early period. In his inaugural lecture for the philosophical faculty at the University of Frankfurt, titled “Aktualität der Philosophie” (1931), he comments on the development of Scheler’s phenomenology, stating, “Sie zeigt vielmehr an, daß der Übergang der Phänomenologie aus der formal-idealistschen in die materiale und objektive Region nicht sprunglos und zweifelsfrei gelingen konnte, sondern daß die Bilder überschichtlicher Wahrheit, die einmal jene Philosophie auf dem Hintergrund der geschlossenen katholischen Lehre so verführerisch entwarf, sich verwirrten und zersetzten, sobald sie einmal in eben jener Wirklichkeit auf gesucht wurden, deren Erfassung ja gerade das Programm der »materiellen Phänomenologie« ausmacht.” (328-9). Here, Adorno seems to reject the form of philosophy necessary for a harmonious relationship between faith and reason, in that he rejects an epistemology, which claims some access to a supra-historical truth.

\(^{24}\) Adorno, “Vernunft und Offenbarung,” *GS* 10b, 616. [Emphasis added]
by divine revelation into a critical philosophical concept gives insight into what exactly Adorno means by an ascesis toward faith in revelation. Adorno notes earlier in his essay on faith and reason that, “Nichts an theologischem Gehalt wird unverwandelt fortbestehen; ein jeglicher wird der Probe sich stellen müssen, ins Säkulare, Profane einzuwandern.”\textsuperscript{25} In the case of Adorno’s appropriation of the Old-testament prohibition of images, this is no different. This ‘Verbot’ is the second of ten commandments that Moses is purported in \textit{Exodus} to receive on Stone Tablets from God on Mount Sinai, but Adorno’s invocation of the concept goes far beyond the commandment.\textsuperscript{26} Adorno, in interpreting the \textit{Bilderverbot} beyond its original meaning, translates this commandment against itself in dialectical fashion, \textit{questioning} revelation itself as idolatrous, without foreclosing entirely upon the concept as a whole.

The task of a post-secular thinker is thus, like Adorno and his \textit{Bilderverbot}, to take from the religious tradition concepts that are useful to thought outside of their context within revelation. Doing so does not empty or secularize such concepts: the biblical \textit{Bilderverbot} retains its Hebrew character in Adorno’s writings, but also takes on new, critical meanings. In the case of this present study, we are not concerned explicitly with the philosophical implementations of such a concept, but rather the political implications: the ability to treat religion as a resource for thinking alternative political forms without secularizing religious traditions—that is without

\footnote{Adorno, “Vernunft und Offenbarung,” \textit{GS} 10b, 608. [Adorno likens this change to Benjamin’s chess-playing puppet from \textit{Über den Begriff der Geschichte}, who is purported to be an undefeatable opponent. Benjamin likens this puppet to historical materialism and its secret puppet master to theology, „die heute bekanntlich klein und häßlich ist und sich ohnehin nicht darf blicken lassen.“ (ibid.)]}

\footnote{This commandment reads: “You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing mercy to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.” \textit{Exodus}, 20:4-6.}
emptying out their transcendental significance or meaning entirely.27 Habermas remarks that a critical difference between secular and religious thought concerns the question of the individual vs. the collective: “Die säkulare Moral ist nicht von Haus aus in gemeinsame Praktiken eingebettet. Demgegenüber bleibt das religiöse Bewußtsein wesentlich mit der fortdauernden Praxis des Lebens in einer Gemeinde verbunden und im Falle der Weltreligionen mit der im Ritus vereinigten globalen Gemeinde aller Glaubensgenossen.”28 What the post-secular does, in this sense, is to open up religious modes of gathering (e.g., liturgy) to non-religious subjects.29 Lyric poetry’s ability to play with signifiers—to say more than one thing at the same time—lends itself especially to such an undertaking. The poem can at one place reference a belief held by a religious subject and at the same time involve this reference in a poetic gesture that opens up to non-religious subjects. Poetic speech’s condensed form, where multiple levels of meaning lie latent, asking the reader to actualize them, allows the expression of complex, post-secular political modes of association that draw upon religious forms.

27 Thus understood, the gesture here is to treat the post-secular as a form of thought that emerged with modernity—with modernist poetics—and not, as it is often treated by contemporary theorists, as a post-9/11 reckoning with the persistence of religion in an ostensibly secular society. José Casanova, for example, writes that, “religion has certainly returned as a contentious issue to the public sphere of European societies. It may be premature to speak of a post-secular Europe, but certainly one can sense a significant shift in the European Zeitgeist.” (“Public Religion Revisited,” Religion: Beyond a Concept, Ed. Hent de Vries, New York: Fordham UP, 2008, 101). In examining poetry from the beginning through mid-twentieth century, this dissertation demonstrates that post-secular modes of thinking are not merely relevant to mediating political subjects in the twenty-first century, but that these rhetorical strategies emerged with the secularizing thrusts in German (and European) society in the previous century.

28 Habermas, Jürgen, Ein Bewußtsein von dem, was fehlt: Eine Diskussion mit Jürgen Habermas, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), 97.

29 In Ein Bewußtsein von dem, was fehlt, Habermas outlines the funeral ritual designed by Max Frisch as an example of how this could take place. In St. Peter’s church in Zurich, a gathering took place without a priest, but followed many religious traditions (most of all, the place of gathering) in commemorating the life of a man who was himself agnostic. My argument is that we find a similar, but in many ways more potent example of such modes of gathering in the lyric investigated in this dissertation in the way these authors make space for religious subjects.
Let’s take a brief moment to look at an example of how a poem can both represent a devout religious subject and take on a post-secular structure. Here, Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s religious poetry lends itself particularly to such an analysis, because of the way in which it is suspended in a devout disposition that refrains from epistemic claims about the truth of religious content. The poem, “Fronleichnam” describes a Catholic procession with a consecrated host through the city streets during the celebration of Corpus Christi. A medieval tradition and one which deeply offended Martin Luther (who thought processions amounted to plain idolatry), this celebration gained much devotion during the counter-reformation as a provocation against protestants. That is to say, the procession itself is not only a tradition that stands as a protrusion of religious subjects into the public sphere, but also as an intentional provocation and making public of aspects of the Catholic faith that are not sociologically universal. The procession is typically decadent, a large communal affair involving the bishop, all his priests, and the faithful of the community. The opening strophe of Hofmannsthal’s poem emphasizes the celebration of the feast, but most interestingly also the problematic of those who resist the public celebration of religion.

FRONLEICHNAM

Von Glockenschall, von Weihrauchduft umflossen
Durchwogt die Straßen festliches Gepränge
Und lockt ringsum ein froh bewegt Gedränge
An alle Fenster, – deines bleibt geschlossen.

So hab auch ich der Träume bunte Menge,
Der Seele Inhalt, vor dir ausgegossen:
Du merktest’s kaum, da schwieg ich scheu-verdrossen,
Und leis verweht der Wind die leisen Klänge.

Nimm dich in acht: ein Tag ist schnell entschwunden,
Und leer und öde liegt die Straße wieder;
Nimm dich in acht: mir ahnt, es kommen Stunden,
Da du ersehnest die verschmähten Lieder:
Heut tönt dir, unbegehrt, vielmümligen Reigen,
Wenn einst du sein begehrst, wird er dir schweigen.30

Immediately noticeable is how the poem does not discuss what is being celebrated on Corpus Christi. Eucharistic imagery—indeed any direct and easily identifiable symbol of the Christ-figure—is absent from the poem. Instead, the procession is emphasized as a mode of self-revelation, an externalization of the participants’ souls (“Der Seele Inhalt”), but the content of these souls is not made explicit. While a devotion to the sacrament of bread and wine is one possible understanding of this intimate inner-state, the form of celebration that is emphasized in the first stanza—the community’s public performance, walking together, singing together—could equally be the subject of the poet’s self-revelation. The poem thus emphasizes a meta-level of the importance of religious ritual: not the devout religious disposition, but rather the ability of individual self-disclosure with the community, that is, in the public sphere.

As the poem progresses, we experience a shift from an initial celebration of the holiday to an address to a person (a “you”) who closes their window, ignoring the procession. This act of closing the window—of not only refusing participation in the communal ritual, but also attempting to ignore its presence, to deny recognition to those in the procession—frustrates the lyrical voice (“Und lockt ringsum ein froh bewegt Gedränge / An alle Fenster, – deines bleibt geschlossen.”). What ensues is a subtle attempt to find a ground of dialogue between two positions which are incommensurate: between those who value the procession as an externalization of their inner-self and those who close their window to music in the streets (“So hab auch ich der Träume bunte Menge, / Der Seele Inhalt, vor dir ausgegossen”). What we find

30 Hofmannsthal, Hugo von, Die Gedichte, (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 2000), 186.
here is not a conflict between the religious and the non-religious, but rather a thwarted self-
revelation. This poem is not trying to convince the “you” of the validity of the procession, or the
theological principles being celebrated, but rather we find a critique of shutting oneself off from
the public sphere, from sociability, from others. The poet is not upset because the “you” doesn’t
revere the sacrament, but rather because his own presentation of his inner self in the public
sphere isn’t being heard, recognized, or affirmed.

The poet emphasizes the disclosure of personal interiority in public form—in
community—but religious propositions are here unexamined. The poem has nothing to do with
expressing any particular belief or faith content, but rather its semantics present us with sensual
language, affect, communal movement. Emphasized in religious ritual, we find a vulnerable, but
public expression of interiority and desire. The final two strophes oscillate in tone, and the
address of the lyrical-I to this anonymous “you” shift from that the personal frustration towards
the expression of a greater critical articulation of the disposition of the you. The poet reveals a
nihilistic aspect of the you’s self-separation (the act of closing the window to the festivities in the
street). The desire to be left alone is characterized as dangerous and the poet warns against this
course of action (“Nimm dich in acht”). This modified tone instructs the addressee to cherish the
present celebration, but not as an observance of the belief in the corporeal presence of a Godman
in bread and wine. Instead, the decadence of the pageantry is compared to its opposite: to the
empty street, void of life and community (“ein Tag ist schnell entschwunden, / Und leer und öde
liegt die Straße wieder”). In doing so, the lyrical voice seems to emphasize an alternative
understanding of the celebrations that does not rely upon a pious belief in the sacrament, but
rather a more ethereal celebration of life. Hofmannsthal gestures towards a post-secular mode of
relating religion to the non-believing subject: in a way that neither assumes belief or any devout
religiosity, nor does it discount the validity of such categories for those who do assent to a
divinely sourced mode of knowledge. Instead, making place for the religious ritual—not through
participation, but by not rejecting religion in the public sphere, by not closing one’s window—
emphasizes an affirmation of the self-disclosure of the other.

Typical of the sonnet form, we find a movement of inversion in the final stanza—
conditional though it may be. The final stanza plays with this accessibility of religion,
proclaiming a dialectical understanding of the interaction between faith and desire. The
addressee who refuses recognition of the participants in the Corpus Christi procession is here
characterized as desiring the opposite of the decadent public ritual: scorned songs [verschnähten
Lieder] as opposed to the polyphonic performance of the procession [vielstimmiger Reigen]. The
particularities of the inversion in this poem are characteristic of the post-secular search for a
mode of mediation between the religious and the secular. Inversion does not substantially change
the form of the religious ritual or concept—in this case, the decadent celebration itself remains
unchanged—but it does disconnect the form of the ritual from its content, from its reliance upon
divine revelation. In doing so, the form becomes more accessible, no longer excluding secular
subjects, whose normative convictions preclude the assimilation of revelation and truth claims.
The you’s lack of desire for the performative nature of the procession produces its polyphony,
emphasizes a plurality of voices coming together: the potential of communion between disparate
subjects. However, this possibility is complicated by the final line, which emphasizes a mutually
exclusive relationship between the polyphonic song and one’s desire thereof (“Wenn einst du
sein begehst, wird er dir schweigen”). In a certain sense, this suggests that the procession is
annoying and intrusive because it is unwanted; were it to be desired, accepted, and tolerated, it
would be as if the streets were silent. On the other hand, the more literal sense of the final line
suggests a more soteriological meaning: the curtained disposition of the you towards community (the nihilistic sense of the you’s desire) will secure its object in the most regrettable way. Conflict produces more conflict. The procession—especially understood in its historical counter-reformation popularity as a Catholic provocation against protestants—is emptied of its provocative qualities in acknowledging the way in which it allows a self-disclosure of (Catholic) subjects within the public sphere. Drawing on discourses following the Thirty-Years-War that sought harmony between Catholics and Protestants in the midst of the late Hapsburg empire, where the state religion was once again being called into question, Hofmannsthal emphasizes the complicated nature of post-secular thinking: the dialectical orientation of mediating subjects with different metaphysical commitments.

Hofmannsthal gestures toward—and also problematizes—that which the four authors in this dissertation successfully cultivate in their mobilization of religious imagery. By highlighting the latent, *proto-political* aspects of their lyric poetry, this dissertation emphasizes that German modernism’s commitment to non-traditional artistic expression—traditionally understood as a break with the past—is also involved in a project of mediating the old and the new: mediating the religious subject with the secular. This mediation lies at the core of a political imagination that is sourced in religious thinking. Rather than the diminution or privatization of religion, when we witness the application of religious forms—often inverted—towards political ends, we find a characterization of the religious that is neither secular nor based upon a belief in divine revelation. The findings of this dissertation thereby adjust our understanding of post-secular art: rather than understanding the post-secular chiefly as a post-WWII phenomenon as Habermas
describes it,\textsuperscript{31} we find already in the beginning of the twentieth century lyric poetry which fulfils the criteria of communicating a \textit{proto-political} relationality that establishes harmony between religious and secular subjects, albeit in a context that escapes immediate implementation in the legal context of a secular nation state.

\textit{d) Methodological Considerations of the Present Study}

As stated above, the present dissertation examines the contributions of religious-themed lyric poetry to the political imaginary in four poets, commonly categorized under the broad category of modernism. The paradigmatic explication of these four authors enables an intensive study of each of these authors’ corpora and secures for the present study a heuristic argument for the latent political meaning of religious imagery within modernist lyric. However, there are also certain restrictions to this approach that must also be acknowledged. First and foremost, the ability to make a strong intervention into the overarching contribution of religious thinking to the political imagination within the modernist period is conditioned by the constraint of only examining four poets. The analysis of the present study lays the groundwork for such historical claims, but it will be the task of a future study to reveal the full extent of the historical contribution of modernists’ religious impulses to the political imagination.

\textsuperscript{31} Habermas’ motivation for introducing (and popularizing) the term “post-secular” is largely connected to the conflict of religious extremism with secular liberalism that receives acute attention following the attacks on 11 September 2001. His focus on post-secular theorization is concerned with the particulars of the secular nation state, liberal western systems of governance, and contemporary politics. That is not to say that Habermas ignores prefiguring of post-secular modes of thinking in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (in historical political contexts that differ vastly from the post-WWII order), but such predecessors to post-secular thinking are not the focus of his political theory.
In each chapter, I combine a formal analysis of the poetry at hand with a conceptual, theoretical approach to better explicate and situate the formal insights within the German intellectual tradition. Here, I am not only concerned with lyric form—the structure of the poem itself—but also with symbolic form, especially those associated with religious understandings, traditions, and images. At this juncture, the paradigmatic approach, which examines one author at a time, allows an in-depth analysis across the oeuvre of each author’s poetry. In the case of Lasker-Schüler, I focus on a novel reading of her often-overlooked early poetry, but in doing so, trace the development of her political thought from its latent form in her early corpus (predominantly *Styx* and *Der siebente Tag*) to the explicitly political prose works of her later period (e.g., *Ich räume auf!* or *Ich undich*). Georg Trakl’s relatively small corpus lends itself to an overarching analysis, whereby I resist recent periodization attempts by scholars such as Richard Millington and argue that by examining the political undertones of his religiously inflected lyric, we can see a through-line across the different phases of his lyrical production.

The chapter on Rainer Maria Rilke attempts to revise our understanding of the shift in Rilke’s poetry with the *Neue Gedichte*, arguing for a continuity of the mobilization of religious themes from the *Stundenbuch* through to the *Elegien* that undermines a sense of authorial and social authority: a poetic form of anarchic gathering. Finally, in the case of Paul Celan, I focus on the middle period in his poetry (*Sprachgitter* and *Niemandsrose*) because of the unique frequency of the collective pronoun [*wir*] in this period of his poetic production; in doing so, I shed light on an exceptional moment in the work of Celan’s poetry, where he explores collective responses to the historical trauma of the Shoah. The dissertation as a whole thus seeks to revise our understanding of all four poets—who are not typically read as political thinkers—and in doing so, contributes
not only to our understanding of German modernism more broadly, but also functions as four unique interventions into the scholarship surrounding each individual poet.

The selection of authors for this dissertation reflects a conscious effort to represent the diversity of both modernist authors who mobilize religion in their poetry and the productive political consequences of such engagement. Lasker-Schüler, Trakl, Rilke, and Celan exemplify different religiously inspired political visions and each highlight unique paradigms within German Modernism. Lasker-Schüler and Trakl represent two distinct moments in German-language Expressionism; on the one hand, Lasker-Schüler was a Jewish woman in predominantly Protestant Germany, and on the other, Trakl was raised a Lutheran in predominantly Catholic Austria. Rainer Maria Rilke further diversifies the landscape of the dissertation, providing a unique style that, despite various scholarly attempts, cannot be classified under a single broader movement. Rilke’s Catholic upbringing, combined with his interest in Russian Orthodoxy, Islam, and other, more secular visions of the world mobilize religious images to question authority—both authorial and societal—and to re-envision the formations of communities in light of the existential pressures of modern life. The incorporation of Paul Celan within this research project denotes a fruitful instance of incongruity. Although the historical era in which Celan writes—in the aftermath of the unprecedented terrors of a systematic genocide conducted by the National Socialists—differs drastically from the socio-political settings of the first three authors, this final chapter functions to show that the political implications of religious allusions combined with lyric experimentation continue far into the twentieth century. Indeed, Celan’s Jewish identity, combined with his invocation (and inversion) of Christian liturgical practice, interacts with his political ideas in precisely the manner that this dissertation seeks to uncover. In the wake of the Holocaust, Celan’s poetry draws on a theology
of language to reclaim the ‘language of the oppressor’ and moreover mobilizes theological forms to invert hierarchies.

The dissertation begins with an analysis of the politics of Lasker-Schüler’s early poetry, particularly through the recurrence of the biblical figure of Eve. Ultimately, I propose that Lasker-Schüler’s early poetry contains a latent gesture towards an alternative mode of politics, one that combines the critical potential within Lasker-Schüler’s mytho-poetic account of Eve’s transgression with an erotic messianism to imagine an alternative mode of communal relations, which I term: collective eroticism. The second chapter discusses the poetry of Georg Trakl, exploring a different way in which political valence emerges from religiously inflected expressionist poetry. His lyric enables a process of kenosis—religiously-inflected notion of self-debasement—to break beyond the individual into the realm of culture. Acting as a mode of cultural kenosis, Trakl’s poetry can be understood as an attempt to re-think human associations and to save human culture from its corrupt manifestation in Western modernity. As stated above, the second half of the dissertation distinguishes itself from the first, examining less the religious allusions within its expressionist lyric and more focusing on the inverted form of religion that we find in the poetry of Rilke and Celan. I propose a new understanding of the religious character of Rilke’s lyric by arguing that these images undermine hierarchies of authority and propose conditional religious propositions as sufficient to establish a communal practice. In this chapter, I show the political-economic aspect of the ethical side of Rilke’s late poetics, arguing that one can detect a latent politics that I term angelic anarchy. Finally, I demonstrate that the messianism of Celan’s poetry provides a mode of relating to historical trauma, abstracting beyond the singularity of Auschwitz in the poem’s inability to witness to such terrors. I then turn my attention to the role of liturgical allusions in Celan’s poetry, arguing that poems such as
“Tenebrae” and “Psalm” provide a politics of liturgical organization that extends beyond religious confession. By separating the religious mode of organization from metaphysical content through poetic processes of inversion, Celan thus gestures towards the possibility of liturgy as a mode of politics, of solidarity with the unknown other.

In the course of conducting research for the present dissertation, it has become overwhelmingly clear that the influence of religion on modernist political experiments is a much larger phenomenon than the present study—both in formal restraints and in methodology—allows me to demonstrate. Further poets, whose poetry reflects a religiously inflected participation in a political imaginary, could include Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Stefan George, Georg Heym, Emmy Hennings, Berthold Brecht, Ruth Schaumann, Nelly Sachs, Ingeborg Bachmann, and others. It will be the task of future studies to examine the work of diverse German Modernist poets more broadly, in order to represent various geographic, ethnic, and confessional identities, as well as varied poetic styles. Such a study promises a clearer explication of the the overwhelming conjunctions between sustained poetic engagement with religious discourses within German Modernism and the present dissertation lays the groundwork for this future research.
CHAPTER I: POETRY AS REDEMPTIVE TRANSGRESSION: THE POLITICS OF LASKER-SCHÜLER’S EARLY POETRY

Das Profane also ist zwar keine Kategorie des Reichs, aber eine Kategorie, und zwar der zutreffendsten eine, seines leisesten Nahens.  
~Walter Benjamin

Part One, Abject Eve: A Revolutionary Reading of Lasker-Schüler’s “Erkenntnis”

a. Introduction

In a posthumously published play, Ichundich (I-and-I), written while in exile in Palestine in 1942, the poet Else Lasker-Schüler produces an avant-garde rewriting of the Faust myth during the height of the National Socialist regime in Germany. The play—an ostensible critique of political ideology through the lens of a mythopoetic imagination—has been described as a “bewilderingly postmodern” re-thinking of Jewish and Christian eschatology in light of the holocaust. Faust and Mephisto, prototypically problematic figures in Goethe’s Faust, are presented in an almost saintly manner in the midst of high-ranking Nazi officials such as Goebbels, Göring, and even Hitler himself. The play is more than a mere commentary on the present through a parody of the Faust myth; it is at the same time a poetic retrospective, a pastiche that sutures Lasker-Schüler’s own poetic works into a political commentary. By

32 This section (Part One) has been accepted for publication in the following article: Hoffman, Lukas, “Abject Eve: A Revolutionary Reading of Lasker-Schüler’s ‘Erkenntnis’,” New German Critique (forthcoming).

ventriloquizing her poems, and often her early work, through the figures of Faust and Mephisto, she recontextualizes her own poetic corpus in the light of the antisemitic and genocidal policies that were being carried out by the fascist leaders in Germany.

The play stages a thought experiment: is it possible to resist fascist politics outside the binary logic of good and evil? Lasker-Schüler presents Faustian transgression as a third path: an escape from the moral constraints of saintly goodness, but also a superior ethical position to fascism. Ultimately, these traditionally iniquitous figures, Faust and Mephisto, propose a poetic theodicy: rethinking salvation through the categories of poetry and love rather than sin and virtue. Lasker-Schüler explicitly frames poetry as political resistance by casting Faustian transgression as an escape from the legalistic constraints of bourgeois morality. Interposed with citations from Goethe’s oeuvre as well as Lasker-Schüler’s own poems, the play reveals the poetic worldview of Faust and Mephisto as a life-affirming force operating in aesthetic contrast to debauched, drunken Nazis. Poetry broadly understood, and Lasker-Schüler’s early poetry in particular, is presented as a process of self-creation and self-salvation, which is juxtaposed with the fascist ideology of a hierarchical submission to authority. In this play, poetry has the power to unbind seemingly eternal moral judgements (which are in turn associated with damnation), thereby freeing the subject from a punitive theological system, while still maintaining an ethical imperative to overcome the contemporary fascist political system in Germany.

Ich und ich (I-and-I) is certainly not the first of Lasker-Schüler’s political interventions, but it represents the culmination of her mythopoetic imagination operating in tandem with

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34 Among Hitler, Goebbels, and other fascist leaders, Lasker-Schüler also places Baldur von Schirach, a prominent Nazi poet, among their ranks. Through a series of dialogues, his poetry is shown to be empty and kitsch, a failure of poetics to capture the superior ethical sentiments that her own poetry and that of Goethe is positioned to represent.
resistance to political violence. Her later more overt politics raise the question whether or not her early poetry itself can be understood to have a political valence—whether this earlier form of poetry, independent of its later re-contextualization, has its own distinctive and disruptive power in the face of violent political ideologies. The question can be posed as follows: is the turn to the political in her later work merely a response to the urgent threat of National Socialism? Or is there a latent politics in her earlier work that is repurposed, recontextualized, and reconceptualized to meet the challenges of fascism? To be sure, any political element found in these early poems themselves will be responding to a different political situation (Wilhelmine Imperialism vs. the Third Reich). And her earlier lyric, usually associated with Expressionism, seems more concerned with erotic, personal, mythical, and religious themes more than anything explicitly political. Nevertheless, in what follows, I claim that there is a politics in her early lyric, one that continues to develop throughout her work.

The fact that Lasker-Schüler spends the latter half of her life placing new versions of old, ostensibly religious poems into different contexts and thereby making visible different (often political) undertones of this poetry suggests that she herself grasped poetic production as political work. Perhaps the best example of such a text is the brochure that she self-published in 1923, titled Ich räume auf! Meine Anklage gegen meinen Verleger (I clean up! My Accusation against my Publishers), where she sets forth a scathing critique of a fictional publisher, but in doing so also undertakes a much larger critique of capitalist enterprise as an ideology in dialectical opposition to the arts.35 Within the semantic field of Lasker-Schüler’s brochure, the political, the religious, and the poetic are intimately interwoven, as Gabriel Trop suggests,

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35 For more on the political nature of this Lasker-Schüler’s Aufräumen brochure, see Krauss, Andrea “Aufräumen: Else Lasker-Schülers Politische Praxis,” which has also been slightly revised and translated into English as “Aufräumen/Cleaning Up: Else Lasker-Schüler’s Political Practice.”
providing a polytropic system of human relations.\textsuperscript{36} The poet, Lasker-Schüler writes, takes on a priest-like quality, capable of mediating the potential of the aesthetic and the human: “Sind wir Dichter der Künste etwa nicht Priester? Unsere Kunst nicht unser Gott bei uns?” \textsuperscript{37} This analogy proposes that art will fulfill a divine-like function in the course of the messianic teleology of this text; in this analogy we see that art—specifically that of the poet—is oriented toward promising an emancipatory future, no matter how tenuous that future may appear. In other words, the poet acts as mediator of a liberatory politics.

Central to the politics in this brochure is a religio-ethical requirement that portrays art as a divine aspect of human life. Lasker-Schüler plays with religiously inflected terms (such as 
\textit{Askese}, ascesis) and infuses them with aesthetic meaning—the ascetic becomes the aesthetic—and in doing so, she unlocks a materialist critique of political economy that lies latent in religious imagery: the subversion of established orders and norms and the impetus not just to interpret the world, but to change it. This religious and political blend corresponds to a rebellion undertaken with suffering figures (“mit den Unterdrückten jeder Klasse”)—united around an imperative: “Die Händler aus dem Tempel jagen!” This imperative is, of course, derived from the New Testament tale of Christ's anger at the money lenders and merchants who were using the Jewish Temple as a place of business. In this story, the divine nature of Christ is associated with a righteous anger at material injustice, avarice, and the economic contamination of sacred spaces. In Lasker-Schüler’s case, the temple is not a literal space of worship, but rather an aesthetic sphere of poetic productivity, one that has been infiltrated by the profit-driven interests of


publishers. Her answer to this injustice is ‘to clean up’ (or perhaps to understand Aufräumen more literally: ‘to space up,’ ‘to make space’). In the wake of the Bolshevik revolution just 8 years before and following a series of several attempted revolutions in Germany, Lasker-Schüler writes: “Immer mehr wurde Krieg, immer näher rüstete die Revolution. ‘Lenin!’ Auch auf ihrem Verlagsthron [sic.] zitterten die Buchtyrannen.” In this declaration, she links the poet’s productivity to the material conditions of the oppressed, to revolutionary communities. She republishes her own poetry within this brochure, bringing ostensibly subjectivist lyric into a political context. As in the later, posthumously published play Ich und ich, aesthetic production is cast in a salvific light. As God secures salvation within a religious system, so too will art secure revolutionary success—salvation from capitalism, exploitation, and commodified art.

By repositioning her early poetry into explicitly political contexts, such texts reveal that Lasker-Schüler’s own conception of poetry does not align with typical literary models that would separate subjectivist lyric from the category of the political. Instead, in Lasker-Schüler’s early poetry we find an equally avant-garde gesture: lyric as a testing ground for the political imagination. It is not the case that her poetry is specifically political in the same way as a poem such as Brecht’s “Das Manifest.” Instead, we find in Lasker-Schüler’s early lyric an experimental space for conceiving human relationality in a more general sense. The political ramifications of this relationality become more explicit over the course of her development. We

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38 After World War I, Communist attempts to take power in Germany began with the 1918 November Revolution, which was followed soon by the 1919 Spartacist Revolt in January of the next year. The Ruhr Uprising in 1920 was a reactionary movement of industrial workers in Lasker-Schüler’s home Ruhr area, where proletarian workers attempted a general strike that was met with considerable violence, including a number of executions. The Hamburg Uprising in 1923 followed, which was not isolated to Hamburg but included disparate movements in Saxony and Thuringia, where coalition governments were formed with the German Communist Party, but also in the Rheinland, where small communist armies attempted to occupy governments and declare sovereignty.

39 Lasker-Schüler, Else, Werke und Briefe, Vol. 4.1, 84.
can, however, find a politics in these early lyrical forms with its own tonality and character, responding to its own historical and political situation.

Recent scholarship has emphasized the political thought of Lasker-Schüler, predominantly in the prose of her middle and later phases of literary output. The present section of this chapter uncovers the lyrical roots of Lasker-Schüler’s revolutionary thought by focusing on the political role that interiority and vulnerability takes on in her early poetry. Some work has been done in this domain in contributions by Kristina Mendicino, who has argued that Lasker-Schüler’s biblical poetry from *Der siebente Tag* can be linked to her politics in connection with the artistic group *Die Neue Gemeinschaft*, or by Gabriel Trop, who has argued that Lasker-Schüler’s poetic practice is oriented toward reorganizing “the dominant codes governing human relations.”

This contribution seeks to make explicit the political consequences of her earlier poetic practices by emphasizing a critical, relational potentiality in the abject modes of subjectivity pervading her early lyric. Doing so allows us to further specify—both in form and content—the way Lasker-Schüler’s early poetry combines a poetics of subjectivity with political, even revolutionary, imagination.

I first briefly sketch the concept of the abject as found within Lasker-Schüler’s early poetry. Then, focusing on her poem “Erkenntnis,” I show the way that Lasker-Schüler’s engagement with and reconceptualization of religion in general, but the biblical garden myth in particular, emphasizes the roots of human subjectivity within the realm of the abj ect. This poem represents the biblical Eve as a figure of primordial abjection: a paradoxical embodiment of

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mythic violence that escapes mythic punishment, and thus a mixture of Prometheus and Pandora. I then provide a formal analysis of the poem, arguing that the structure of the poem itself makes space for abject subjectivity within a general trajectory of poetic idealism. Lasker-Schüler’s poem simultaneously seeks to free transgression from the semantics of guilt while acknowledging the historical limitations of the trauma that authoritarian forms of morality have historically inflicted on disobedient subjects. I conclude with an analysis of the revolutionary potential harbored in her early poetry: a latent mode of politics that becomes historically actualized in her later work. Specifically, I argue this revolutionary impulse is characterized by the call for solidarity of (and with) the abject; the central utopian impulse of her poetry seeks to cultivate collective vulnerability.

b. Lasker-Schüler’s Abject Subject

Lasker-Schüler’s conception of poetic subjectivity can be illuminated by paradigms of abjection formulated by theorists such as Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler, who pick up this term to signify those practices that render human life “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” by the normative contours that delimit the “status of subjectivity.” Kristeva conceives abjection as inhabiting “the in-between,” which is not restricted to heteronormativity, but rather indexes a mode of existence that refuses to be assimilated into cultural norms, a mode of being where “nothing is familiar.” In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler writes:

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This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject’s domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life.\textsuperscript{43}

In other words, the constant exercise of force and exclusion upholds the construction of stable contours for recognizably valid forms of subjectivity (seemingly necessitated by modern political institutions). While the explicit context of Butler’s writings correlates this normative status of subjectivity predominantly with a heteronormative conception of sex and gender roles, there remains a broader notion of the abject that lies latent and that she picks up on in her more recent work on vulnerability.\textsuperscript{44} It is this broader notion of non-normative self-assertion that I mean to emphasize in Lasker-Schüler’s erotic poetry, which already gestures toward this conception of subjectivity in the early twentieth century. In poems such as “Orgie,” “Du, mein,” “Karma,” “Weihnachten,” and countless others where rebellious, erotic language is foregrounded, Lasker-Schüler invokes an abject poetic subject that unabashedly confesses its disgust with monogamous, heteronormative sexuality, asserting its own freedom to transgress societal expectations and the perceived constraints of bourgeois morality.\textsuperscript{45}

The abject in this context thus enacts a non-identical relation to itself and to society inasmuch as abjection is constituted by the non-equivalent exclusion from the typical conception of a subject with a static identity. A classic example of Lasker-Schüler’s gender-bending, aesthetically indeterminate identity can be found in her personification (in both fiction and in her

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{43} Butler, Judith, \textit{Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"}, xiv.
\item \textsuperscript{44} See, for example, Butler, Judith, \textit{The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind}. (London: Verso, 2020).
\item \textsuperscript{45} The sexual desire for the poet’s beloved is likened to the experience of having orgiastic sex in the poem, “Orgie,” thus transgressively asserting the poet’s desire. In “Du, mein,” the poet expresses an erotic desire for her dead brother. “Karma” is an exceptionally transgressive poem, characterizing the desire of a wife to murder her husband out of revenge. “Weihnacht,” on the other hand, uses Christian imagery of the incarnation to describe an erotic encounter, rejecting Christian sexual ethics with traditional Christian imagery.
\end{itemize}
personal life) of the Prinz Jussef persona. As time progressed, Lasker-Schüler began identifying further with the more abject characteristics of Joseph, whom she named an Arab prince, further distancing him from his Hebrew roots. She would also perform this persona in the cafés of Berlin, dressing up in a costume recognizable through its orientalist tropes, introducing herself as Prinz Jussef, and telling strangers made-up stories of a distant kingdom that belonged to him (or perhaps more properly, to her). She was also known to often sign her letters with his name. While some scholarship has treated Prinz Jussef as an *alter ego*, Nicola Behrmann argues convincingly that Lasker-Schüler’s prince should be understood “als eine Stellvertreterfigur für ihr Werk.” If we understand the Jussef character in this manner, this staple figure in her café performances can also be detected in the poetic subjectivity that we find in her poetry. The continuous staging of this identity, the particularities of which seem to change in each personification, confirms the malleable conception of personal identity present in Lasker-Schüler’s work. Not only does Lasker-Schüler push back against heteronormative conceptions of sex and gender by often cross dressing, identifying as a man, but she also undermined occidental exclusivity by identifying as a Muslim (even if, to be sure, she falls into orientalist clichés that are controversial in their own right). Her personification of an Arab prince should nevertheless

46 The figure of Prince Jussef appears for the first time in her writing in the 1908 short story, “Der Derwisch”, where the narrator writes: “Ich aber trage den lammblutenden Hirtenrock Jussufs, wie ihn seine Brüder dem Vater brachten” (Lasker-Schüler, *Werke und Briefe*, Vol 3.1, 116.). Jussuf is thus identified with the biblical figure, Joseph, the son of Jacob, whose brothers sold him into slavery because they were jealous of him. In the Genesis account, Joseph eventually rose to become the second in command in Egypt, assisting the Pharaoh in surviving a great famine. Thus understood, Joseph is simultaneously a figure of the outcast, a prophet, and a great ruler.

47 In 1914 she published a collection of short stories under the title, *Der Prinz von Theben: Ein Geschichtenbuch*, where the identity of this oriental prince seems to stabilize for a time. She publishes several different pieces of prose with Jussef as a main character until 1923, when she ceased writing publicly through this persona, although in her correspondence and private life she would continue to identify as the prince until her death in 1945. For a more complete trace of the presence of this figure throughout her literary corpus, see: Behrmann, Nicola’s article: “Varieté, Telefon, Kino”.

not be understood as a desperate cry for attention from the patriarchal world, but rather, as an act of defiance against the relentless demands of processes of social recognition that uphold well-defined social roles and culturally conditioned values. Her orientalist, cross-dressing costume does not demand recognition, but rather creates a space for alternative identities and aesthetic play, emphasizing the fluidity of identity as a whole. Lasker-Schüler’s ability to twist her own identity was thus not only intimately tied to her aesthetic output, but her literary persona is also deeply connected to an association with outsiders.

Abject beings are the object of the normative forces of society turning against those who are perceived as a threat to the assertion of normative subjectivity. The abject does not seek to be assimilated into the status quo, but much like Lasker-Schüler in the cafés of Berlin, stands opposed to the forces of integration, issuing by its presence alone a challenge to the dominance of the status quo. Not all abject beings are excluded in the same manner: some are excluded because of their gender identity, others because of their class, and still others because of race or nationality. A theory of the abject is not a wholesale rejection of normativity but undertakes a critique of the normative structures that fail to incorporate certain subjects, emphasizing vulnerable relationality as an alternative to normative contours that necessitate exclusion. Thus understood, the abject is not just an anti-position, a mere antithesis, but itself offers an alternative to normative conceptions of the subject: the vulnerability of abject bodies reveals the cracks in

49 This is also quite a serious reason by which one should be skeptical of claims that Lasker-Schüler’s gender-bending was done as an attempt to be taken seriously as a woman in a patriarchal society. (For one such claim, see: O’Brien, Mary-Elizabeth, “Ich war verkleidet als Poet... Ich bin Poetin!!” The Masquerade of Gender in Else Lasker-Schüler’s Work.”)

50 While Lasker-Schüler’s poetics can be described as cultivating a solidarity with the outcasts of society, her presentation of race, especially how African characters are presented in her work, is often very problematic. For more this, see: Ingold, Julia, Arabeske und Klage: Aspekte des Ausdrucks bei Else Lasker-Schüler, (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2022).
the contours of normative conceptions celebrating the power of the individual and its self-
sufficient autonomy. In the case of Lasker-Schüler, the lyrical subjects in her early poems
present us with an avant-garde rejection of moral mythologies that emphasize guilt, similarly
rejecting normalizing contours of the subject, and in doing so, also offer us an alternative
conception of subjectivity that incorporates vulnerability and relationality into their claims for
agency. As Thomas Elsaesser understands abjection, one should not confuse the normative
exclusion of the abject as “victimhood,” nor should it be associated merely with “resistance.”
Instead, abjection “figures as the freedom to assert – and to inhabit – a position of extreme
marginality and exclusion, imposed by the Other.” Therein lies the critical potential of the
abject: a freedom of assertion over and above the exclusion from the status quo.

In Lasker-Schüler’s lyric, the erotic-mystical presentation of self-knowledge is positioned
as a sort of Promethean transgression, but one that is set against the self-aggrandizement of the
autonomous subject and against a mythic sense of good and evil. Lasker-Schüler’s
“Erkenntnis” presents a paradigmatic instance of this tendency in her lyric, one that
oscillates between an anti-authoritarian celebration of transgression and a traumatized
lamentation for the wounds inflicted upon the one who suffers. Lasker-Schüler reimagines the
subject outside of Enlightenment, masculine, rational, sovereign typologies, and instead locates
freedom within a modernist, feminine, erotic, and vulnerable re-casting of the Prometheus figure
(as we shall see in her heterodox lyrical representation of the biblical Eve). The attention given

51 While I have framed Lasker-Schüler’s later and explicitly political works as having an element of resistance, I
agree with Elsässer that the abject figure alone is not a figure of resistance. Instead, where we might find a level of
resistance in Lasker-Schüler’s early lyric is within the poetic act that incorporates abject subjectivity into a greater
aesthetic trajectory of emancipation.

to the inherent vulnerability of the abject body leads to the assertion of freedom in relationality; her lyric gesture thereby positions the embrace of the abject as a remedy to isolation and as a pre-condition of forming healthy communities. She reimagines the marginality of this excluded type as a source of poetic freedom, an opportunity for self-creation and self-determination of one’s relations, while acknowledging the constitutive relationship between relationality and freedom. However, while her poetry elucidates the potential of abject subjectivity, it also examines the material limitations of this potential by acknowledging the historical trauma that abject figures can undergo and have undergone. She thereby balances her aesthetic idealization of abjection with an ambivalence that she derives from Jewish and Christian myth. In doing so, she reverses traditional motifs that cast the female body as the source of sin, emphasizing the emancipatory potentiality of a religiously inflected mythopoesis. In the poem “Erkenntnis,” Lasker-Schüler no longer presents Eve’s transgression in the garden as a fall narrative (as one finds in standard 19th-century interpretations of the garden myth), but as the simultaneous romanticization and problematization of abject subjectivity.

53 Here, one could glance at her poem “Weltflucht,” featured in the brochure Ich räume auf and which I will discuss shortly, where the poet describes a flight from the violence of normative communities. She opts instead for an interior world, one void of all restrictions (“das Grenzenlose”). The subjectivity of the poet, represented by the directionality that the poem reveals with its final line (“Meinwärts!”), stages an aesthetic exercise that inverts the violence latent in modern communal organization. This process involves the presentation of oneself to the world, accomplished by creating an aesthetic cover—a poetic mode of mediating between the boundless interiority of a poetic subject and the external world (“Fäden möchte ich um mich ziehen –”). The ‘threads’ which she desires to weave around herself can be understood in a paradoxical way as a self-determined binding of the chaos of infinite interiority with the community; these threads point toward a desire to “confuse” the thou and thus relate to this thou through a self-chosen and self-determined entanglement with a collective.
c. Guiltless Transgression: Re-writing the Genesis Myth

Lasker-Schüler’s conception of religion is heterodox to the core, but it functions as an aesthetic vision to imagine a different world; her poetic play with mythic figures thereby gestures towards the potential of alternative relationality as something latent within religious thought. Her lyric focus on interiority and the excess of desire aims to undermine the strict contours of the subject typically associated with the lyrical tradition: the lyrical-I understood as “pure” expression of inner desire, but in a manner socially recognizable by society as symbolically mediating its own conception of interiority.54 Lasker-Schüler regards such processes of uprooting as intrinsic to the Jewish and Christian conceptions of guilt itself (the articulation of the norm which indicates the potential of its own suspension), proposing Eve’s indiscretion as a model by which to cultivate abject modes of subjectivity as sources of freedom.

The poem, “Erkenntnis,” originally published in Der siebente Tag (1905), at first seeks to extract poetic subjectivity from the overbearing semantics of guilt in mythopoetic forms. She thereby refracts the unstable contours of self-sufficient subjectivity through a biblical lens, undermining any assertion of a purely autonomous subject. As Kristina Mendicino comments, this poem “marks a departure from any account of Genesis that would proceed from a sovereign creative subject, by gravitating precisely toward those moments where biblical creation degenerates and the beginning breaks down into false starts.”55 Lasker-Schüler draws upon the figure of Eve, the first figure in the bible to challenge the sovereignty of the creator over

54 As Theodor Adorno argues in “Rede über Lyrik und Gesellschaft,” the subjective nature of the genre of lyric gives critics a concrete object—mediated by language—by which to identify the normative modes of subjectivity in society. Lasker-Schüler recognizes this and mobilizes alternative, or as I argue, abject forms of subjectivity in her lyric in order to undermine such forces of normativity.

creation, and refashions her as a figure who asserts her own autonomy through challenging the theocratic order. Still, this assertion of autonomy is undermined by the poem itself. A deep tension emerges between the poetic attempt to revalue and restructure the world through a self-creating mythopoetic agent (Eve herself) and the way that the semantics of religious tradition impact and constrain the world in which she lives.

After an initial prelude, the poet addresses Eve in the moments following her rejection of divine law. The primary gesture of this initial address to Eve recasts her story beyond any conception of guilt. Set in the moment after Eve asserts her own abjection from the theocratic order, the poet asks Eve to take a confessional, but distinctly guiltless approach to her transgression:

Wilder, Eva, bekenne schweifender,
Deine Sehnsucht war die Schlange,
[…]
Wilder, Eva, bekenne reißender,
Den Tag, den du Gott abrangst,
Da du zu früh das Licht sahst\textsuperscript{56}

By intreating a confession, or in other words a vulnerable self-acknowledgement of transgression, the poet seeks to free Eve from the guilt of her sin and to emphasize the positive results of her decision, without denying that a transgression has in fact occurred. The call for a wildness in Eve’s confession affirms a sexually connotated desire, her existence in a network of erotic relations. The perceived fierceness of the primordial mother is nevertheless offset by a lyric tenderness on the part of the poet, one who is not threatened by Eve’s abject status, but instead recognizes this ferocity as a source of creative potential. In what can best be called a poetic theodicy, this poem seeks to save the primordial mother from a tradition that understood

\textsuperscript{56} Lasker-Schüler, Else, \textit{Werke und Briefe: Kritische Ausgabe}, Vol. 1.1, 81-82.
her as the source of original sin, the genitor of evil in the human world, and thereby the primal heir of unforgivable guilt.

By recasting Eve as the source of salvific knowledge, Lasker-Schüler does not just propose a redemption of the individual figure, but also indexes a redeemed humanity. One of the particularities of this resignification of Eve consists in a concatenation of the mythical figures of Prometheus and Pandora. The myths of Prometheus and Pandora are themselves deeply connected: Pandora, the first human woman created by Zeus, was a devious gift given to humans to punish them for Prometheus’ transgression of gifting fire and knowledge. The comparison of Eve and Pandora has been commonplace since at least the beginning of Christianity; both are women whose rebellion causes evil to enter the human world. In Lasker-Schüler’s poem, Eve stands out as both a figure of knowledge and of transgression: she has violated God’s commandment (“den Tag den du Gott abrangst”), but this violation is inspired by a state of enlightenment (“Da du zu früh das Licht sahst”). Eve’s change in knowledge thus preceded and inspired her rebellion. Eve is thereby positioned as a re-imagined Promethean character; but what is unique to Lasker-Schüler’s conception of transgression is that she locates it within a sexualized female figure akin to the temptress Pandora. Unlike Eve, Pandora’s misdeed was not punished—she was herself thought to be a punishment: a “lovely evil” or a “curse for mortal men.”

Pinpointing Eve’s transgression within a blend of knowledge and erotic desire, Lasker-Schüler gives a heterodox and syncretic account of the biblical garden myth, embracing the revolutionary energy characteristic of Prometheus’ rejection of the divine injunction—an association present in German literary history since Goethe’s “Prometheus”—while

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simultaneously construing female curiosity and sexuality as something positive, something life-affirming. Eve, as a combination of Prometheus and Pandora, represents the ambivalence that is characteristic of the knowledge she introduces—one that willfully disobeys authority while simultaneously releasing evil and hope into the world.

Within the trajectory of this initial address, the poet presents Eve as one who breaks out of the constraints of mythic subjugation by embodying the knowledge of liberation in her transgression. No longer is Eve the woman who introduces negativity, suffering, and death to human life, but like Prometheus, she creates a new type of subject. Here, however, the poet emphasizes female fertility as the creative capacity that produces a new vision of humankind. Eve’s body is depicted as possessing a newfound power in the aftermath of her rejection of the divine order: an autonomous capacity for self-reproduction.

Riesengroß
Steigt aus Deinem Schoß
Zuerst wie Erfüllung zagend,
Dann sich ungestüm raffend,
    Sich selbst schaffend
    Gott-Seele . . . . .

Und sie wächst
Über die Welt hinaus,
Ihren Anfang verlierend,
Über alle Zeit hinaus.58

This autonomous fertility not only accentuates her difference from the masculine body, but also her rejection of a masculine-coded conception of a sovereign subject as an autonomous agent. In this way, the poet asserts Eve’s freedom from patriarchal sexual normativity—her status as an abject being—albeit in an affirmative and life-producing state. Although she has violated divine

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58 Lasker-Schüler, Werke und Briefe, Vol. 1.1, 81-82.
law, or perhaps precisely because she has done so, Eve becomes the source of divine self-
creation in the world, one that grows in intensity toward infinity ("über alle Zeit hinaus").
Lasker-Schüler portrays Eve’s womb as a messianic space imbued with the potentiality of self-
creation ("sich selbst schaffend"), a space where relations can be forged anew. It is important to
note that while the autonomous mode of reproduction does represent a freedom from the
biological constraints of conjoining the female to the male, the poetic trajectory is not towards
autonomy as self-sufficient subjectivity. Rather the confessional address signals a different type
of relationality: one that exists on Eve’s own terms. Eve’s subjectivity is thus distinguished from
an autonomous conception of the subject in her relation to her own creation: to herself, to the
God-soul. The exclusion from divine law becomes a source of freedom—a freedom from
the normative, so-conceived "natural" law of reproductive morality and a freedom to establish her
own relations—which effectively suspends the traumatic discourse of guilt.

Walter Benjamin also provides a helpful analogue for understanding this mode of
politically inflected religiosity in “Zur Kritik der Gewalt” when he makes a distinction between
the drive of mythic violence [mythische Gewalt] toward authoritarian moral law and a form of
divine power [göttliche Gewalt], which is exemplified by the gift of the commandments.
Benjamin argues that divine authority constitutes the antithesis of myth in all respects:

Ist die mythische Gewalt rechtsetzend, so die göttliche rechtsvernichtend, setzt jene
Grenzen, so vernichtet diese grenzenlos, ist die mythische verschuldend und sühnend
zugleich, so die göttliche entsühnend, ist jene drohend, so diese schlagend, jene blutig, so
diese auf unblutige Weise letal.59

The operative distinction between mythic and divine violence as conceived by Benjamin is that
divine violence is not enforceable. As Butler indicates, in Benjamin’s critique we find an

59 Benjamin, Walter, Gesammelte Schriften: Band II.1, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 199.
interpretation of the Jewish tradition to which we are not typically accustomed. Benjamin—and I argue that Lasker-Schüler participates in this same tradition—separates the commandment from its ability to be enforced.60 Benjamin thereby rejects an understanding of the commandments that underlies the generation of guilt, positing instead that the commandment is a private ethical imperative meant to inspire one to act rightly, but not meant to punish the transgressor. This same emancipatory potential drives Lasker-Schüler’s initial portrayal of Eve.

d. The Remnants of the Abject: Eve’s Shame and Anguish

Lasker-Schüler’s re-mythologization of the primordial mother thus endeavors to break the authoritarian cycle that reproduces guilty subjects.61 However, there is a tension in the poem between the poet’s attempt to absolve Eve of her guilt and the temporality of this address. Addressing the mythological figure that marks the beginning of historical time, the poet is unable to undo historical trauma that has already been produced. Where the opening and closing sections of the poem belong to a poet writing in the present, the song in the middle of the poem belongs to Eve herself. This shift in voice is in many ways a key gesture of the poem, one to which I will return later, and it produces a tension between the desire of the poet for a liberated, feminine, creative ideal and the trauma of the figure who does not yet embody this ideal. Instead of a liberated Eve, at the center of this poem, Eve gives voice to her own song. But rather than confessing her newfound freedom, her voice discloses a distinctive vulnerability—an insecure relationship to the world and to others. Eve is traumatized by her rejection of the law and is filled

60 Butler writes, “The commandment delivers an imperative precisely without the capacity to enforce in any way the imperative it communicates.” (“Critique, Coercion, and Sacred Life in Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’,” 204.)

61 Such a schema is signified in the biblical garden myth: the primal commandment that forbids eating of the tree of good and evil.
with agony as her perception grows with knowledge of good and evil: “Ich fürchte mich nun / Vor meinem wachenden Blick –” In direct contradiction to the framing of the poet who sees Eve’s rebellion outside contexts of guilt, Eve is herself plagued with an internal feeling of shame from which the poet’s voice has been unable to free her: “Denn meine wilde Pein / Wird Scham.” In structuring the poem in this fashion, Lasker-Schüler emphasizes the historical limitation that shame has placed on the abject body. This tension—between the desire for liberation from the constraints of the ethical and the facticity of the traumatized body still perceiving itself through the semantics of shame—lies at the heart of this poem. Shame becomes a factor that limits the potential of transgressive freedom: a force exercised by a status quo normativity that is not easily overcome. Her poetry strives toward a space outside of this shame, while complicating this path through the accumulation of guilt in mythic history.

To put this point differently: the religious impulse in the early work of Else Lasker-Schüler is to imagine a community that “makes space” (in the sense of aufräumen) for abject beings without sublimating the critical potential of their abject status. The resultant imagination is one that incorporates conflict as a mode of organization. It is important to emphasize that Lasker-Schüler’s religious imagination is not invested in dogma. Rather, as Cristanne Miller argues, “Lasker-Schüler attempts to unite religions through cumulative and metaphorical, not theological or philosophical, methods.”62 Hers is not a religion that seeks to exclude; instead, religion operates as a poetic form of associating with those who have traditionally been excluded, with what critical theorists might refer to as the non-identical. By making space for the abject, Lasker-Schüler’s poetry participates in the attempt “to rearticulate the very terms of

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62 Miller, Cultures of Modernism, 141.
symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility.\textsuperscript{63} Her poetry thus recasts the relationship between the ‘I’ and the ‘we,’ staging the conflict between the individual and the community, but also calling into question the very contours of the normative boundaries that exclude abject subjects. She undermines boundaries between male and female, denies distinctions between rich and poor, and seeks to cultivate a mode of relational subjectivity that is grounded in erotic, embodied experience. The political gesture of her poetry lies within this matrix: within the attempt to imagine a network of relations where the abject is not sublimated nor integrated into the norm, but where the status quo reimagines the ‘threat’ of the abject as a source of creative potential.

The contours of this gesture can be extracted by attending to the structure of the poem. The poem is formally divided into four parts, each with a distinct poetic voice and temporal structure. Beginning with a sort of prologue (lines 1-9, which I will refer to as section I), the poetic voice speaks as a collective ‘we’ and seems to be placed in the present. The next temporal structure (lines 10-37 or section II, and 58-63 or section IV) surrounds the voice of Eve that lies at the center of the poem and consists in an address by the poet in the present to the historical, postlapsarian Eve. There is a palpable tension between this address to Eve by the poet (sections II and IV) and the moment when Eve herself is given a voice in the poem (section III, lines 38 to 57). These distinct moments create a complex image in which the poet’s own conception of Eve, as seen in sections II and IV, seem to differ from Eve’s voice at the center of the poem. This tension is productive for drawing out the difference between the shaming function of the Genesis myth (seen in section III) and the poetics of abjection (as an ambivalent affirmation and critique of abjection) at stake in Lasker-Schüler’s early poetry. The preface of this poem (I) already

\textsuperscript{63} Butler, Judith, \textit{Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"}, xiv.
foregrounds this tension, mobilizing Eve’s “Urgeschrei,” to call for a new form of human relationality that does not reproduce the weight of guilt inherited from the primal mother.

The transgression in this poem is steeped in erotic semantics that seems to be the only element uniting the contemporary poet and Eve’s own voice. Even the title of this poem invokes an erotic mode of knowledge, referencing Genesis 4:1 “Und Adam erkannte sein Weib Eva,” which is the first mention of sexual consummation in the bible. The verb “Erkennen” is typically understood in the history of philosophy as a disembodied knowledge, but this poem adopts the sexual connotations of the biblical language to re-embody and even eroticize knowledge. The poet’s address to Eve understands her as a transgressor, but in soliciting her knowledge through the aestheticized form of a song (“Singe, Eva, Dein banges Lied”), the poet also attempts to disentangle her rebellion from the accrual of guilt. Lasker-Schüler thus unites the most instinctual urges and desires with the highest forms of reason, carnal knowledge with a form of insight.64 It is not just the ecstasy and affirmation of the individual that is at stake with this transvaluation: this form of erotic knowledge also requires a certain vulnerability, a disposition towards the adamic ‘you.’ Such an attitude resists the naturalization of mythic values, refuses to punish the transgressors, and instead creates space for the lawbreaker to express their abject status, their non-conformity with the status quo.

However, when given space in the center of the poem to speak for herself, the initial impulse of Eve—far from representing a paragon of transgressive self-creation—is to call for the other. After tasting the sweetness of her freedom, fear and agony begin to enter the stage and she seeks cover through her partner: “Verstecke mich, Du - / Denn meine wilde Pein / Wird

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64 Lasker-Schüler, Werke und Briefe, Vol. 1.1, 81-82.
It is important to note that this ‘you,’ although contextually referring to an adamic figure, is not gendered. The desire to hide oneself seems to result from the consequence of transgressive desire: “Verstecke mich, Du, / Tief in das Auge der Nacht, / Daß mein Tag Nachtdunkel trage.” This act of hiding oneself with another (“Verstecke mich, Du”) follows upon the figure’s realization of her abject status: a somatic reaction to knowledge that being alone in the world is undesirable. Eve’s erotic energy is reoriented toward this adamic ‘you’ by self-consciously disclosing a primordial vulnerability. Here again relationality is emphasized, but from Eve’s perspective this vulnerability is less idealized, and more grounded in embodied experience. The concealment of the self exists in tension with the desire of the poet who frames Eve’s song in the opening and closing strophes, namely, to establish Eve as a figure of affirmative and self-sufficient freedom. Intimacy and vulnerability allow the subject to remain incomplete; the relation to the other does not require dependence but does undermine this desire for total self-sufficiency. Whereas the poet writing in the present has fantasies of Eve’s autonomy, the primordial mother’s own song gives voice to a different set of concerns: she embraces erotic relationality in a manner that grounds the poet’s somewhat aggressive assertion of avant-garde autonomy in embodied experience and a relation to the other.

This newfound interpersonal desire is furthermore intimately tied to a non-penetrative erotic power. Despite the biblical context of sexual consummation (“Adam knew his wife”), we do not find a traditional, religious notion of pro-creative sex anywhere in this poem. Instead, we encounter a hope that the erotic partner (the adamic ‘you’) will absolve Eve from transgression

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65 Ibid. 81-82.
66 Ibid, 81-82.
67 See also the final line: “Flüchte um vor der Spitze deiner schmälsten Wimper noch!”
by covering or obscuring her insecurity. Eve’s response is also one of choosing vulnerability, but takes an erotic character, rather than the confessional approach proposed by the poet. The imagined relation of the poet to Eve is also modelled upon a non-penetrative way of being. The poet’s address to Eve (sections II and IV) surrounds and envelops Eve’s song (section III) in a formal way, but it does not sublate her voice. The poem thus acts as a womb, creating a protected space for Eve’s anti-authoritarian subjectivity to gestate. While the poet’s imagined relation to a mythic past (sections II and IV) attempts to free the subject from the binding power of guilt, it also makes a space within this liberatory imagination for the traumatized other, those whose wounds cannot be healed by the imagination. Eve’s song lies in the center of the poem as a kernel that refuses to be suspended: a trauma that cannot be overcome. Eve’s voice does not belong to the poetic trajectory; instead, it complicates the avant-garde sense of freedom that the poet proclaims for Eve. The historical trauma of Eve and the presence of Eve’s voice thus implicitly challenges the authority and poetic sovereignty of the lyric voice manifest in the frame in the poem. The voice of Eve represents the persistent presence of the wounds of a traumatic injury that still marks the self: a renunciation of bodily autonomy resulting from the erotic encounter.

Far from merely imagining a self-creating subject who is free from all external constructs of guilt, this poem’s emancipatory trajectory is tempered by this inescapable contact with the traumas (rather than the potentialities) of the abject body. Eve’s “primordial scream” (I) cannot be silenced; it remains untamed, permeating the present world with an inescapable voice from the past: “Es tönt aus allen wilden Flüssen.”68 In doing so, the prelude preconditions the poet’s

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Nietzschean gesture of ‘re-valuing’ the past (II)—treating the ‘it was’ as a ‘so I willed it’—complicating the assertion of sovereignty with the echoes of Eve’s trauma. The endurance of Eve’s song (III) in the midst of an attempt to revise the meaning of the Edenic myth undermines the power of the mythopoetic construct to shape the contemporary world. Lasker-Schüler brings to light a tension between the poet’s desire to establish a world free from guilt and the immutability of Eve’s mythical position, which is, in turn, channeled into an emancipatory politics of making space for the abject Other.

Lasker-Schüler presents us with an erotic epistemology—a mode of self-knowledge invested with a critical potential to suspend mythic violence. Nonetheless, Lasker-Schüler recognizes the power of religion, of mythology, of revelation to shape this relation. By returning to the primordial scene and attempting to free Eve from her guilt, this poem presents erotic transgression as a condition for the production of knowledge, the “Erkenntnis” produced in and by the poem itself. This knowledge is, however, intimately tied to the experience of rejecting authority—an experience which is revealed to both traumatize as well as inspire poetic creativity. This production of experiential knowledge is thus not always positive. Lasker-Schüler’s Eve can thus be understood as an erotic renegotiation of the biblical origin story by imagining the distinctive possibilities that transgressive knowledge can hold, all the while acknowledging the ambivalence of this knowledge imposed by historical trauma on the body of the abjected individual.

e. Abject Revolution: Cultivating Erotic Communities

As indicated above, the attempt to free Eve of the guilt of the Jewish and Christian traditions also indexes a redeemed humanity. Such a proposition expands the ambivalent characteristic of the
primordial mother to that of the community, positing a collectivity that makes space for abject bodies. This mythopoetic re-telling allows the poet to imagine a world without an unpayable debt to the divine, but in so doing also to imagine a praxis that is free of guilt’s historical oppression. Eve, as a particular historical figure, is understood as the first person to undergo such subjugation. Her “Urgeschrei” in the preface (I) becomes a model of revolutionary poetry because it signifies the overthrowing of hierarchies, both in the moral sense, but also in the poetic order. This cry calls for an equalization of human experience by recognizing the trauma that lies at the center of self-knowledge. The poem’s preface thus stages this primordial cry in its echoes throughout history and begins to model a revolutionary response commensurate with a vulnerability that the poem evokes at its outset: “Wir reißen uns die Hüllen ab, / Vom Schall der Vorwelt hingerissen, / Ich nackt! Du nackt!” Here we find the roots of a collective—a ‘we’—imagined in a state of reshaping their relations to each other. There is something Dionysian at play here: a suggestion that this erotic relationality escapes the world of appearances, the world that reproduces the guilt humans have inherited from their first parents. In this sense, the nakedness seems to be a gesture of returning to a primal subject, to a bare conception of relationality. This poetic ‘we’ imagines a mode of human gathering that is focused upon the community’s collective affirmation of individual desire, regardless of its relation to the law. By re-signifying transgression as something to be embraced, the transgressive other is no longer

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69 Mendicino comments in a similar vein, claiming: “Novel creation is shown within the poem to arise by accidental permutations within an anarchic atmosphere that cancels the laws of physics, liquefies the solid, and stifles all sovereign speakers who might lay claim to the first-person plural, and the poem is consistent enough in its unsettling effects to destabilize the instance of poetic speech that would tell of all these things, too.” (“Undoing-Creation-Anew”, 669).

70 For more on bare relationality, see Giorgio Agamben’s conception of ‘bare life’ in Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life.
presented as a danger to the community but is incorporated into its body as a constitutive aspect of collectivity.

Lasker-Schüler’s conception of the ‘we’ thus has revolutionary connotations. At the outset of the poem, we are presented with the formulation of a collective inspired by an erotic encounter in the face of the existential threats of industrialized conditions. We find a suffering collective that discovers the primordial knowledge of a mythopoetic genesis: the naked and vulnerable I-you relation that allows desire to be an interpersonal binding agent. The preface of “Erkenntnis” presents a mode of collectivity that is simultaneously modelled on a mythopoetic relation to the primordial mother, while also embracing the binding of disparate subjects into a community through vulnerability:

Schwere steigt aus allen Erden auf
Und wir ersticken im Bleidunst,
Jedoch die Sehnsucht reckt sich
Und speit wie eine Feuersbrunst.
Es tönt aus allen wilden Flüssen
Das Urgeschrei, Evas Lied.
Wir reißen uns die Hüllen ab,
Vom Schall der Vorwelt hingerissen,
Ich nackt! Du nackt!71

The plural first persons [wir] find themselves in a crisis, struggling to survive (“wir ersticken im Bleidunst”). However, this threat to life—being suppressed by the increasing ‘gravity’ [Schwere] of the situation—is met with a desire that still blazes (“Jedoch die Sehnsucht reckt sich / Und speit wie eine Feuersbrunst”). This desire is characterized as wild, irrational, and even dangerous, although it nevertheless binds the collective together in the equalization inherent in its attunement to the suffering body. This ‘we’ feels the reverberating, revolutionary “primordial

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71 Lasker-Schüler, Else, Werke und Briefe, Vol. 1.1, 81-82.
scream” of the traumatized primordial mother. The evasiveness of the modern, industrial crisis (the suffocating “lead-mist”) operates to bind individuals together into a we, into an indeterminate collective formation. When the preface finally professes the revolutionary act of tearing away the veil (“Wir reißen uns die Hüllen ab”), this self-exposure is inspired by the burning desire produced by a return to the origins of human transgression. She expresses a call for exposed vulnerability: a desire for a change in human relations, to expel pretense completely from relationality and instead begin renegotiating the contours of the human through relationality.

The attempt on the part of the poet to eradicate the concept of guilt by proclaiming the autonomy of the primordial mother is directly connected to an attempt to free those oppressed by the industrial age, the suffocation produced by mists of lead. Lasker-Schüler proposes two responses to bourgeois oppression within the story of Eve’s rebellion: an aesthetic ideal and a mythopoetic praxis which, on the one hand, embraces transgressive self-creation, and on the other hand, constitutes a community through an attunement to the vulnerability of the other. This poem thus invites us to revalue transgression outside the concept of guilt—to radically restructure society without recourse to ressentiment—while also seeking solace in the other (“Verstecke mich du”) as an answer to failed attempts to establish autonomy and do justice to the concrete effects that the violence of abjection exerts on suffering bodies. The politics in such a poem thereby exist within a constellation of imagining the possible and coping with the actual; the revolutionary cry is combined with a therapeutic praxis.
For reasons already mentioned above, Lasker-Schüler’s relationship to religion is not simple to determine. Raised Jewish, Lasker-Schüler was acquainted with many people of different faiths during her lifetime. However, in her private life, she often expressed frustration with protestant Christians. Her relationship to Catholics was more uneasy; after her brother nearly converted to Catholicism before his untimely death in 1882, Lasker-Schüler looked to the faith that had captivated her brother as a source of poetic (not devotional) inspiration. But perhaps her most important Catholic confidant was her poetic idol and dear friend, Peter Hille. In an essay that proclaims Hille’s poetic virtuosity, Lasker-Schüler claims that his bohemian relation to faith taught her, “daß es nur einen Glauben, wie einen Gott, eine Schöpfung, einen Himmel gibt. Die Religion nur die Erbin vieler Namen und lallender Heidennamen sich zu repräsentieren und Streites leider verpflichtet fühlt.” Her poetry continually blends different religious traditions, treating them as sources of inspiration for a single religious vision. Though unwavering in her personal devotion to Judaism, she could thereby be understood as an heiress of rhetoric that confesses a ‘universal’ religion. Hers is a religion void of any dogmatic or confessional boundaries; she thus maintains her Jewish identity in constant dialogue with other religious traditions. While her religious investments lie predominantly with the other two Abrahamic traditions (i.e., Christianity and Islam), Lasker-Schüler also draws upon disparate pagan mythologies (e.g., Greek and Roman mythology or the ancient Egyptian religion), expanding the universality of her religious engagement. Lasker-Schüler’s poetic engagement with religion can thus be understood in the tradition of Lessing, Novalis, and Hölderlin, all of whom mobilized

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poetic practices to illustrate the commensurability of different religious traditions with one another.

Religion, understood in this perspective, is less of a confessional or doctrinal proposition and more of a communal binding agent. Religion, thus understood, is a deeply personal commitment to a certain way of living, but this personal commitment is understood as having consequences on a greater scale for human relationality. Religious life structures the relation to others paradigmatically through mythic perspectives, but also practically through ritual, liturgy, and other forms of religious praxis; that is, certain individual commitments are revealed to have political consequences. Still, in Lasker-Schüler’s early poetry, there is a palpable tension between the individual and the community, which in turn is mediated by religious imagery. Because of her constant emphasis on subjectivity, if there is a political vision to be found in this early poetry, it must be a politics that is equally invested in the collective as it is in the individual. In other words, the politics found here are preparatory, in the sense they are preparing subjects to demand a different economy of human relations.

Lasker-Schüler often combines erotic desire with religious imagery to further this end, supplementing a drive-based understanding of eroticism with an understanding of the erotic that forms human subjectivity. The erotic sphere thus attains a proto-political significance, proclaiming universal relevance to human subjectivity and preparing the subject for relation to the collective, in a manner quite similar to religious practice. Lasker-Schüler’s unique religious investments emphasize subjects that are not defined by their role in society (i.e., not by their religion, their profession, nor their associations). Likewise, erotic motifs emphasize vulnerability as a mode of agency, relation as a space of freedom and potential. Religious motifs in the work of Lasker-Schüler occasion a turn toward the self that is not deaf to the cries of the oppressed,
thereby structuring a mode of ‘universal’ religion that does not allow normativity to import exclusionary categories, but rather to embrace and liberate the oppressed while enabling an alternative notion of collectivity. This notion of collectivity, however, is intimately tied to erotic forms of expression, emphasizing intimacy and consent as the primary modes of relationality. Such a notion of collectivity makes space for the participation of all, but (as is the case with interior religiosity) is incapable of forcing participation.

a. Fleeing the Violent Collective: “Weltflucht”

Within the complicated relationship between the individual and the community found in Lasker-Schüler’s poetry, perhaps no poem better captures the violent potential of collectivity as the poem “Weltflucht,” published originally in Styx (1902). In this poem, we encounter a retreat from the world, which calls to mind Jewish and Christian mystical discourses that problematize "this world" as a realm of moral negativity (e.g., sin). Because of this allusion, an initial reading of this poem may suggest a regressive politics, or at minimum, an apolitical aspiration. The hermit, the mystic, or the religious retreat from the world more generally are all largely associated with visions of politics that often accept deplorable circumstances in the here-and-now in favor of super-sensuous access to a world ‘beyond.’ However, in a manner that mirrors Lasker-Schüler’s conception of aesthetic exercise as a mode of “Askese,”73 in this poem we encounter a mode of aesthetic hermitage that could not be so simply characterized as a complete retreat from the world into a privileged domain of interiority. Instead, the categories between

73 Ibid, 79.
interiority and community are challenged, suggesting that the poet’s retreat from the world
[Weltflucht] is also intimately bound up in defining her own relationship to the community—one
that may be characterized as an abject relation to the collective. That is, the poet frames herself
as a disruptive presence that holds a critical potential to undermine the status quo, but
nonetheless is itself characterized by a vision of alternative collectivity that ‘makes space’ for the
abject.

Lasker-Schüler's integration of this poem into her later politically inflected brochure (“Ich
räume auf”) suggests that this immediate association of “Weltflucht” with a depoliticized "flight
from the world" should be called into question. As already discussed, in “Ich räume auf” Lasker-
Schüler presents a vision of the poet as someone with world-constituting powers and
simultaneously associates poetic production with the revolutionary rhetoric of revolt. It is
important to note that in this brochure she also re-positions this particular poem as an expression
of her mystical “Ursprache.”74 While this poem appears at first glance to enact a retreat from the
world, in this retreat, the poet does not abdicate her world-constitutive responsibilities. Indeed,
her retreat into interiority presents the possibility of escaping from external violence by entering
an indeterminate space of individuality, one in which relations with the world can be re-
constituted. In doing so, she constructs a negative relationship to the community, one where she
is excluded through the violence of association with this external community—a set of
interlocutors in the second-person plural (Ihr) who are presented as a problematic group due to

74 As Lasker-Schüler introduces this poem in her political brochure, she writes: “Ich räume auf, für mich, für meine
dichtenden Freunde, für die lebenden und toten Dichter, zunächst im Interesse der Dichtung. Die Gedichte meines
ersten Buches: Styx, das im Verlag Axel Juncker erschien, dichtete ich zwischen 15 und 17 Jahren. Ich hatte damals
meine Ursprache wiedergefunden, noch aus der Zeit Sauls, des Königlichen Wildjuden herstammend. Ich verstehe
sie heute noch zu sprechen, die Sprache, die ich wahrscheinlich im Traume einatmete. Sie dürfte Sie interessieren zu
hören. Mein Gedicht Weltflucht dichtete ich u. a. in diesem mystischen Asiatisch.” (Ibid.)
the limitations and constraints these interlocutors impose on the poet. At a fundamental level, these restrictions can be understood as stemming from a false recognition of the individual by the community—in other words, not allowing her to assert her own status as an abject subject. In doing so, her poetry seeks to imagine a liberatory community, whereby recognition is not the standard mode by which one derives status.

WELTFLUCHT
Ich will in das Grenzenlose
Zu mir zurück,
Schon blüht die Herbstzeitlose
Meiner Seele,
Vielleicht – ist’s schon zu spät zurück!
O, ich sterbe unter Euch!
Da Ihr mich erstickt mit Euch.
Fäden möchte ich um mich ziehen –
Wirrwarr endend!
Beirrend,
Euch verwirrend,
Um zu entfliehen
Meinwärts!75

Although I will later argue that a positive notion of collectivity can be found in Lasker-Schüler’s lyric, here we see an anonymous collective [Ihr] presented as a violent force from which the poet retreats. As the poet flees this violence, she opts instead for an interior world, one void of all restrictions (“das Grenzenlose”). The informal mode with which the poet addresses this collective is also significant, as it reveals a certain familiarity with this plural grouping. Christianne Miller understands that this communal ‘you’ to “suffocate the poet because ‘you’ impose ‘selves’ that confuse.”76 The resultant confusion of identity can be understood as the consequence of the lack of recognition of abject identity: individuals within the community are

75 Lasker-Schüler, Else. Werke und Briefe. Vol. 1.1. 34.
76 Miller, Cristanne. Cultures of Modernism: 136.
only ‘allowed’ certain categories of identity that do not adhere with that of the poet. Such an imposition of an identity on the individual by the community is here revealed to be a violent action, associated with the death of the individual (“O, ich sterbe unter Euch!”). These boundaries of recognized identity (‘German’, ‘Jew’, ‘woman’, ‘man’, etc.) are, however, inverted by the mystical retreat into the self, which allows individuals an agency in constructing their own identity apart from the community.

This mode of interiority is characterized—in contradistinction to the restricted mode of this particular community—as a life-affirming zone of undifferentiation. The borderlessness (“das Grenzenlose / zu mir zurück,”) points toward an unstable notion of internal identity. Rather than an ontological understanding of the subject that posits a stable notion of self-identity, this poem points toward an understanding of the individual as containing seemingly infinite potential within itself. Categories of identity are revealed as analogous modes of cognizing a subject, but beneath the surface lies an abyss of possibilities, waiting to be actualized. The botanical metaphor in the first stanza (“Schon blüht die Herbstzeitlose / Meiner Seele”) points toward an organic mode of actualizing potential that lies latent beneath the surface. Even if the ontology of the subject is ultimately epistemologically inaccessible, the infinite potential of interiority can be thought as a life-giving drive within the subject that particularizes itself organically, independent of external perception.

The image of the *Herbstzeitlose* is also particularly interesting in this regard, not least because it contains poisonous leaves, but also because the flower emerges before these leaves. Thus, at this moment we see the potentiality of the soul [*Seele*]—of interiority—blossoming, actualizing, but with this is foreshadowed the emergence of a poisonous material as well. These leaves are, of course, not poisonous to the flower itself, but to others who mistake the plant for
something that it is not—who recognize the flower falsely as a benign plant. The actualization of
interiority that we find in this initial retreat—the blossoming of the "naked lady" flower (as they
are known in English)—can thereby be understood as the first step towards reconstituting a new
relationship to the community.

As the suffocating presence of the community is inverted by the retreat into interiority,
the poet responds with a series of ongoing poetic processes: the paradoxical perpetuation of
chaotic confusion through persistent “ending” (“Wirrwarr endend!”) and the simultaneous
misleading and entangling of the community with the indeterminate space of poetic interiority
(“Beirrend, / Euch verwirrend”). The act of a poetic retreat from the world (“Um zu entfliehen”
or “Weltflucht”) is revealed as an aesthetic process of creation—of embracing disorder
(“Wirrwarr”) in poetic form. That this poem is written in free verse is thereby not insignificant
and one should also note the use of zeugma and syllepsis as these relations to the community are
reconstituted; in other words, the association of those who "do not belong" is established in
poetic form. This poetic affirmation of disorder does not, however, preclude relation to a
community. Instead, this relation will take an indeterminate form without requiring an external,
often violent, imposition of identity. In lieu of identity formation through communal recognition,
an interiorized aesthetic of self-becoming is proposed. The aesthetic formation of self-identity
outside of the communal process allows the subject a renewed relationship to the plural Other, to
the “ihr.” Relationality is rethought as a source of freedom as Lasker-Schüler proposes an
alternative notion of collectivity constituted by poetic processes. In other words, the relation of
the poet to her infinite interior self becomes a model for the poet to relate to the collective.

The subjectivity of the poet, represented by the directionality that the poem reveals with
its final line (“Meinwärts!”), stages an aesthetic exercise that inverts the violence that lies latent
in modern communal organization. This process involves the presentation of oneself to the world, which is accomplished in this poem by creating an aesthetic cover—a poetic mode of mediating between the boundless interiority of a poetic subject and the external world (“Fäden möchte ich um mich ziehen –”). The ‘threads’ which she desires to weave around herself can be understood in a paradoxical way as a self-determined binding of the chaos of infinite interiority with the community; these threads point toward a desire to “confuse” the thou and thus relate to this thou through a self-chosen and self-determined entanglement with a collective. The violence of a community-imposed identity placed on the poet is reflected in the grammar of the poem; the poet is the grammatical object of the community’s actions (“Ihr mich erstickt mit Euch”). However, the weaving of these threads reverses the subject-object relation between the poet and the community. The poet’s retreat into interiority revives the poet’s agency when combined with her aesthetic production; the plural ‘you’ [Euch] is shifted to the grammatical object of the poem’s movement (“Euch verwirrend”), the object of aesthetic production. The process of aesthetic production thereby inverts the violence performed by the community and also constitutes a new mode of the poet’s relation to the ‘you.’ The poet’s abject status—her non-identical relation to herself—becomes a model also of communal relations.  

The seemingly monastic retreat from the world, much like those religious predecessors who sought refuge from a world that did not share their values, does not point toward a regressive politics of quietism. Rather, the retreat is a proto-political period of preparation that allows Lasker-Schüler to constitute a new relation of the poet to the plural you [Euch],

77 Here the non-identical relation to the self can be explained in other terms as the relation of the finite subject to the infinite potential contained within subjectivity. The non-identity signals the inability to contain the “Grenzenlose” within the subject who is nonetheless singular and therefore finite. The abject status is thereby derived by the assertion of the subject’s infinite identity potential over and above the categories that society offers the subject to conceptualize self-identity (e.g., "man," "woman," "German," "Jew," etc.).
predicated upon her ‘cover’ of her own identity by the threads, which she weaves around herself. She acknowledges her own abject status—the inability of the current structures of the plural you [Euch] to recognize her properly. Reconfiguring this relation by chaotizing it, the poet’s relation to the communal world is not a flight outward, but rather a disruption of the logic that makes the plural you [Euch] into a source of oppression—she treats her own abject relation to herself as a model of relating to the community. Gabriel Trop argues that the ‘threads’ [Fäden] that permeate Lasker-Schüler’s oeuvre constitute a poetic practice that enables “an imaginative normative suspension through which she can reorganize the dominant codes governing human relations.” Lyrical interiority can thus be understood as a way of preparing for a healthy relation to the community—that is, as a precondition for re-fashioning communities in a constructive manner. But it also holds a political potential in that it is a mode of ‘making space’ for the abject within the community.

The indeterminate characterization of the poet’s interiority (“das Grenzenlose”) presents an internal zone that exists beyond societal boundaries. The desire for interior retreat signifies a desire for the world to be different; specifically, this denotes a desire for the conditioned world to become unbound from its violent modes of determination. The cloaking of the self, signified by the poet’s desire to wrap herself in threads (“Fäden möchte ich um mich ziehen –”) can thereby be understood as an aesthetic mode of relating to the community, incorporating what Trop calls “heterotropic seams and atropic fringes,” or the concurrent movements away from violent recognition and toward an aesthetically open relation to the collective. Here the abject acts as a model, but also as a catalyst for this change. The imaginative interior space of this poem thus

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79 Ibid. 693.
performs a tension between the individual and the collective, critiquing a contemporary violence in communal identity formation, but in doing so, attempts to imagine a mode of mediating the two through a poetic practice. Interiority thus becomes a mode of preparation for an alternative community formation, revealing a glimmer of messianic power that points toward how human relations could be structured differently.

\[\text{b. Erotic Messianism I: “Chaos”}\]

Lasker-Schüler’s poetry suggests a conception of both collective and individual identity that is fundamentally modelled after technologies of the self that we find in religious practice. Throughout her work, Lasker-Schüler predominantly plays with identity through gender, and this playful conception of identity is central to understanding the mytho-poetic imagination that enables her conception of alternative collectivity. Religion—especially in its Abrahamic manifestations—has long since been a rich source of a communal identity formation, but this communal identity is not typically understood as an imposition on the individual.\(^80\) What is particular to Lasker-Schüler’s use of a religiously modelled identity construction is, however, that far from stabilizing gender norms, religion functions in her poetry as a productive mode of calling the stability of these norms into question. We have already encountered this phenomenon above, in Lasker-Schüler’s personification of the Prinz Jussef persona. In this context, I argued that this motif in her work should be understood not only as gender play, but also as an identification with the outcast of society. Ultimately, in Lasker-Schüler’s lyric we find an

\(^{80}\) Rather, individuals who choose religion as a central orientation in their lives construct their own identities in relation to their communities. As seen in my analysis of “Weltflucht,” this creative process of individual identity is central to understanding Lasker-Schüler’s conception of an alternative collective.
indeterminate self, who is constantly in a state of becoming; self-identity is presented as the
process of an aesthetic, self-creative act. Central to understanding this conception of self-identity
is Lasker-Schüler’s unique conception of gender as itself a fluctuating, unstable performance.

Placing this indeterminate self into relation with the other is the first step toward
establishing an understanding of community that resists the violence seen in “Weltflucht.” A
central motif in Lasker-Schüler’s early poetry is the theme of erotic desire, which operates as a
central motivator of establishing a certain type of relationality that I will show is the basis upon
which alternative communities can be formed. In this section, I examine two poems that position
this erotic relationality within a messianic, liberatory context. In both of these poems, as with
“Erkenntnis,” one finds the redemptive mixed with the traumatic, but examining the particular
role of the erotic in each poem helps to paint a full picture of Lasker-Schüler’s early poetry. The
poem “Chaos” stages the difficulty of relationality while holding a completely fluid, interior
conception of the self. Here, the erotic functions as a catalyst to move from interiority to
relationality. In “Weihnacht,” we find the erotic characterized as pre-reflective intimacy and
positioned within a messianic temporality. Lasker-Schüler’s politics build slowly out of her
conception of the self as a fluid interiority and together, these two poems demonstrate the role
that the erotic plays in establishing a type of relationality that will build towards the healthy
formation of communities.

Another poem to which Lasker-Schüler continually returns throughout her later writings
and which she also rarely revises in any substantial fashion—a rarity when a poem is re-worked
in her later phases—is titled “Chaos,” which was originally published in Styx. This poem
seems to undermine any stable notion of self-identity, characterizing the "ground" of the self as
chaos, but also problematizes this chaotic foundation of the self as destabilizing the relation of
the self to the other. The creative potential of self-identity is revealed as having both positive and negative sides: while one holds the power to create oneself, this power can lead to existential states of disorientation, loneliness, and the feeling of being left for dead [Todverlassenheit]. She thus asserts a unique form of the liberal, autonomous conception of the self, while simultaneously calling its viability into question. Critical moments such as these appear with regularity in Lasker-Schüler’s poetry; gestures toward redemption are often framed in relation to the trauma of fallen existence. This poem is no exception. The poet stages a recovery from the isolation of a collapsing interior affect through the recovery of a primordial mythology, which rekindles her (erotic) desire for relations with an Other.

CHAOS

Die Sterne fliehen schreckensbleich
Vom Himmel meiner Einsamkeit,
Und das schwarze Auge der Mitternacht
Starrt näher und näher.

Ich finde mich nicht wieder
In dieser Todverlassenheit!
Mir ist: ich lieg’ von mir weltenweit
Zwischen grauer Nacht der Urangst . . .

Ich wollte, ein Schmerzen rege sich
Und stürze mich grausam nieder
Und riss mich jäh an mich!
Und es lege eine Schöpferlust
Mich wieder in meine Heimat
Unter der Mutterbrust.

Meine Mutterheimat ist seeleleer,
Es blühen dort keine Rosen
Im warmen Odem mehr.

. . . . Möcht’ einen Herzallerliebsten haben!
Und mich in seinem Fleisch vergraben.81

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Here we find a poet whose self-identity is frustrated, torn, and lost in the midst of a cosmological loneliness. In short, the existential state of the poet could be summed up by one word: alienation. The confusion of self-identity (“Ich finde mich nicht wieder”), combined with the externalization and dislocation of the self (“Mir ist: ich lieg’ von mir weltenweit”), envelops the poet’s future into loneliness (“Himmel meiner Einsamkeit”). Her horizon is quickly becoming empty (“Die Sterne fliehen schreckensbleich”), and she is confronted with a void (“Und das schwarze Auge der Mitternacht / Starrt näher und näher”). This alienated state ultimately anesthetizes the poet, who is positioned in a mythological, hellish state (“Zwischen grauer Nacht der Urangst”).

Halfway through the poem, we notice a shift away from the staging of the poet’s internal disorientation and alienation to an attempt to find an escape. The subjunctive turn in the third stanza characterizes a desire for the inversion of the poet’s alienated, anaesthetized state. In other words, it is a desire for feeling, even painful, that is ultimately left unfulfilled by the poem's ending, which remains conditional (“Ich wollte, ein Schmerzen rege sich / Und stürze mich grausam nieder / Und riss mich jäh an mich!”). This desire is characterized in the subjunctive (“Ich wollte…” and mirrors two other subjunctive propositions in the poem, which similarly offer a potential to invert the poet’s experience of alienation (e.g., “Und es lege eine Schöpferlust…” and “. . . Möchte‘ einen Herzallerliebsten haben!”). These second two subjunctive propositions differ from the desire for pain and re-characterize the attempt to rid oneself of alienation through two different modes of relationality: familial (“Mutterbrust,” “Mutterheimat”) and erotic (“einen Herzallerliebsten”). The familial relation is found to be emptied of its redemptive potential (“Meine Mutterheimat ist seeleleer”), and the erotic mode of relation stages a sort of ‘last hope’ for jolting the poet out of her anesthetized state. This shift from familial to erotic relationality suggests that an erotic actuality (as opposed to the
potentiality staged in the poem), even if it is not pleasurable but rather painful, may supply a life-
giving force to the currently empty locus of creation (“Mutterheimat”). The final couplet (“. . . .
Möchte' einen Herzallerliebsten haben! / Und mich in seinem Fleisch vergraben”) synthesizes
the erotic and anesthetized states with a clear reference to a desire for the flesh of the lover, but
in a way that seeks to satiate the drive to death; the poet digs herself into the beloved, almost like
into a grave.

Formally, this poem stages the fluidity of self-identity in the way it organizes sound. While the first stanza has no detectable rhyme scheme, the poem slowly transforms into an unstable rhyme by the final stanza (the poem’s rhyme could be noted as: abcd, ebbf, geghij, djdkk). The rhyme scheme initially corresponds to the creation of an identity, operating as a sort of Schöpfung out of chaos (formally reflected in the first stanza’s lack of rhyme) towards an increasing amount of order in the stanzas as the poem stages the return to a mytho-poetic (and eventually erotic) orientation. This understanding of poetic form participating in the process of creation, however, is ultimately a disorderly practice. Her notion of creation incorporates a dynamic poetic form, but one may nevertheless detect an inverse relationship between meter and rhyme. While the rhyme scheme approaches but never truly achieves a stable order, the meter works in another direction, beginning with order and moving towards disorder—towards chaos. Beginning with regular iambic tetrameter in the first two verses, the meter then begins to become unstable in the third line. This general metric process is repeated in each strophe, beginning in trochees, establishing a pattern destabilized in the following lines. In the second and final strophes, this unstable meter is resolved in the final line with iambic tetrameter and iambic pentameter, respectively. The meter thus seems to have a certain entropic quality, working in opposition to the rhyme scheme, which seems to build towards order. The form of the poem runs
parallel to an aesthetic construction of self-identity—there is constant flux and just where order is perceived in one domain, a different element undermines it. The interplay between order and chaos is accompanied by two moments of stable couplets (i.e., the first two and final two lines), which reveal a drift from divine and cosmological semantics (“Sterne,” “Himmel”) to erotic desire (“Möchte’ einen Herzallerliebsten haben! / Und mich in seinem Fleisch vergraben.“). This movement, encapsulated by the form of this poem, is a motif in Lasker-Schüler’s poetry: the transformation of one’s relation to the cosmos into erotic relationality.

At the locus of the conditional transformation of religiosity into erotic relationality we find a primordial mother figure (“Unter der Mutterbrust. // Meine Mutterheimat…”). Found throughout Lasker-Schüler’s early poetry, this primordial mother figure recalls the figure of Eve, who was thus named because she would be the “mother of all living.”82 In this poem, the poet imagines herself ‘at home’ in relation to the primordial mother figure in the midst of Schöpferlust (“Und es lege eine Schöpferlust / Mich wieder in meine Heimat / Unter der Mutterbrust.”). The desire for creation enables the poet to imagine this ‘at home’ state—being in relation to the primordial mother—but this home [Heimat] is found to be soulless and unhospitable to life (“Meine Mutterheimat ist seeleleer, / Es blühen dort keine Rosen / Im warmen Odem mehr. –“).83 Her current state of disorientation, loneliness, and alienation has extinguished even her conditional access to this paradisial life. Desiring a jolt—a painful catalyst—into a self-relation, erotic desire can be seen as commensurate with violent self-

82 Gen. 3:20.

83 In contradistinction to the life-giving potential recalled in the maternal home [Mutterheimat], the poet’s attempt to construct a mythological relation to a primordial mother figure—who, understood as Eve represents the origin of transgressive redemption—seems impotent in the poet’s attempt to escape her existential anesthesia.
creation or self-appropriation. The relation to the Other is a jolt of energy that would bring a subject from a state of autonomous anesthetization back to a state of life-giving creation.

This mode of relation is, however, not disconnected from the mytho-poetic account of the primordial mother, who remains center-stage throughout Lasker-Schüler’s early poetry. Let us recall the poem “Erkenntnis,” where the primordial mother was positioned as a creative source of rethinking subjectivity. “Chaos” can be understood as an extension of this mythological perspective, placing the poet’s ‘I’ in the space of the abject. In the “seelenleer[e]” paradise of her mother’s homeland, the poet responds in the same fashion as the primordial mother, seeking to cover herself in an erotic encounter. In “Erkenntnis,” this encounter is shown to itself have a creative potential of extending the night into the day (“Verstecke mich, Du, / Tief in das Auge der Nacht, / Daß mein Tag Nachtdunkel trage.”). The night, here, can be understood in the sense of the romantic tradition, inverting the typical tropes of suffering, death, and a lack of faith with a sense of transcendence and poetic production. The erotic covering of oneself in another can thereby be identified with the relational poetic sphere—acknowledging one’s own limitations, but in doing so also structures new possibilities for the traumatized subject to relate to the Other.

c. Erotic Messianism II: “Weihnacht”

The poem “Weihnacht” widens our understanding of the potentials that Lasker-Schüler depicts as latent in erotic relationality by mixing these erotic semantics with a religious, specifically a Christian lexicon. Even though its author’s Jewish identity may provide just hesitance to accepting such a proposition, this poem is fundamentally a poem about Christmas, albeit not in the most traditional or doctrinal sense. This title blends erotic elements into the event celebrated
by the Christian holiday, by placing an emphasis on the literal meaning of the German word for Christmas: *weih – nacht* ("holy or consecrated night"). Commemorating the incarnation as a moment of reconciliation between the human and the divine, Christmas is the celebration of an act already accomplished that has secured a salvation yet to come. Aside from the exceedingly commodified aspects of its contemporary celebration, the roots of which had begun blossoming in Weimar in Germany as this poem was composed, this holiday is the celebration of a divine love that extends universally toward humanity. Lasker-Schüler, however, does not reproduce the clichés associated with the holiday: Mary, Joseph, and even the baby Jesus are all missing from the poem. Instead, this poem presents a mode of relationality between a poet and an unspecified ‘you’ *[du]*, presenting an interpersonal connection as a messianic moment that affects multiple modes of temporality (past, present, and future). The characterization of this relation is general enough that one cannot pin it down to a specific religious confession and is also blended with erotic imagery such that it ultimately proposes the possibility of an erotic encounter to transform catastrophe through an incarnational love.

**WEIHNACHT**

Einmal kommst du zu mir in der Abendstunde  
Aus meinem Lieblingssterne weich entrückt  
Das ersehnte Liebeswort im Munde  
Zündet meine weißen Lichte an.  
Alle Zweige warten schon geschmückt.

84 One might notice the difference between the plural form of *Weihnachten*, typically used in German to talk about ‘Christmas” and the singular form of the word used here. This singular usage may suggest a certain ‘defamiliarization’ of the concept, emphasizing the literal sense of “consecrated night,” but the singular use could also be understood as an emphasis of the religious event. Christmas is traditionally celebrated as a season, consisting of several days (the exact number differs in different Christian traditions), which is the etymological origin of the plural form of this word. What is clear is that there is a choice to make this plural singular, which has the result of making the title non-identical to the Christian celebration. The earliest copy of this poem that we have is from 1928, and carries the title in the singular (i.e., “Weihnacht”) and the editorial decision was made in the historical critical edition of Lasker-Schüler’s work to use this title. However, there are later editions of this poem (Textstufen D² and F), which carry the title in its plural form (i.e., “Weihnachten”). It is not clear whether this change was from Lasker-Schüler herself, or whether her publishers Christianized her title. (See: Lasker-Schüler, *Werke und Briefe 1.2*, 291-2).
Einen Engel schnitt ich mir aus deinem goldenen Haare
Und den Traum, der mir so früh zerrann.
O ich liebe dich, ich liebe dich,
Ich liebe dich!

Hörst du, ich liebe dich – – –
Und unsere Liebe wandelt schon Kometenjahre,
Bevor du mich erkanntest und ich dich.85

Without the title, one might be tempted to read this poem simply as a variation on a love poem.
This poem plays with the immanence typical of this genre, suggesting a different temporality within each strophe of the poem: the temporality of awaiting a moment yet-to-come (“Einmal kommst du”), a past knowledge of the other (“ich frage seit ich dir begegnet”), and finally a love that precedes recognition (“Bevor du mich erkanntest und Ich dich”). The first temporal relationship is qualified by the following two, but here we find a messianic notion hidden in the poet’s expectation that she will be reunited with her lover. The erotic encounter is a moment that remains unfulfilled; the grammar of the expectation, presented in the future-present tense, characterizes the future event as a near certain occurrence. The second strophe suggests a previous encounter between the lover and beloved, but also expresses a disappointed attitude.
While the erotic encounter seems to have been a quite powerful experience, it has passed too quickly (“Und den Traum, der mir so früh zerrann”), leaving the poet with an unfulfilled longing for the other. This disappointment (“so früh”) implies there are limits to erotic relationality; desires are often left unfulfilled and moments that may seem transcendent also pass too quickly.
Importantly, Lasker-Schüler places the hopeful messianism of the “night of consecration” (*Weihnacht*) in relation to the disappointment of the past memory of an encounter. The messianic

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potential that is presented here is thus perceived by the poet as transient and vulnerable in her contemporary moment of waiting, endowing the messianism of this poem with a certain finitude and fragility.

The third strophe, however, presents the most complex temporal structure in this poem by presenting the love between the erotic pair as having pre-dated their first encounter. The poem thus acts to reverse the messianic statement with which it commences, inverting its own temporal orientation from futurity to a primal moment. A nexus of temporal relations, this poem possesses a certain Christological form—not in doctrinal content—but rather in the effect that the love in this poem has upon temporal relationality. Such an incarnational, messianic form suggests that the mode of human relationality in this poem—predominantly erotic love—possesses a binding, organizing power that transcends time and space. The initial encounter, which is personal and bodily (“seit ich dir begegnet”) extends toward the future and back towards the past reorienting meaning around this corporal moment. This eroticism, however, should not be understood as exclusive, nor as a particular ich-du relation, but rather (as I explicate in the final section) as the model for a new, erotic mode of communal relations.

The universalized love emitted by the erotic encounter proceeds from the fact that it is simultaneously extremely personal and also unbound from particularity, preceding recognition (“Bevor du mich erkanntest und Ich dich.”). Here we find a model of human relations drawn from the power of the desire of the I for a thou: the messianic nature of erotic love (“Und unsere Liebe wandelt schon Kometenjahre”). The use of Kometenjahre, literally ‘comet years,’ signifies the sudden enlightening of a cosmic object as a temporal event. This is thus an astrological or cosmological mode of measuring temporality, pointing toward a rare, but also potentially catastrophic moment in time. This line, moreover, evokes a certain messianic meaning in this
transformation; the verb "wandeln" is commonly used to refer to an incarnational transformation or, in the sense of "to promenade, to walk" this word is used to speak both of God accompanying someone with their difficulties and of a religious subject walking in the commandments. Here erotic love replaces the divine figure and takes on the transformational role that the divine plays in a more traditionally religious context. The concluding gesture of this poem stages the messianic possibility of the erotic encounter as transforming catastrophe into something positive: to envision the disappointment of the present (the absence of the beloved) into a promise of a future salvation, a future communion. This gesture is not foreign to modernist thought—Benjamin’s angel of history, Adorno’s “Risse und Schründe,” and other critical thinkers on the peripheries of Judaism proposed similar concepts—but what is notable about Lasker-Schüler’s conception of catastrophic messianism is the combination of this redemption with dual-directional temporality (extending into the past and the future). Put more simply, the messianic moment redeems both future and past events. This general understanding of redeemed time can, however, also be found within Christian theology of the incarnation. What distinguishes Lasker-Schüler from this theological mode is that she relocates the locus of the messianic power not within a Godhead, but within the erotic encounter itself.

The most potent Christian symbolism here seems to be present in the poet adorning herself as if she were a Christmas tree (“Zündet meine weißen Lichte an. / Alle Zweige warten schon geschmückt.”). Even the angel cut from the lover’s hair seems to be another decoration, an ornament for the top of the tree. In this adornment, we see the insertion of a religious custom into

86 Lasker-Schüler’s conception of messianism is different from that of Benjamin’s Angel of History because of its relation toward the future. “Einmal kommst du…” suggest a future coming that stands as a secure epistemic assertion. Benjamin’s Angel, on the other hand, cannot securely assert a better future, but rather sheds light on the catastrophic events of history in order to seek hope of a messianic figure.
an erotic encounter and, as already discussed, concealed in this resignification of the *Weihnacht* is a messianic temporality transferred from the structures of the Christian holiday into the realm of *eros*. Pre-existing mythopoetic material of the messianic event is thus mobilized in a way that both limits and expands its scope. It is limited insofar as the messiah is no longer literally God become human; the metaphysics of incarnation fall away. Yet, in distancing itself from Christian dogma, this poem seems to expand the accessibility of the redemption proposed; no longer is the possibility of redemption an exclusive gift for the baptized Christian, but it is present in very personal, erotic moments that do not correspond to any particular doctrine, culture, or tradition. The Christian celebration of the incarnation on Christmas [*Weihnacht*] is thereby re-signified in this poem as a universal encounter of bodily love in the face of trauma. This re-signification elevates the erotic to a form of incarnational love, but in doing so, also mimics the incarnation by wedding the divine or religious event to the banal.

This nexus of divine and banal language participates in the mystical tradition of expressing union with the divine through concrete erotic terms and images. The Song of Songs, a book in the Hebrew Bible that describes romantic lovers who are estranged from each other and yearn for the consummation of their love, has often been taken up by mystics in both Christian and Jewish traditions to express union of an individual with the divine. Yudit Kornberg Greenberg writes that,

Mystical texts that elucidate its [the Song of Songs’] theological underpinnings underscore the intimacy between God and an individual soul. Mystical commentaries on the Song often signify personal embodied experience. In another mystical vain, the Kabbalistic theosophy of the sefirot (the ten creative forces that mediate between the Ein
Sof—the infinite and unknowable God—and our created world) reveals the Song’s meaning in terms of the dynamics of God’s inner life.  

This erotic expression of union with the divine—the infinitely other—is also tied to acts of linguistic transgression throughout the western tradition. Mechthild von Magdeburg, Julian of Norwich, or Bernard of Clairvaux all were criticized by their contemporaries for their use of fleshly, erotic expressions to describe divine love. Mechthild von Magdeburg, for example, underpinned the necessity of transgression for union with the divine. As Rita Perintfalvi writes, “The mysticism of Mechthild of Magdeburg as well as the eroticism of the Old Testament’s Song of Songs represent a call for transgressions, since without these the experience of God is not possible. It is exactly through the ‘transgression’ in mysticism and eroticism that one can enter the sphere of the Sacred.” Lasker-Schüler inverts this sense of transgression; not orienting this towards the divine but using imagery of divine love to express a banal, erotic disposition. In doing so, she transgresses the "sanctity" of divine imagery, and also elevates the fleshly encounter to attain a messianic significance.

Originating as the heavenly made word (“Aus meinem Lieblingssterne… / Das ersehnte Liebeswort”), this love is itself the result of aesthetic creation, continually cultivated through the transformation of heavenly [himmelschen] figures (“Lieblingsterne,” “Engel,” “Komet”) into something that affirms the bodily, fleshly encounter (“im Munde,” “goldenen Haare,” etc.). Instead of looking at the presence of danger and negativity as something to reject absolutely, this account of love looks at the traumatic as holding redemptive potential. This love thus treats the destructive potential of trauma as a source of new creation, something to be affirmed until it can

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be transformed. There is certainly a disappointment expressed in the face of the transience of erotic love (“Und den Traum, der mir so früh zerrann”), but this present disappointment finds satisfaction in messianic time; that is, though not presently satisfied, the poet seems secure in her knowledge that the lover will return someday (“Einmal kommst du”). This messianic time is further explicated by making the transience of the cosmic immanent (“Und unsere Liebe wandelt schon Kometenjahre”), in a process that is aesthetically constituted, yet remains deeply interpersonal. The poet’s relation with her beloved signifies as a universal moment of salvation because it signifies a mode of loving relation available to all. The re-signification of Christmas as an erotic encounter therefore does not only particularize the incarnate nature of love, but also makes it more universally accessible, expanding salvation beyond the strict moral codes of Christianity and re-claiming the salvation story for Jews and Gentiles alike. In this poem, universal salvation is signified by allowing love to precede knowledge, to precede recognition, and to extend openly outward toward the Other.

Erotic love has the power for radical orientation of the individual—to give her purpose—and Lasker-Schüler presents this purpose in the context of an I-thou relationship that mirrors a personal relationship to a salvific figure. Eros that precedes knowledge is thus expanded so as to allow the salvific moment to extend throughout history. Rather than calling for a confession of love for a particular messiah, the poet’s erotic orientation—a radical, unrestrained love for the ‘thou’ [dich] (“O ich liebe dich, ich liebe dich, / Ich liebe dich! /Hörst du, ich liebe dich”) 89—

89 The tripartite repetition of this phrase has a biblical cadence, where the repetition of something in threes represents a certain perfection in communication (c.f., 1 Samuel 3 and 19, Numbers 23); of course, the specific three-part communication of love has new testament resonances as well when in John 21, Peter tells Jesus that he loves him three times, which represents an overcoming of his three-part transgression of denying the messiah with a tripartite confession of love.
operates as an erotic education (in a mode analogous to Schiller’s aesthetic education). This operation of overcoming transgression is the primary potential staged in this poem: the transgressive act of re-signifying the Christian incarnation as something erotic is revealed as a universal moment capable of transforming trauma into alternative relationality. In the section to come, I will show that this erotic disposition to the other can also be seen as a political gesture. Latent in Lasker-Schüler’s early poetry lies a model of collectivity that is trained through erotic practice, through acting upon erotic desire and actualizing the relational potential of erotic dispositions.

*d. Collective Eroticism and Transgressive Redemption: “Versöhnung”*

In the course of this chapter, I have highlighted different aspects of Lasker-Schüler’s early poetry, which I hold to have a latent political potential: an attempt to constitute a subject free from guilt, an insistence on interiority and subjectivity as a mode of non-violence that has the potential to reform communal life, and finally locating a messianic potential in erotic relationality. At the core of these three sections rests a tension between a boundless conception of the subject and a deep desire, which seems to be characteristically inherent to Lasker-Schüler’s conception of this subject, to relate to the Other in a manner that conceals the lack of self-sufficiency proclaimed by Lasker-Schüler’s self-constituting subject. This desire also finds its most primal expression in erotic language. The task remains, however, to show that this erotic desire can have a politically inflected meaning. I do not mean to make the argument that love

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90 Shiller’s understanding of an aesthetic education theorizes the way in which art—especially literature—holds the potential to educate people in a moral way. Lasker-Schüler’s poetry, in turn, can be understood to be modelling (and in this sense, educating the reader in) an erotic disposition as more than a drive-based conception of love, but rather a way of relating to the other through vulnerability and intimacy.
poetry is inherently political, nor as I’ve already made clear do I hope to show a specific political agenda within Lasker-Schüler’s early poetry; rather, in this section, I argue that the particular erotic relations in Lasker-Schüler’s poetry model a type of relationality that extends beyond the erotic pair. That is, that the erotic ‘we’ can be understood as the basis of a type of human relationality that is not exclusive to sexual activity, but rather can become a constructive model of communal existence.

As previously discussed, Lasker-Schüler’s conception of *eros* is intimately tied up in a conception of creativity, both in its procreative and poetic manifestations. Lasker-Schüler’s proposition of a collective eroticism, as I term it, is ultimately a community oriented around the creative powers of human relationality, which can be inflected by a poetic (or perhaps more generally, aesthetic) expression. As I argued above, religion is conceived by Lasker-Schüler as a metaphor for human relationality, and when that religion takes on an erotic lexicon (as in “Erkenntnis,” “Weltflucht” and “Weihnacht”), it begins to become clear that Lasker-Schüler’s universal religion can model a mode of communal existence that is redeemed from the violence of the world—whether that violence takes the form of authoritarian moral structures, the violence of imposed identity, or actual catastrophic violence that the dynamics of human society has generated for millennia. In the midst of the violence of the 20th Century nation state, Lasker-Schüler proposes the abject subject—Eve, Prince Joseph, etc.—as a sign of the potential for human relations to structure themselves in an alternative mode. If there is a politics to be found in Lasker-Schüler’s poetry, it is fundamentally a politics of reconciliation. That is, reconciliation of the transgressive to the ‘norms’ of social arrangements, in other words, the reconciliation of society to the abject body without any violation of the body’s own autonomy. Such a politics would be bound by the peaceful initiation of subjects to creatively constitute their relations to
each other: to allow desire for a relation to the other to be the guiding principle of communal formation and to structure that desire upon *eros*, which redeems transgression through establishing creative—even messianic—potentials in human relations.

In the following poem, “Versöhnung,” we find the roots of a collective, that is, a ‘we’ (“*wir*”), within this constellation of religiosity, erotic relationality, and a desire for reconciliation. Most straightforwardly, however, this poem seems situated on the eve of the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur, an observance of fasting and prayer to atone for one’s sins. This religious context is, however, undermined by the poet’s insistence on the innocence of the ‘we’ while also expressing transgressive, sexual desire. This poem thus blends religious observance and a reconstituted relation with guilt and erotic transgression.

**VERSÖHNUNG**

Es wird ein großer Stern in meinen Schoß fallen . . .  
Wir wollen wachen die Nacht,

In den Sprachen beten,  
Die wie Harfen eingeschnitten sind.

Wir wollen uns versöhnen die Nacht –  
So viel Gott strömt über.

Kinder sind unsere Herzen  
Die möchten ruhen müdesüß.

Und unsere Lippen wollen sich küssen,  
Was zagst du?

Grenzt nicht mein Herz an deins –  
Immer färbt dein Blut meine Wangen rot.

Wir wollen uns versöhnen die Nacht,  
Wenn wir uns herzen, sterben wir nicht.
Es wird ein großer Stern in meinen Schoß fallen.  

The poem begins with a faithful observance of prayer (“In den Sprachen beten,”), but even here we find a universalizing gesture. The plural characterization of ‘Sprachen’ suggests an observance that extends beyond a specifically *Hebrew* observance of Yom Kippur and instead opens the call for atonement and reconciliation to a pluralistic community. The different languages are characterized as harps (“die wie Harfen eingeschnitten sind.”); they are conceived of as having boundaries cut with ornate designs—a harp is an instrument whose exterior shape determines the sounds of the interior strings—but the plurality of languages (or metaphorical harps) suggests the commencement of a polyphonic prayer. The extension of community—or perhaps more precisely, the plurality of language communities that are gathered in the collective pronoun, *wir*—is thus established by religious observance. This collective gathering in the aesthetic realm of language (i.e., the languages “cut like harps”) is presented as a successful mystical orientation: access to the divine is palpable for those participating in this prayer (“So viel Gott strömt über.”).

In other words, this mystical collective is gathered through the language of desire. The first half of the poem suggests a mystical relation to the divine. The second line of the poem, “Wir wollen wachen die Nacht,” suggests the awakening of a mystical trope of the ‘night.’ Such a trope is common in mystical theology, pervades romantic poetry, and can be easily understood as a negative approach to divinity. Common in the Jewish and Christian traditions from figures such as Maimonides to Juan de la Cruz, here the apophatic approach to divinity is united to an epiphanic mode of aesthetic production (the music of prayer). In other words, the night is

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revealed as a locus of divine inspiration, where desire is presented as the central, uniting factor; this collective desire communicated by the constant re-iteration of “wir wollen.” However, as we have already learned with Lasker-Schüler, the religious almost never remains just religious, but almost always crosses over into the realm of the erotic.

The desire for reconciliation is ultimately problematized by the erotic ‘threat’ that lies at the center of the poem (“unsere Lippen wollen sich küssen”). In the midst of an ascetic observance of prayer, such as one finds on Yom Kippur, erotic desire seems to unsettle the rest yearned for by the childish hearts of the ‘we’ (“Kinder sind unsere Herzen / Die möchten ruhen müdesüß.”). Eros is thus presented as something transgressive, a potential violation of the commandment to rest. In the pair that lies at the center of the poem, we find a hesitation from the erotic other as they contemplate this transgression (“Was zagst du?”), while the poet attempts to persuade this beloved that the transgression of the erotic act is rather a fulfillment of the desire for reconciliation. The particularity of this transition from religious observance to erotic expression—something we have already witnessed in other poems—is that it seems not only to threaten moral authority or religious tradition, but also the universal religion that extends beyond confessional boundaries and establishes a mystical polyphonic relation among disparate language communities. I contend, however, that this ‘threat’ of transgression operates in the poetic imaginary as a mode of actualizing the potential signified by religious promise of reconciliation.

Such a promise of reconciliation is contained in the messianic temporality of the first and final lines, which are almost identical (“Es wird ein großer Stern in meinen Schoß fallen... / […] / Es wird ein großer Stern in meinen Schoß fallen”). In the course of the poem, the tentative proposition of the first line (delineated by the ellipses) transforms into a definitive proposition with which the poem concludes. A first order level of meaning clearly references a moment of a
great heavenly object falling into the poet’s lap (“Es wird ein großer Stern in meinen Schoß fallen.”). In other words, this line references an unexpected moment of luck: a Glücksfall. In many ways this mirrors the incarnational movement already witnessed in “Weihnacht,” especially with the prominence of erotic imagery in the poem. However, the German Schoß equally refers to the womb. Such an interpretation reveals another level of meaning: the unexpected Glücksfall is also the incarnational power of the female body: the ability of the female (pro-)creative powers to transform the heavenly into a body. (“Es wird ein großer Stern in meinen Schoß fallen.”). This messianic promise appears as a more secure statement in its second instantiation, prophesying this future messianic moment.

Such a reading is congruent with Lasker-Schüler’s re-written mythology of Eve, found most clearly explicated in “Erkenntnis.” In the initial address of Eve (II), the poet seems to idealize Eve’s motherly qualities and the emergence of her (pro-)creative powers:

Riesengroß
Steigt aus deinem Schoß
Zuerst wie Erfüllung zagend,
Dann sich ungestüm raffend,
Sich selbst schaffend
Gott-Seele ... 

There are two main differences of the movement of incarnation in “Versöhnung” from that of “Erkenntnis”: the directionality of this action and the agency of the mother figure. Whereas in the idealized address in “Erkenntnis,” the self-created God-soul emerges from Eve’s womb without any relation to another (“Steigt aus deinem Schoß / […] Sich selbst schaffend / Gott-

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92 Although in everyday speech, one would typically delineate ‘lap’ from ‘womb’ by using the word ‘Mutterschoß’ when referring to the later, there is a poetic tradition of embracing this ambiguity; in literary language, especially in religious contexts, the ‘womb’ can be commonly found referenced simply as ‘Schoß.’

Seele”), in “Versöhnung” this incarnational movement is presented in future form, but in the context of an erotic Other. Moreover, it occurs as a surprise to the poet, as a gift unexpectedly received (“Es wird ein großer Stern in meinen Schoß fallen.”). In contradistinction to Eve’s womb, which is characterized by a messianic power that is in the process of being actualized, the poet’s womb seems to possess a messianic potentiality (as opposed to actuality). The incarnational movement is delayed to a future, unknown time; it stands as a promised future action, but in need of actualization. Just as the erotic moment is not consummated, neither is the messianic moment actualized. As already proposed in my analysis of “Chaos,” the erotic is situated in Lasker-Schüler’s poetry as a mode of actualizing potentiality; it is a catalyst to reawaken the creative potential that lies beneath the surface of the anesthetized subject. This motif reappears here. The second half of the poem transitions from a religious disposition (“In den Sprachen beten,”) to an erotic relationality (“Und unsere Lippen wollen sich küssen”).

The erotic pair at the center of this poem models a mode of relating to one and other that extends beyond a restrictive binary of the "ich-du" relation. We find a notion of erotic relationality that has a valence beyond mere immanent reproduction; that is, a notion of erotic relationality that extends beyond heterosexual intercourse. As the poet responds to the hesitation of her beloved (“Was zagst du?”), she makes the following remark:

Grenzt nicht mein Herz an deins –
Immer färbt dein Blut meine Wangen rot. 94

Here we find the mixing of an old trope of erotic poetry—the mixing of blood as a sign of the erotic act—with a biological understanding of the direct, material causation of the act of blushing. Found in the grammatical form of a question, but with the punctuation withheld, the

hearts of the lovers are proposed as adjoined, united through the mixing of blood, which causes the poet to blush. Here we do not find a specifically sexual mode of relating the lovers, but rather a biological mode of unification, one which has creative effects that harbor messianic consequences. We find a mode of erotic relationality that is simultaneously referencing procreative potentiality, while also not restricting this relationality to the biological, procreative complementarity of men and women. Here, we find a form of relationality that suggests that an alternative, eros-inspired collective is possible; it is a mode of collectivity that is not imposed on its members, but instead flows out of the poet, inviting others to join in transgression, promising a messianic reconciliation (“Wenn wir uns herzen, sterben wir nicht.”). The use of the innocent expression "herzen" conjures up a sense of biblical love and embrace, suggesting a mode of reconciliation that extends beyond mere sexual encounter which has its roots within Jewish and Christian understandings of reconciliation.95 Put differently, just as the particular moments of reconciliation in the bible are considered to be archetypal for a greater understanding of how the believer should relate to others, so too do the lovers stand in for a greater understanding of collectivity. As Jennifer Ingalls astutely points out, “The return to unified personal pronouns after the break into individual signals the resolution of the poem.”96 This resolution reconstitutes the collective ‘wir’ and points toward a mode of relating beyond the ‘I-thou’ binary. Collective eroticism thus would be a mode of affirming one’s relation to the Other that is instigated by a desire—a desire that is trained through religious practice—but also does not acquiesce to moral

95 See the following bible passages from the Lutherbibel, for example: Gen 33:4 “sau aber lief im entgegen, und herzet in,” 2 Kings 4:16 “und er sprach, umb diese zeit, uber ein jar, soltu einen son herzen,” Sal 5:20, “mein kind, warumb wiltu dich an der frembden ergetzen, und herzest dich mit einer andern?” Song of Solomon 2:6 “seine linke liget unter meinem heubte, und seine rechte herzet mich,” Sir 9:12 “sitze nicht bei eins andern weib, und herze dich nicht mit ir,” Mark 10:16 “und er herzet sie, und leget die hende auf sie, und segnet sie.”

or religious authority. It embraces a vulnerable relation between persons and extends beyond boundaries that would normatively exclude transgressive others.

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The politics of Lasker-Schüler’s early poetry are certainly not programmatic; they cannot be translated into a manifesto. However, one can find in this early work the roots of a vision that becomes more maturely developed and more historically grounded in her later literary output. Already in “Erkenntnis,” “Weltflucht,” “Chaos,” “Weihnacht,” “Versöhnung,” as well as in many other early poems, the demand to change the way humans relate to one other takes center stage. The poem posits a vulnerability at the center of relationality, seeking to rip away the veils imposed on subjects, to recognize the fluidity of individual identity, and to "make space" for abjected individuals. One may thus find in this work an attempt to establish a basis of relationality that could be actualized in an alternative collective form. Else Lasker-Schüler’s politics are explicitly impractical, but these political elements of her poetry gesture towards a space where imagination and play can explore political potential through poetic expression. A poem such as “Erkenntnis” (“Knowledge”) explores the contradiction between the power of imagination, of the potentiality of what could have been, while also incorporating the historicity of mythical and historical trauma. This poem can thereby be thought as a model for how to ground the imagination in the embodied reality of our collective wounds and embrace the contradictions of an imaginary politics. Lasker-Schüler’s political vision is valuable because it is not a manifesto, indeed, because it embraces the realm of imagination. The primordial scream

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97 This paragraph is taken from my article: Hoffman, Lukas, “Abject Eve: A Revolutionary Reading of Lasker-Schüler’s ‘Erkenntnis’,” New German Critique (forthcoming).
[Urgeschrei] may not always be loud enough for ears to hear, but when the lyrical voice brings attention to the near universal nature of shame and anguish, the awareness of this negativity alone stands as a call for a revolution of sensibility. By imagining alternative spaces in which human relationality is laid bare (“I naked, you naked!”), Lasker-Schüler’s poetry gestures towards a world that incorporates abject subjectivity, allowing alterity without imposing normativity.
CHAPTER II: THE POLITICS OF ASSOCIATION IN GEORG TRAKL’S POETRY

Historisch gesehen ist [das Reich Gottes] nicht Ziel, sondern Ende.
~Walter Benjamin

I. Introduction

On a cold, rainy day in June of 1914, Trakl wrote his editor to update him on his current situation. As a poet who struggled to find his place in a fast-changing society, Trakl’s letter provides an insight into how his poetry relates to the emerging modern social order during the final days of the Hapsburg Empire. In the context of personal complaints about his discontent with modernizing life in Innsbruck, Trakl writes,

Zu wenig Liebe, zu wenig Gerechtigkeit und Erbarmen, und immer zu wenig Liebe; allzuviel Härte, Hochmut und allerlei Verbrechertum – das bin ich… Ich sehne den Tag herbei, an dem die Seele in diesem unseeligen von Schwermut verpesteten Körper nicht mehr wird wohnen wollen und können, an dem sie diese Spottgestalt aus Kot und Fäulnis verlassen wird, die nur allzugetreutes Spiegelbild eines gottlosen, verfluchten Jahrhunderts ist.98

In addition to lending an insight into his personal struggles with depression and suicidal tendencies, Trakl’s letter elucidates his poetic vision of society. He positions the ‘godless accursed century’ in a mimetic relationship to the body, suggesting that the communal Zeitgeist of the new century brings about a somatic effect in the flesh: a desire to escape embodied existence. This mimetic relation between the body and the community motivates Trakl to identify a societal problem by examining his own self, his own body. In the first sentence of this quote, one finds a negatively explicated triad of virtues (“Zu wenig Liebe, zu wenig

Gerechtigkeit und Erbarmen.”) that are related directly to Trakl himself (“– das bin ich”).

Trakl’s own ‘sick’ body thus enables him to criticize the body politic of the early twentieth century Hapsburg Empire; the mimetic power of decadent society had transformed the body into a reflective surface onto which it projects the polity’s terror. Personal sickness, the decay of one’s own body, thereby becomes a signifier of something beyond itself: an unhealthy society. Trakl’s longing for the realization of these three virtues, his desire for modernity to be different than it is, manifests itself in the recognition that any critique of inter-personal relations, of the community, or of society must begin with one’s own self.

It is thus that any politics to be found in Trakl’s poetry reflect a particular conception of the subject; that is, they have a strong proto-political character. Trakl’s assessment of societal problems begins with a personal identification with the problem, suggesting that one can detect society’s ailments within an examination of the individual subject. And yet, throughout his poetry, one finds individuals who are constantly problematized. Grim images of the world, full of debased, suffering individuals seem to permeate his poetry. Bodies are distorted, wounded, and vulnerable. Suffering is omnipresent and nihilistic interpretations of his work seem to offer themselves far too easily. In this chapter, I offer a hermeneutical framework by which to understand the negativity in Trakl’s poetry: the unhealthy bodies that abound can be understood as social signs that not only signify an unhealthy, modern collective arrangement, but also offer a surprising thanato-political solution. Suffering and death are positioned as the liberation of the soul from the body’s mimetic entrapment to the communal Zeitgeist. I thereby argue that Trakl’s

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99 It is significant that these three conceptions of ‘right living’ are relational and find their manifestation in relation to others.
negativity not only operates in a critical mode (revealing the disorder of the decadent Hapsburg elite), but also offers a solution that is produced by the problems themselves.

Through the associations of successive expressions of death-filled images, Trakl’s poetics operate according to an associative logic that seeks to reconceptualize human relations. In this chapter, I argue that this aesthetic form of association functions as a mode of societal critique: images of negativity lay bare the injustice, the mercilessness, and the lovelessness of the world. Exploring the mimetic relation of the self to society through the lens of his own subjectivity (or that of his lyrical I), Trakl explores the way in which humility and self-debasement can serve as remedies to societies ailments. In doing so, he employs the Christian trope of kenosis. Originally thought as the self-emptying of God in the act of becoming man, Traklian kenosis becomes an emptying out of culture to once again become habitable for humans. Such a conception of kenosis thus extends beyond the individual and attempts to empty culture of its maladies. In so doing, Trakl’s poetry inhabits a locus of aesthetic gathering that is void of particular historical content—a poetic space that I term ‘bare culture.’ His poetry presents us with the possibility of human association that is not mediated by an institutional apparatus, but rather through an aesthetic affirmation of the negative aspects of our existence. The negativity of existence in turn gives rise to non-hierarchical modes of relationality. In his lyric, Trakl mobilizes a constellation of images, creating an aesthetic, associative form of expression, which reconceptualizes human relationality beyond standard political institutions.100

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100 This political potential is a formal characteristic of Trakl’s poetry. Trakl’s lyric takes an associative, transformational approach to lyrical expression. His poetry does not communicate a political agenda at the level of mere content, but the form of his poetry contains a certain proto-political vision that gestures toward new forms of human association. Theodor Adorno recognizes this aspect of Trakl’s lyric in Ästhetische Theorie: “Der Unterschied ästhetischer Logizität von der diskursiven wäre an Trakl zu belegen. Die Flucht der Bilder – »Wie schön sich Bild an Bildchen reihet« – macht gewiß keinen Sinnzusammenhang nach der Prozedur von Logik und Kausalität aus, so wie sie im apophantischen Bereich, zumal dem der Existentialurteile waltet trotz des Tralkschen ›es ist‹; der Dichter wählt es als Paradoxon, es soll sagen, daß ist, was nicht ist. Trotz des Scheins von Assoziation jedoch überlassen
His poetry thus offers a thought experiment to his readers. It proposes suffering and death as potential modes of associating with the other—as potential modes of relationality and, ultimately, sources that generate non-exclusive communities. Moreover, such a poetic form has the ability to gesture beyond its own linguistic constraints; in the presentation of paradoxical images, association allows the poetry to gesture toward forms of life not-yet-manifested. The rationality of association—of relationality—is central to the form of Traklian lyric. It proposes movements of thought through images—but it does not undergo the precarious process of securing the transcendence that is proposed. In the ebb and flow of successive poetic images, his lyric teaches us to think of categories as fluid. It operates as an attempt to think human association differently: to relate to one another through poetic expression, rather than through human institutions and organizations. These movements of his poetry propose new forms of thinking but do not enact them; instead, these forms of thought rest within the aesthetic realm of potentiality. His poetry thus gestures toward the aesthetic possibility that—as in the case of Lasker-Schüler—human relations could take on non-hierarchical, associative forms of organization.

Ultimately, the apocalyptic imagery that suffuses Trakl’s poetry communicates a form of associative actuality. In this chapter, I first explicate the connection between the apocalyptic and the movements of *kenosis* through an analysis of the communal role that suffering plays in his poetry. The proto-political valence of Trakl’s poetry is ultimately derived from an aesthetic form which inverts values and gestures toward communal organization through free association. These

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seine Gefüge sich nicht einfach deren Gefälle.” (Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, GS 7, 431-2.) Adorno identifies a form of rationality within the Traklian ‘flight of images,’ which maintain a power of association that unites difference without subsuming things underneath categories. A certain political potential is to be found within this associative power of Trakl’s poetry. Association becomes a mode of relationality, which does not yield to hierarchical forms.
modes can be understood as shifts in consciousness of the other, whereby aspects of human life that are otherwise negatively coded (suffering and death) enable community building. The apocalyptic reveals the political potential of this proposed inter-personal association; the constant repetition of images that portray the downfall of modern, occidental culture enclose a yet-to-be determined image of utopia. Adorno notes this of Trakl’s poetry, “Gegen den Untergang des Abendlandes steht nicht die auferstandene Kultur sondern die Utopie, die im Bilde der untergehenden wortlos fragend beschlossen liegt.”  

101 The utopic image, which for Trakl can be understood as the programmatic realization of loving communities, is enclosed in the poetic depiction of the present declining culture. The apocalyptic—the breaking of the ‘end-times’ into the present—thus bestows the community-enabling consciousness with political meaning. The poetics of decline thereby allow Trakl to locate the redemption of the world—of culture—within the negative images of destruction.

II. Traklian Kenosis and Bare Culture

Within Trakl’s poetry, and especially surrounding the recurrence of biblical imagery, one finds an aesthetic that emphasizes obscurity and resists a singularity of interpretation. It would be hard to mention a contribution to Traklian scholarship that does not foreground such obscurity as central to understanding of his lyric. W.G. Kudszus, for example, writes, “Lyric language in the manner of Trakl undermines concepts of meaning.”  

102 However this is not to say that Traklian lyric is itself meaningless. Rather, it attempts to empty singular, authoritative meaning from

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poetic language, thereby restoring a sense of mystery to the genre of lyric.\textsuperscript{103} Indeed, semantics of silence permeate this aesthetic; this resistance rejects even the poetic-I that is so often purged from his lyric (e.g., “Das Dunkel löschte mich schweigend aus.”).\textsuperscript{104} The semantic expulsion of the self (the lack of a lyric I) commences the \textit{kenotic} disposition of his poetry, but this process of emptying extends beyond poetic individuality. \textit{Kenotic} form ultimately generates a poeticized mirror of reality (“Spiegel der Wahrheit”)\textsuperscript{105} that resists singularity of interpretation, just as the world itself does. This mirror, in turn, inverts the truth of society in its reflection and Trakl mobilizes this inversion towards a mode of cultural \textit{kenosis}: his poetry empties out modernity and attempts the presentation of \textit{bare culture}.

This term ‘bare culture’ signifies an understanding of human culture—of the aesthetic binding agent that extends beyond the immanent community—that has been emptied out of historical and particular content. It is ‘bare’ in a way analogous to which Agamben theorizes ‘bare life’ to be reduced to its most basic form, stripped of all normativity and particularity. Bare culture is a state of exception, a prioritization of human association over the particular form in which such a relation occurs. As such, bare culture is the association of human subjects, hidden beneath legal structures, religious rituals, aesthetic production, or any other particular, identifying or historical factors. Analogous to Jean-Luc Nancy’s understanding of community, bare culture is not something that is built or constructed, not something that can be lost or gained, but something that \textit{happens}, in this case that happens in the poetic expression of Trakl’s

\textsuperscript{103} As Richard Detsch remarks, “I recognize that any thread of meaning in Trakl’s poetry cannot lead too far, but I do not therefore refuse to follow such a thread.” (Detsch, Richard, \textit{Georg Trakl’s Poetry: Toward a Union of Opposites}, University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1983, 3.)\textsuperscript{103} It would thus be contrary to the obscurity of Trakl’s poetry to attempt to pin down his lyric through interpretations that purport singular authority.


\textsuperscript{105} Trakl. “Nachtlied (III).” \textit{Sämtliche Werke und Briefwechsel}. Vol. 2. 388. ln. 7.
poetry. Traklian lyric, thus understood, represents a formal praxis of association that empties out modern culture through the very negative realities that (western) culture supplies so excessively (primarily suffering and death); by doing so, Traklian lyric reveals a positive underpinning of human association stripped of its borders and exclusive conditions. As such, bare culture constitutes an association with others; its primary relational content is that of undoing—unconditioning existing social arrangements.

This indeterminable nature of Traklian lyric thus sets off its associative gesture: his poems possess a disruptive power. In its obscurity, Trakl’s poetry turns language against itself, resisting linguistic representation; however, rather than a limitation on his poetry, such a reflection points towards a greater power of lyric to communicate indeterminable meaning, to communicate utopia through negativity. Trakl’s negative images cry out and demand that they be rectified, atoned. However, he considers (rightly) that his poetry is “eine unvollkommene Sühne,” an attempt to draw out utopia through negativity that is left unfulfilled.106 The mode of lyrical expression that produces Trakl’s kenotic poetry is filled with successive images of affliction, agony, and pain, which yield to healing affirmation through the galvanization of this suffering in linguistic associations. Trakl’s “Nachtlied (I),” for example, reveals a mode of painful expression found within in a song of affirmation:

Nur die nächtlich dunklen Fluten
Rauschen, schluchzen meine Lieder,
Lieder, die von Wunden bluten,
Tragen an mein Herz sie wieder
Durch das Dunkel her. 107


107 Trakl’s “Nachtlied (I),” reveals a mode of painful expression found within in a song of affirmation: “Nur die nächtlich dunklen Fluten / Rauschen, schluchzen meine Lieder, / Lieder, die von Wunden bluten, / Tragen an mein Herz sie wieder / Durch das Dunkel her.” (Trakl, “Nachtlied (I),” Sämtliche Werke und Briefwechsel, Vol. 1, 236, ln. 6-10.) Here we see an account of poetic language that is itself wounded—meaning seeps out of the poem like blood out of a wound. That is to say, for the purposes of this argument, the proto-political traces in Trakl are to be found in
Here we find an account of poetic language that is itself wounded, meaning seeps out of the poem like blood out of a wound. In Trak’s poetry, we find a particular potentiality for alternative modes of relationality in the wounds of his poems: in the bleeding, distorted bodies. Still, these wounds should be understood as the sphere of poetic productivity, as a source of aesthetic creation, a source of freedom in establishing new associations. Tracing vulnerability back to its most painful (but also palpable) expressions, Trakl’s conceptions of relationality often resist standard contemporaneous models of how humans should relate to one and other (liberalism, capitalism, etc.). In this section, I begin my analysis of Traklian kenosis by examining the material power of the mystical elements of Trakl’s poetry, showing how the Christian moments in his work can be understood as a contribution to the proto-political imagination. Then, in my analysis of “An die Verstummten,” I explicate how the personal destitution takes on a social significance in his poetry.

\[a. \text{Trakl’s Material Mysticism}\]

Trakl’s poetry mobilizes religious imagery inspired by the Christian mystical tradition towards the poetic presentation of a mode of self-emptying that allows affirmation of the negative aspects of living. These forms of association break down boundaries that restrict spontaneous community formation.\(^{108}\) Traklian kenosis, a poetic manifestation of darkness, shares a structural affinity with spiritual discourses of the ‘night’, found in authors such as Meister Eckhart, Jakob

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\(^{108}\) The main manifestation of such a boundary would be those produced by nation-states, but this form of ‘in-group’ vs. ‘out group’ (or ‘friend’ vs. ‘enemy’) conditioning of human relations can be understood as a general tacit of modern politics. (C.f. Carl Schmidt).
Böhme, or Juan de la Cruz. In this sense, the mystical night is a moment of purgation of worldly desires, of intense loneliness, and of preparation for a world to come; to embrace the negativity of the ‘now’ is to ensure the positivity of this promised future. This is, in some sense, an extension of Christian negative theology, whereby *kenosis* is understood as a spiritual process of imitating Christ. 109 It is an internal movement of lowering oneself out of piety and humility.110 Traklian *kenosis* intervenes in this spiritual tradition in materialist fashion, mobilizing theological conceptions toward material ends.111 Ultimately, it seeks detachment from modern concerns in order to reconceptualize human relations. Adapting the concern for the Other from the ‘Nächstenliebe’ commandment, Trakl’s politics are formally based on Christian models of incorporating the Other. Traklian *kenosis* thus combines an aesthetics of free association with an internal, more existentialist strain of expressionism that forms the disposition of the self to be open towards the Other.

The motif of darkness can thus be seen as a locus of Trakl’s precarious relation to religiosity; it inhabits his deepest religious convictions along with his most convulsive rejections of organized religion.112 Darkness provides a semantic to discuss the *kenotic* movements within

109 C.f. Phil 2:7. “[Jesus] emptied (ἐκένωσεν) himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.”

110 The German Medieval Mystics often endorse this mode of spirituality, calling for an emptying out of the interior life—debasement of the self as an absolute humility—such that one becomes an appropriate vessel of the divine. Here, one could reference Mechthild von Magdeberg’s writings in *fliessende Lieht der gotheit* or Meister Eckhart’s numerous writings on humility and detachment.

111 Of course, the primary place to locate the origin of such an operation would be to examine the first half of Feuerbach’s *Wesen des Christenthums*, where he attempts to expose the core truths of Christianity as misdirected projections of human goodness.

112 Darkness is often the space of Trakl’s deepest religious moments. However, such moments of radical openness toward the divine are not teleologically oriented. That is to say, they do not secure a divine transcendence in their attempt to render divine presence. Moreover, Traklian darkness also inhabits the moments of his lyric’s most robust blasphemy (c.f. “An Luzifer”). As Richard Millington comments with regard to Trakl’s religious commitment, “Certain values conventionally associated with Christian doctrine, especially humility, forebearance, and compassion, were certainly central to his own worldview, and Trakl was himself inclined to formulate his own
Trakl’s poetry without the need (nor the desire) to place judgement on the religious orthodoxy or authenticity of his religious commitments, as so many previous scholars have done.113 In this quasi-religious, mystical mode, Traklian darkness becomes associated with traditionally positive spiritual dispositions: ‘humility’ (c.f., “Immer dunkler”), ‘piety’ (c.f., “Unterwegs,”), and ‘fortitude’ (c.f., “Abendlied”); but darkness is also incorporates ‘negative’ interiority, such as ‘melancholy’ (c.f. “Nachtseele,” or “Melancholie des Abends”), or dark eroticism (c.f., “Romanze zur Nacht,” “Blutschuld,” e.g.), into its semantic constellation. At a fundamental level, Traklian darkness is an aesthetic sphere of associative potential—of not-yet actualized transformation—of incomplete redemption.114 Redemption is promised within processes of kenosis, beginning with the individual’s self-emptying and culminating in a cultural kenosis and the poetic emergence of bare culture. The potential of this transformation is shown within the individual, but its actualization comes only through its instantiation in communities. Trakl thus

113 Indeed, this is one way to navigate a ‘third path’ through the “two diametrically opposed critical approaches” in Trakl scholarship: on the one hand, the ‘Christian’ element which stresses hope and redemption and, on the other, the more secular, ‘Orphic’ lines of interpretation. (Detsch, Georg Trakl’s Poetry, 2.) As Leiva-Merikakis suggests, Christianity lends a formal model to Trakl’s poetry, but Trakl’s poetry does not appear to profess Christian doctrine. (C.f., Leiva-Merikakis, The Blossoming Thorn, especially the chapter titled, “The Poetics of Incarnation.”) The interaction of the light within the darkness is presented as redemptive, as healing, and as transformative. The process by which Traklian darkness becomes redemptive does not transform the negative into a positive, but rather Traklian darkness places the positive and the negative into a non-hierarchical association, where both are co-extant. (For example, suffering is ipso-facto not ‘revalued’ as good.) Trakl’s proposition is not that the embrace of suffering will transform negativity into positivity—it is not a ‘taking up one’s cross’ on the ascent of Mount Tabor. Rather, the negative remains negative and embracing suffering provides a route towards embracing the world in both its positive and negative aspects and ultimately, of relating to others. The intense focus on the negative aspects of modern existence—the portrayal of sometimes horrific images of suffering and death—are revalued as affirmation of the world, without denying the particularity of negative experience. The positive and the negative relate to each other, are placed in association, and are ultimately shown to be symbiotic modes. See also: Csúri, Károly “Zur poetischen Religiosität in Trakls Dichtung,” 1995.

114 Richard Detsch notes that this “redemption does not depend upon the contrition of the evildoer; rather it attaches to the act of evil itself.” (Detsch, Georg Trakl’s Poetry) In associating redemption with the act of evil itself, Traklian redemption moves beyond an individualistic (or soteriological) mode of redemption—in this context, the act of evil rises to the level of societal significance.
participates in the tradition of mystical lyric in order to translate traditional negative connotations of darkness into a transformative embrace of evil, in which the status quo can be altered for the better.

b. Poverty and Destitution as Traklian Kenosis: “An die Verstummten”

Destitution, in the context of the spiritual practice proposed by Trakl’s lyric, constitutes a mode of poetic *kenosis*. However, Trakl’s poetry intensifies the concept of *kenosis* as inherited by Christian theology; it involves a radical act of self-emptying to the level of complete destitution. Structural, external, and material forms of disparity are conflated with internal, spiritual poverty; they coexist. This understanding of rejecting individual identity through the embrace of self-impoveryishment simultaneously provides the possibility of personal enrichment by enabling a new level of associations. Contrary to the onto-theology of Christian dogma, which theorizes the relation of God to humans, Trakl’s poetic *kenosis* translates this formal relation to orient humans toward a human Other. His poetry’s presentation of the poor extends beyond a typical Christian understanding of poverty (“Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God”115 / “The poor you always have with you”116). Trakl translates *kenosis* from theological discourse to poetic form, mobilizing the formal elements of *kenosis* toward material ends. His portrayals of debasement operate analogously; debasement becomes the ultimate ‘emptying of oneself,’ but often goes well beyond calls to piety.

His poem, “An die Verstummten,” encapsulates this phenomenon, navigating different forms of destitution within the modern forms of culture. Understood in this sense, this poem

115 Luke 6:20

116 John 12:8 (C.f., Matthew 26:11)
suggests silence, vulnerability, and conjoining as aesthetic spaces of associative potentiality. Here, we find a negative characterization of modern life as debased and demonic, but the poem envisions a potential for redemptive transformation from within this sphere of negativity. At the center of this poem, there stands a prostitute, who is found destitute, giving birth to a dead child while alone in the rain. Her destitution, however, is presented by the poem as a potential source of redemptive power. The lines following her presence explore different potential vessels of this redemption and ultimately propose a veiled affirmation of the material as a mode of solidarity and alternative mode of relationality.

**AN DIE VERSTUMMTEN**

O, der Wahnsinn der großen Stadt, da am Abend
An schwarzer Mauer verkrüppelte Bäume starren,
Aus silberner Maske der Geist des Bösen schaut;
Licht mit magnetischer Geißel die steinerne Nacht verdrängt.
O, das versunkene Läuten der Abendglocken.

Hure, die in eisigen Schauern ein totes Kindlein gebärt.
Rasend peitscht Gottes Zorn die Stirne des Besessenen,
Purpurne Seuche, Hunger, der grüne Augen zerbricht.
O, das gräßliche Lachen des Golds.

Aber stille blutet in dunkler Höhle stummere Menschheit,
Fügt aus harten Metallen das erlösende Haupt.117

From the outset of this poem, darkness is presented as a problem. Modern electric streetlamps suppress the darkness and evoke a tone of lament. The interjection of “O” that sets off the poem (and is echoed in lines five and nine) arouses a mournful tone, suggesting that something of the spiritual night has been lost with modern technological advancement.118 Here, in the midst of the

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118 Here, one senses also a grotesque echo of the Baudelairean lament of the modernization of Paris in *Les Fleurs du Mal*. A cross-analysis of the poem, “Le Crépuscule du soir,” for example, helps to expose the similar stakes of the aesthetics of these two poets, and thereby to emphasize the political within the Traklian motif of darkness. Baudelaire’s lyric focuses on the suffering subjects in the modern city and the plight of the working class is an
madness of the city ("der Wahnsinn der großen Stadt"), the poem explores various forms of alienation (material as well as spiritual), but in doing so remains especially rooted in the flesh. The initial image of the city induces a shock that is made visible through poetic personifications of inanimate, urban objects. Anatomies are crippled, suffering, scorned, bleeding, and even lifeless. The light of this poem is not provided by the sun or the stars of the night sky, but by electric city lights ("Licht mit magnetischer Geißel die steinerne Nacht verdrängt"). The electric lights that suppress the night—the scourge [Geißel] of technology—has eradicated darkness from social spaces and with it, the possibility of transformative change. The poem thus explores destitute darkness within the city, exposing the reification and suffering of both human and non-human beings.

In the center of this poem, we find a prostitute, who is presented as cold, wet, and abandoned, bearing and mourning her dead child. Her debased position vis-à-vis society stands in demand of redemption; her destitution invokes a somatic reaction in the reader that such suffering should not exist. In the midst of a city which seems to deny darkness to its inhabitants, she rests in an existential darkness that is not extinguished by electric lights or by modern technology. Her societal position as a prostitute is important: she receives recognition in society explicit theme in Baudelaire’s aestheticization of the evening twilight. ("Ô soir, aimable soir, désiré par celui / Dont les bras, sans mentir, peuvent dire: Aujourd'hui / Nous avons travaillé! — C'est le soir qui soulage / Les esprits que dévore une douleur sauvage.") Baudelaire’s poem explores the transformation of the city at twilight; capitalistic exploitation is revealed to be criminality, and, in turn, criminality is portrayed as the mere undertaking of businesspeople. ("Cependant des démons malsains dans l'atmosphère / S'éveillent lourdement, comme des gens d'affaire, / Et cognent en volant les volets et l'auvent.") The twilight functions, here, to reveal the true nature of the city—the criminals and the capitalists are exposed as one and the same—but while Baudelaire seeks to extract beauty from the misery of human life (which is evident in the title, Les Fleurs du Mal). Trakl’s poetics extract misery-qua-misery and thereby orient itself towards an un-promised redemption. Baudelaire’s twilight ultimately becomes a meditation, by which the reader of poetry realizes their moral superiority over the criminals of the city, ("Recueille-toi, mon âme, en ce grave moment, / Et ferme ton oreille à ce rugissement."). Trakl, however, implicates the reader within the destitution of humanity, removing the element of choice from one’s complicity in criminality. Still, Trakl’s aesthetic is not void of beauty—beauty is simply revalued as salvation. The "erlösend[e]s Haupt," which emerges from hard metals, stands as an insecure promise of salvation to the reader.
as an object of debased eroticism. Her pregnancy is conceivably the result of her economic exploitation. One might identify Freud’s Madonna-Whore paradox within this image, one abstracted from a particular masculine complex to the level of society.\textsuperscript{119} The debased erotic recognition of the prostitute by her clients is ultimately what prevents her from becoming a mother, what suppresses her futurity. The locus of life-production—the womb—is a zone of (re)productive darkness. The \textit{matrix meretrix} [the womb of the whore], therefore presents the possibility of a future extending from the debasement of societal \textit{eros}. The womb is a place of physical darkness, not penetrated by the scourge of city lights. However, upon birth, the fruitfulness of her womb (its darkness and potentiality) is countered by the scourge \textit{[Geißel]} of electric lights and the child dies upon entering the false light of the modern city. As the night is suppressed \textit{[verdrängt]} by the magnetic curse of electric light, so too is the possibility of the \textit{matrix meretrix} trapped in economic estrangement: only a lifeless corpse emerges from the womb.

Walter Benjamin’s theory of the prostitute seems a fitting analogy to understand the social undertones operative here. Nearly simultaneous to Trakl’s composition of this poem (1913), Benjamin theorizes, “[Die Dirne] stellt im Eros die Kultur dar, Eros der der gewaltigste Individualist, der kulturfeindlichste ist, auch er kann pervertiert werden, auch er der Kultur dienen.”\textsuperscript{120} The prostitute becomes for Benjamin, and I argue for Trakl as well, a signifier of a greater societal problem. Namely, the purity of erotic love has been corrupted by the totalizing drives of culture, which infiltrates every aspect of human life. For Benjamin, the prostitute

\textsuperscript{119} Freud’s theory of the madonna-whore complex is the theory that many men are attracted to two types of women: a) the saintly ‘madonna’, whom they desire for their personal characteristics, but for whom they cannot feel sexual desire, and b) the ‘whore’, whom they desire because she represents the potential expression of their debased sexuality, but for whom they have no respect and with whom they cannot have a personal relationship.

\textsuperscript{120} Benjamin, \textit{Briefe I}, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), 67-8.
represents all humans: “Entweder sind alle Menschen Prostituierte oder keiner.” The destitution of the prostitute stands in for the destitution of modern man, who in the increasingly calculated interactions of modern society (c.f., Georg Simmel’s *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben*), is also left in a state of impotent isolation. Benjamin moreover extracts a moral claim from the life of the prostitute: “Indem [das Leben der Dirne] ein sittlicher ist, kann es kein anderer sein, als der unsres eignen Lebens.” At a metaphorical level, the economic alienation of the prostitute stands in for all members of society; even though she theoretically controls her own labor power, her life activity is subsumed under the logic of capitalism. She thus stands as a universal anecdote to illustrate the mode in which society demands debasement of its inhabitants.

The prostitute in this poem, if she is also to be understood as the will to culture (á la Benjamin), has lost her child and with it the externalization of her life-force. By extension, the future of culture also appears bleak and destitute. As the night is trapped within the stone of the city, unable to emerge, so too is the prostitute trapped alone in the rain, without any foreseeable future. Ultimately, Trakl’s prostitute embodies the isolating consequences of an individualistic society and stands as a negative image; her isolation seems to engender a demand for community, for solidarity. Her suffering is the human embodiment of the distinct presence of evil (“der Geist des Bösen”), introduced in the first stanza, which is denied its expression through traditional darkness. But if the suppression of the matrix meretrix is to be understood as a sign of the suppression of good in society, then the injustice of her abandonment holds a greater critical significance as well.

121 Ibid. 67.
122 Ibid. 67.
Responding to this injustice of culture, the poem then seeks out different avenues for redemption. The first of such consequences is that this injustice prompts a just and divine anger, reminiscent of the God of the Old Testament, that seeks to exorcize the demonic from society (“Rasend peitscht Gottes Zorn die Stirne des Besessenen”). This characterization of the evil in society as demonic possession can be understood as an attempt to export the guilt for the evil actions into the realm of the demonic (the possessed victim is, at least in most Christian traditions, morally blameless). Here, divine wrath expresses a misdirected, but destructive force as it lashes out at societal injustice brought on by the demonic presence of false (city) light. Rather than punishing the culprit (technology), however, this wrath scourges the flesh. The divine flogging does not address the proper source, but instead attacks the victim; fleshly injustices (“Seuche, Hunger”) are positioned in the form of subsequent images as the result of absolute evil, the consequence of possession, not the cause. This failure results in societal indifference: covetous laughter that is associated with wealth (“O, das gräßliche Lachen des Golds.”).

The final stanza takes a different approach and affirms the material in its state of negativity. Revaluing the act of falling silent (in opposition to the indifferent laughter) as holding the power to forge redemption, the darkness of the cave (“in dunkler Höhle”) functions as a foil of the electric city lights. The poem hallows a space that is void of modern life in order to search for the redeeming quality from within human potentials.

Aber stille blutet in dunkler Höhle stummere Menschheit,
Fügt aus harten Metallen das erlösende Haupt.\textsuperscript{123}

\textsuperscript{123} Trakl, “An die Verstumnten,” \textit{Sämtliche Werke und Briefwechsel}, Vol 3, 351. Textstufen 4 D, 5 D.
Here, in this emptied zone of darkness, humanity is presented as a singular grammatical subject to the verb ‘to bleed’ (“Aber, stille blutet… Menschheit,”) and is bound together as a singular, wounded body, perhaps the object of the divine flogging of the previous stanza. This wounded humanity is increasing in silence (“stummere Menschheit”), suggesting a growing movement of inversion against the eruption of covetous laughter and a subversion of the traditional binary conception of silence, where one is either silent or not silent. In using the adjective ‘*stumm*’ in a comparative form, Trakl locates an accumulative movement towards solidarity under the bare (and silent) category of humanity. In doing so, he collectivizes a notion of silence at the core of the Christian mystical tradition, whereby silence is conceived of as the locus of the divine.124

The semantics expressing such a collective movement towards silence associate the act of falling silent with a material, messianic potential (“Fügt aus harten Metallen das erlösende Haupt.”). While divine anger is portrayed as impotent in effecting material change, wounded humanity’s increasing silence enables an incarnational creativity that promises a salvific figure.

The transition in the final line of this poem from silence toward a world of poesis suggests an aesthetic potential that stands in opposition to the oppression elucidated in the initial strophes. The creative power of this ‘muter’ (*stummere*) humanity manifests itself through the verb *fügen*, which signifies an act of construction through joining together. This work of conjoining, of aesthetic creation is completed with rustic materials that counter the gold of the preceding stanza; cast with ‘hard metals’ (“Fügt aus harten Metallen”), this sculpted head stands

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124 Becoming silent for the mystics is a spiritual process of entering into a divine presence; it is not merely a mode of ceasing to speak, but rather, a process of entering into internal silence, where one encounters the divine. It is thus that Meister Eckhart writes, “wan [got] ist mé ein swigen den ein sprechen.“ (“Predigt 36A” Eckhart, *Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1993), 386). He also speaks of entering into an interior silence, so that God can work within the soul: “Daz wort liget in der sêle verborgenliche, daz man ez niht enweiy noch niht enhærret, im enwerde denne gerûmet in dem grunde des hœrennes, ê enwirt ez niht gehœret; mëŕ, alle stimme und alle lûte die müezen abe und muoz ein lûter stilnisse dâ sîn, ein stilleswîgen.” (“Predigt “Ibid, 214).
ready to offer salvation, but only as a reified object. The head is sourced from within the “dunkle[n] Höhle;” it protrudes out of the depths of earthly darkness. The idolatrous presentation of this image, however, obscures its signification of the salvific, but the adjectivization of the verb ‘erlösen’ suggests that this object has some sort of (at least grammatical) agency. Potential salvation is located within the dark suffering of human misery—it is made evident precisely where it was thought to be absent: in the failure of the divine to intervene in the material. The completion of the redemption is not seen—the night is not released; the prostitute remains alone. The salvific head operates merely as a messianic sign: it points towards a potential, far-off redemption. The poem, like those to whom it is addressed, ceases to speak, hoping that this act of falling silent will aid in the forging of aesthetic salvation.

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Ultimately, Trakl’s poetics of kenosis orient debasement, transgression and perversion within an aesthetic form that seeks material redemption. Poetic kenosis is a seemingly infinite movement, which seeks to excavate the potential for salvation from within the infernal nature of modernity. The spiritual practice of kenosis requires humility, openness to the other, and the self-identification with the debasement of modern life: “allzuviel Härte, Hochmut und allerlei Verbrechertum – das bin ich.” This personal identification with the negative, this practice of lowering by identifying with the bottom of society, allows one to begin a process of embracing

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125 This image of a ‘salvific head’ being cast out of metal conjures up biblical references to idolatrous worship—especially the worship of the ‘golden calf,’ which Moses discovers after receiving the ten commandments. C.f., Exodus 32:4.

126 Trakl, Sämtliche Werke und Briefwechsel, Vol. 5.2, 450.
the positive within the world, to bleeding affirm the, “erlösende[s] Haupt,” which Trakl casts with metallic language. Poetic *kenosis* is moreover a zone of pluralistic thought, where binaries and categories begin to dissolve, which allows the fluctuation between the negativity of modernity and the positive affirmation of material redemption. As we will see in the next section, these operations, combined with a revised notion of collectivity, ultimately enable non-hierarchical modes of human association, namely, through an affirmation of suffering and death.

**III. Suffering and Death: Revaluing Negativity as the Principle of Community Formation**

Traklian lyric presents suffering in such a manner as to topple hierarchies and establish egalitarian principles of community. His poetry characterizes the modern world in a gloomy and bleak state, as a totalizing font of suffering; however, much like the salvific head in “An die Verstummten,” Trakl identifies redemptive, associative potentials from within the identification of the problem. Never severed from material, fleshy existence, Trakl’s lyric presents existential suffering as exemplary of modern existence and thereby by politicizing suffering seeks to revalue the problem of modernity as a potential source of its own redemption. Far from endorsing a nihilistic notion of embracing suffering and meaninglessness, his poetry moves toward a re-valuing of the meaning of suffering, in order to eventually propose suffering as a mode of spiritual practice that holds the potential to enable community formation.

This section of the chapter begins with a brief discussion of the associative potential within the concept of suffering and then proceeds to three aspects of Trakl’s politics of suffering. I begin by arguing that Trakl reconceptualizes suffering as a practice and thereby attempts to restore agency to the state of pain. I then explore his adaptation of the theological model of intercession as a mode of community organization, arguing that suffering holds the potential to
mediate human communities in an egalitarian, non-hierarchical fashion. Finally, I discuss Trakl’s thanato-politics, proposing that the recurring motif of death in Trakl’s lyric serves a role of criticizing modern organization of life.

a. Suffering as an Associative Category

One tenet of modern life has always confessed a teleological progression towards the elimination of suffering—and yet, moderns continue to suffer. The suffering of the modern admittedly takes on a very different character from that of the medieval or the ancient world; improved nutrition, palliative drugs, institutionalized hospitals, etc. begin to enable moderns to hope not just for a future—eschatological—world without suffering, but for the eradication of suffering within the here and now. In many ways, pain and suffering thereby are positioned to be antithetical to modern political arrangements. Trakl’s poetry, in turn, points to the failure of modernity to fulfill such a promise. Already in the nineteenth century, philosophers such as Schopenhauer, Hartmann, and Nietzsche began to resist such teleological conceptions of modernity and propose suffering as an aspect of human existence that cannot be eliminated epochally. Schopenhauer, in particular, borrows from Buddhism and argues that suffering is a (perhaps even ‘the’) fundamental truth of human life, thereby rejecting as ‘untrue’ any modern political praxis that seeks to implement a world without suffering.

Rather than think suffering as antithetical, Trakl’s poetry positions suffering as a binding agent. The universality of suffering considered as a force of establishing communities has the effect of breaking down hierarchical forms of organization. Trakl’s poetics of suffering operate to prioritize the Other, proposing a horizontal collective arrangement: what we could understand as an associative structure of relating disparate subjects. Suffering serves as a force of
egalitarianism; no one is exempt from its grasp. Both the byproduct of modernity and as a potential mode of resistance, his poetry attempts to reconceptualize suffering as something active, rather than a passive indicator of external actors. In expressing an active approach to suffering, he draws upon Christian theology that professes a redemptive aspect to suffering; however, instead of operating as a debt-payment for sin, Traklian suffering stands as a type of collective practice that challenges and resists modern politics that both induce suffering and promise its extinction.

Trakl’s poetry practices a mode of poetic expression which attempts to lend a certain interpersonal character to the immanent ineffability of pain. His expressionist lyric operates in a mode analogous to that of pain—that is to say, it offers a sense of objectivity to something that would otherwise rest silent below the surface. As Elaine Scarry writes, “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.”\(^{127}\) Pain demands expression but this expression fails to find a linguistic mode, instead, it expresses itself in the inarticulate cry, which often corresponds to the ‘O’s and ‘Ach’s littered throughout Trakl’s lyric. Furthermore, Scarry holds that pain exists “at the external boundary of the body, it begins to externalize, objectify, and make sharable what is originally an interior and un sharable experience.”\(^{128}\) The aesthetic form of Trakl’s expressionist lyric works analogously, externalizing inward dispositions through objective images, attempting to give language to


\(^{128}\) Ibid, 15-16.
darkness and silence. The relation of language to the form of Trakl’s poetry thus shares a structural affinity to the relation between pain and human consciousness. Traklian suffering lies constantly under the surface—trapped in the polluted, melancholic bodies of modernity—and finds its expression in its most severe form, which in Trakl’s lyric is predominantly that of grief.

The kenotic elements of Trakl’s lyric that empty persons of individuality complicate the capacity of Mitleid, understood as an individual’s participation in the other’s suffering. Instead, Trakl proposes suffering as an associative mode, whereby communities are bound together by their suffering. Here, one doesn’t participate in the suffering of the other, but rather suffering becomes a form of communal consciousness. Personal identity or individuality is not what is at stake in Trakl’s lyric, nor is the particularity of one person’s suffering privileged over the other. Rather, suffering becomes a mode through which subjects of disparate identities relate to each other; it is a source of renewal in human association. The suffering of the other inspires a consciousness that recognizes a transcendental character to this experience.

129 One could equally turn, here, to Theodor Adorno’s comments in Negative Dialektik on the necessity of suffering to be expressed. He writes, “Das Bedürfnis, Leiden beredt werden zu lassen, ist Bedingung aller Wahrheit. Denn Leiden ist Objektivität, die auf dem Subjekt lastet; was es als sein Subjektivstes erfährt, sein Ausdruck, ist objektiv vermittelt.” (Adorno, Negative Dialektik, GS 6, 29). Trakl’s lyric operates as a presentation of suffering, mimetically mediating the objective burden that suffering places upon subjects.

130 Trakl’s poetry can be understood as an attempt to revise the category of Mitleid away from a Schopenhauerian understanding, toward a notion of communal practice. For Schopenhauer, Mitleid is the highest of the virtues—the source of ethics and love—and is understood as the participation in the suffering of the other. He defines Mitleid as antithetical to the Kantian categorical imperative—which seeks to establish the moral law within the individual. As such, Schopenhauer attempts to propose Mitleid as a source of communal ethics, whereby humans are bound to each other through love by a common understanding of the source of their life in pain. He writes, “alle wahre und reine Liebe ist Mitleid, und jede Liebe, die nicht Mitleid ist, ist Selbstsucht... Sogar die ächte Freundschaft ist immer Mischung von Selbstsucht und Mitleid: erstere liegt im Wohlgefallen an der Gegenwart des Freundes, dessen Individualität der unserigen entspricht, und sie macht fast immer den größten Theil aus; Mitleid zeigt sich in der aufrichtigen Theilnahme an seinem Wohl und Wehe und den uneigennützigen Opfern, die man diesem bringt.” (Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung, 293.) The mix of egoism with the ability to share the suffering of the other, which he describes here, is the basis of ethical life.

131 The inter-subjective bond that characterizes Trakl’s politics of suffering moreover has certain elective affinities with Karl Jasper’s understanding of suffering, where suffering is proposed as a catalyst in the expansion of the possibilities of empathy. Suffering, thus understood, becomes an awakening of one’s existence—a palpable experience of life in the Grenzsituation with death. To suffer is thus an experience that one is alive, but only in a

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other is a sign of the suffering of the world, a call for an egalitarian organization. This establishes suffering as a communal practice—a catalyst for inter-personal relations. Trakl’s lyric acts to affect this communal mode of perceiving the world; the poem is a sign which points towards the suffering of the other as a source for the basis of communal life.

In his lyric, the recurring metaphor of the storm serves to show the collective sense of danger. In the face of natural dangers, the threat of the individual is also revealed as a threat to the community, and results in an associative power to bind communities together. Suffering appears as an indiscriminate danger to which the collective is exposed in the face of a powerful storm. This collective notion of suffering serves to inspire what Trakl terms “Sturm- Erbarmen,” which enables collective suffering toward the end of strengthening communities.¹³² Empathy would be too imprecise in describing the binding power of suffering that Trakl’s poetry seems to disclose. The collective, spiritual union brought about by suffering extends beyond a mere ethical disposition of individuals to each other. His poetry seeks, rather, to mobilize the sense of communal organization that results from a natural disaster. The way in which communities come together under threat of their normative material existence is imagined more expansively; the pervasive internal storm of Angst is conceived as inspiring mercy towards the other. The other is limited sense: suffering gives us awareness of life as being threatened. Suffering is not a net-positive; it is understood as a Teilvernichtung of our existence: “hinter allem Leiden steht der Tod.” (Philosophie. 3. Vol. II: Existenzerhellung, Berlin: Springer, 1956, 230.) When one takes a more existential, active approach to suffering, and understands it as a Grenzsituation, then suffering appears as inevitable. Suffering becomes, paradoxically, necessary for happiness; without tension with its opposite, Jaspers argues, one cannot understand the true nature of happiness. If one actively resigns oneself to suffer, by which he means the acceptance of suffering as an awakening to life, then the transcendental aspect of suffering is foregrounded. Suffering is for Jaspers an origin [Ursprung] of life. Jaspers identifies the consequence of this approach as follows: “Jetzt kann der transzenderierende Ausdruck in dem Gedanken gesucht werden, daß, wenn ich andere leiden sehe, es ist, als ob sie in Vertretung für mich leiden, und als ob die Forderung an Existenz gehe, das Leid der Welt als ihr eigenes Leid zu tragen.” (Ibid, 232-3.)

recognized as being in the same danger as the self and the merciful action is extended in light of
this existential sense of danger, brought on by suffering.

b. Reinvigorating the Wound; Trakl’s “Föhn”

This sense of community building through the process of collective suffering is moreover
combined in Trakl’s lyric with an affirmative practice of renewing one’s suffering. One
consistently finds the desecration of corpses and the penetration of wounds throughout Trakl’s
lyric. This motif of the reinvigoration of suffering operates to move suffering from the sphere
of passivity to activity, thereby returning an agency to suffering’s victims. By doing so, Trakl
seems to allow the internal state of individuals to take on an associative valence. Restoring one’s
agency by embracing suffering becomes a political act because it inverts and rejects the modern
project of eliminating suffering. This might be understood akin to Judith Butler’s recent attempts
to rethink vulnerability as a form of resistance. Trakl’s conception of suffering enables the
suffering to affirm their pain as a source of changing social relations. Trakl’s lyric seeks to
establish this active, reinvigoration of suffering as a mode of communal consciousness, whereby
individuals purpose their suffering towards the awareness of a collective identity that is
organized in an egalitarian, horizontal fashion.

133 C.f., for example, the final line of “Menschheit,” which reads: “Sankt Thomas taucht die Hand ins Wundenmal.”

134 Butler’s understanding of vulnerability differs from Trakl in some keyways, namely that they seem to be
blending the ethical and political spheres in a way that does not seem to be operative in Trakl’s poetry. Still, Trakl’s
conceptualization of suffering parallels Butler’s in that he takes an affected mode of human life that is traditionally
conceived as passive (i.e., suffering) and reconfigures one’s approach toward negative affect to emphasize agency as
a network of relations, resisting atomistic conceptions of freedom. In “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,”
Butler similarly writes, “In political life, it surely seems that first some injustice happens and then there is a
response, but it may be that the response is happening as the injustice occurs, and this gives us another way to think
about historical events, action, passion, and vulnerability in forms of resistance. It would seem that without being
able to think about vulnerability, we cannot think about resistance, and that by thinking about resistance, we are
already under way, dismantling the resistance to vulnerability in order precisely to resist.” (Butler, “Rethinking
This communal structure of suffering can be illuminated by the poem, “Föhn,” which meditates upon the associative potential of suffering. Trakl’s metaphorical employment of this alpine term, ‘Föhn’ compliments the collective notion of suffering, given that it arouses a localized, communal, but also sublime experience of danger. In this poem, the foehn functions as a metaphor for our internal suffering—the foehn wind is difficult to predict, comes quickly, and is too powerful to be suppressed. Trakl associates the natural phenomenon of these violent, warm winds with painful lament, establishing lament as a communal spiritual practice that is centered within the individual’s revaluing of their suffering. Ultimately, this entails a process of reinvigorating the wounds and imagines an intentional affirmation of suffering as holding the power to inspire community building.

FÖHN

Blinde Klage im Wind, mondene Wintertage,
Kindheit, leise verhallen die Schritte an Schwarzer Hecke,
Langes Abendgeläut.
Leise kommt die weiße Nacht gezogen,

Verwandelt in purpurne Träume Schmerz und Plage
Des steinigen Lebens,
Daß nimmer der dornige Stachel ablasse vom verwesenden Leib.

Tief im Schlummer aufseufzt die bange Seele,

135 A foehn wind is the alpine weather phenomena of a powerful warm, dry wind that is found on the downward side of the Alps and is responsible for occasional violent winds. These gusts have been known to have destructive force—with winds reaching 200km/h. In 1897, the nobel-prize winning poet, Carl Spitteller, described the Föhn in his acceptance speech as follows: “Der Föhn übt auf das Nervensystem des Menschen eine üble Wirkung aus, die der Reisende, vor allem der Fussreisende, kennen muss, um sie in Rechnung zu setzen und sich mit ihr abzufinden; eine Wirkung, die ich mit einem leichten Influenzanfall vergleichen möchte. Der Föhn drückt auf die Stimmung, er deprimiert, reizt und ermattet.” (Cited from: Frey, Karl, “Geheimnisvoller Föhn, Beschreibungen - Wissenschaftliches – Merkwürdiges,” Mitt. Naturforsch. Ges. Kt. Solothurn 40, 2007, 84.) The foehn wind creates an uncanny feeling within those who experience it. The foehn wind arouses a feeling of un-ease in those who experience it—and yet, many come to revel in this experience. Hermann Hesse confesses that he hated the Föhn as a child, but that as an adult, he began to love the wind. He writes, “Es war so herrlich, wie er voll Leben, Überschwang und Hoffnung seinen wilden Kampf begann, stürzend, lachend und stöhndend, wie er heulend durch die Schluchten hetzte, den Schnee von den Bergen frass und die zähen alten Föhren mit rauen Händen bog und zum Seufzen brachte.” (Ibid, 83). This re-valuation of the foehn winds is common among alpine populations and Trakl reflects upon the way in which one is able to cherish the suffering of the foehn.
Tief der Wind in zerbrochenen Bäumen,  
Und es schwankt die Klagegestalt  
Der Mutter durch den einsamen Wald

Dieser schweigenden Trauer; Nächte  
Erfüllt von Tränen feurigen Engeln.  
Silbern zerschellt an kahler Mauer ein kindlich Gerippe.136

The uncontrollable feeling of lament, brought on by the loss of a loved one, is here likened to the  
foehn; it produces a deep feeling of unease that encompasses the body, awakening one to the  
trauma felt by the loss. In the course of the poem, the mother’s trauma becomes an active force,  
capable of inspiring compassion from celestial beings. This deep suffering of the mother  
becomes a spiritual meditation on suffering for Trakl.137 The first movement of this poem shapes  
grief with the metamorphic power of darkness. The white night transforms suffering into a  
dream-like state, animates the trauma of loss, and restores the mother’s agency (“Verwandelt in  
purpure Träume Schmerz und Plage / Des steinigen Lebens, / Daß nimmer der dornige Stachel  
ablasse vom verwesenden Leib.”). In this re-valuation of suffering—the desecration of the  
decayed body and the intentional reinvigoration of her suffering—becomes a mode of awakening  
to the suffering incurred by loss (“Daß nimmer der dornige Stachel ablasse vom verwesenden  
Leib.”). This constant action of penetrating the wound becomes an active mode of redemption  
and healing. The foehn wind is not a source of suffering itself, but rather an uncanny source of  
animation for the practice of suffering, which tends to fall into forgetfulness and passivity.

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137 Here, one can also identify a certain naturalization, or abstraction from the Marian motif that permeates Trakl’s  
lyric. Mary as the sabat mater can be seen as a paradigmatic figure for the redemptive, communal significance of the  
suffering mother. In a 13th century hymn, Mary is praised for the perfection of her grief of the loss of her son. This  
hymn, too, ends in the presentation of a corpse: “Quando corpus moriétur, / fac, ut ánima donétur / paradisi  
glória.” (“When the body dies, assure that the soul is gifted the glory of paradise.” Translation mine.)
Trakl’s imagery of the night associates the negativity of suffering in the present with the possibility of futuristic positivity. The night’s transformative power frees one from the petrification of civilization, converting petrified life (“Des steinigen Lebens”) into the indeterminate zone of dreams (“Verwandelt in purpurne Träume”), relinquishing suffering from its modern designation as a ‘problem’ to be extinguished. Thus, this poem seems to advocate for finding satisfaction within grief and mourning, for a notion of agency in one’s suffering: a form of spiritual masochism, where one takes pleasure in the pain. The dream-like stake enables this affirmative relation toward continual suffering. The transformation of the suffering of civilization in this state leads to a continual reinvigoration of the wounded body. Trakl envisions the political to be present precisely where it was thought to be absent: in the lonely sphere of suffering.138

Despite this loneliness, however, the suffering of the mother is elevated to cosmic significance as divine beings witness this mourning (“Nächte / Erfüllt von Tränen feurigen Engeln”). The fiery nature of these angels brings forward an ambiguity to their position within the cosmos. The compassion that the angels appear to feel for the grieving mother points towards a transcendental mode of relation to the other’s grief; however, the identity of these angels remains ambivalent. A traditional Christian interpretation of these angels might suggest that they are seraphim, i.e., angels who’s essence is consumed with fire out of their love and worship of

138 Here one could again see a similarity with Trakl’s political vision and Butler’s politics of vulnerability. While analyzing the politics of poetry written by Guantanamo inmates, Butler writes, “bodies are bound up with others through material needs, through touch, through language, through a set of relations without which we cannot survive. To have one's survival bound up in such a way is a constant risk of sociality—its promise and its threat. The very fact of being bound up with others establishes the possibility of being subjugated and exploited—though in no way does it determine what political form that will take. But it also establishes the possibility of being relieved of suffering, of knowing justice and even love.” (Butler, Judith, Frames of War: When is Life Grievable? London: Verso, 2009.) Trakl similarly identifies political possibilities to be operative precisely where one may have thought them to have been negated. In the lonely sphere of suffering, Trakl conceives of the possibility to change affirm the present pain as a mode of regaining agency in one’s approach to suffering. In turn, this agency becomes an enabler of relating to the Other—it affords a mode of association by which all victims of modernity are bound together.
God. The implication, here, would be a rather heterodox one: the Seraphim, who are traditionally held to be consumed with pure joy, are presented here as being filled with earthly sorrow, the opposite of divine glory. Still, the characterization of fiery angels could be interpreted to carry an even more blasphemous connotation: these angels could be demons, consumed not with fires of love, but rather with the inferno. If these angels are to be understood as demonic, then this poem takes on a universalist tinge: even those beings who have pledged their eternal existence to evil are filled with empathetic sorrow at the sight of a mother’s suffering. The disclosure of her suffering is thus shown in both cases to be quite powerful; regardless of whether her suffering displaces the joy of the beatific vision with earthly squalor or if it compels beings who are eternally tormented to empathy. The practice of intentional suffering by the mourning mother seems to contain the power to instill compassion or empathy even in the non-human other.

The concluding line of this poem affords a finality to the re-invigoration of suffering through the desecration of the body that the mother is grieving. The power of the foehn wind’s gust re-animates the suffering of the mother, as the remnants of the child are smashed against the bare wall (“Silbern zerschellt an kahler Mauer ein kindlich Gerippe”). As the final material attachment to the lost child is destroyed, the poem ceases to produce language with the eruption of the reverberating sound [zerschellen] of this destruction. The embrace of suffering is

139 C.f., Dante’s Paradisio. "Canto 28." Dante writes, “Therefore the first Order of the holy Angels possesses above all others the characteristic of fire, and the abundant participation of Divine Wisdom, and the possession of the highest knowledge of the Divine Illuminations, and the characteristic of Thrones which symbolizes openness to the reception of God.” (Alighieri, Paradise. “Canto 28,” 185.) See also: (Pseudo-)Dionysius the Areopagite’s The Celestial Hierarchy.

140 Dante describes the highest order of the angels is “spinning at such a speed / … that Love’s fire burns it into motion.” Furthermore, he specifies the order of the Seraphim as follows: They spin so swiftly speeding in their bonds / to grow as much like that Point [God] as they can, / and they can in proportion to their sight.” (Ibid. 100-102.).
presented as yielding to a release from the same, to a futurity that extends beyond loss. The mother’s attachment to her dead child is released in the destruction of the lost object. The final line leaves the mother without association, bare and embodying a *kenotic* existence that stands open to an indeterminate future. In silence, she stands open to new relationships. Suffering has bound her to new collectives and released her from previous relationships.

Trakl’s conception of suffering as an associative force proposes the destruction of boundaries, borders, and cultural division, evoking the potential for human relation to be mediated by the community of the suffering. At the end of another poem, “Vorstadt im Föhn,” the foehn wind is presented as uniting different cultures:

> Aus Wolken tauchen schimmernde Alleen,  
> Erfüllt von schönen Wägen, kühnen Reitern.  
> Dann sieht man auch ein Schiff auf Klippen scheitern  
> Und manchmal rosenfarbene Moscheen.\(^{141}\)

The foehn wind is here presented as a force which overcomes natural divisions between people, cultures, and religions. This wind traverses the Mediterranean, uniting the alpine village to images of the world beyond, including the shimmering alleys of Venetian canals, ships of the Mediterranean, and even extends across the sea to North Africa, including the occasional mosque. The possibility of the affirmative practice of suffering and the transcendence of distress and hardship signals the possibility of a politics that extends beyond geographical and cultural boundaries. The power of human suffering is conceived here as associating those who otherwise have diverse, even antagonistic identities. The practice of affirmation in the face of suffering ultimately yields to a communal vision of human organization—a communion of persons that

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can be understood as a secular, unrestrained, and extended analog of the Christian doctrine of the ‘communion of saints.’

c. Thanato-Politics: “Entlang”

The religious context in which Trakl’s images operate—that is, within the collections of religious, predominantly Catholic imagery of the late Hapsburg Empire—are important to understanding the communal project that lies latent in his poetic form. Christian (predominantly Catholic and Orthodox) understandings of religious intercession, the idea that each individual holds the potential to play a role in the salvific drama of the whole of humanity, are naturalized in Trakl’s lyric. We do not find a theological worldview, where one can intercede on behalf of another, petitioning God on behalf of one’s friend, neighbor, or enemy, but rather we find a network of relations that are bound through a solidarity of suffering subjects as described above. In this sense, we can speak of an economy of suffering (in a way analogous to how theologians speak of an economy of grace), the praxis of which does not reproduce the doctrinal, ontological, or theological commitments. Suffering becomes a non-theological mode of intercession within Trakl’s poetry. His poetry offers a participation in the suffering of others and, in doing so, suffering becomes a non-theological mode of intercession within Trakl’s poetry. Such an understanding of solidarity with suffering bodies represents a democratic mode of association that rejects hierarchies and allows communities to form through an affirmative approach to suffering. As described above, doing so restores a sense of agency to the act of suffering, which is located within a network of relations (c.f., Butler). To suffer may be to feel alone, but Trakl’s poetry imagines a cosmos where feelings of loneliness are not substantiated in reality. However,
Trakl’s poetics substitute the theological content of the religious motifs with a symbolic signification: religion as communal sign.

This vision of community, instigated by the naturalization of Christian communities, takes on a certain eschatological flavor in Trakl’s poetry. Trakl’s poetry sets this sense of communal existence within the semantic field of ‘death,’ focusing on both the lament resulting from suffering the loss of the other („Sei still! sei still! Laß alle Klagen!“). In the face of death, Trakl’s poetry draws one out of oneself toward the other, toward a community. In this sense, it resembles the Christian notion of agape, but in typical Traklian fashion, the religious undertones can be more universally understood as political vision. Traklian agape results in a loneliness that paradoxically possesses the power to commune with the disparate Other. Loneliness, chosen in love, represents an inversion of the isolation of the modern tendency to isolate (or atomize) individuals.

Death thus comes to serve a critical function in Trakl’s poetry; it serves a concrete extension of the inverse operations of communal suffering. In a poem such as “Entlang,” for example, Trakl proposes death as a common state of humanity, which is fundamentally rooted in the suffering and terror experienced in daily life. The first half of this poem begins the process of cultural kenosis, emptying the modern world of its particularity, allowing it to be transformed. Here we see death as a proposed communal state of being: both a promise of a community to come and a binding force amongst the dying. The second half of the poem explores the

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143 C.f. the mother from "Föhn" or the lonely counterpart to the lovers in “Im Dunkel,” who wanders the bare wall with his stars (“An kahler Mauer / Wandelt mit seinen Gestirnen der Einsame.”) Trakl, “Im Dunkel,” Sämtliche Werke und Briefwechsel, Vol 4.1. 147. Textstufe 2 D. ln. 6-7.
redemptive element of communal death and, permeated with the imagery of suffering, points towards the binding, healing function of an affirmation of suffering.

**Entlang**

Geschnitten sind Korn und Traube,
Der Weiler in Herbst und Ruh.
Hammer und Amboss klingt immerzu,
Lachen in purpurner Laube.

Astern von dunklen Zäunen
Bring dem weissen Kind.
Sag wie lang wir gestorben sind;
Sonne will schwarz erscheinen.

ROTES FISCHLEIN IM WEIHER;
Stirn, die sich fürchtig belauscht;
Abendwind leise ans Fenster rauscht,
Blaues Orgelgeleier.

Stern und heimlich Gefunkel
Lässt noch einmal aufschaun.
Erscheinung der Mutter in Schmerz und Graun;
Schwarze Reseden im Dunkel.144

This poem begins with the destruction of cultural symbols: the splitting of “Korn und Traube.”

Base products of bread and wine, these ingredients evoke the base elements of cultural production in a Hölderlinian sense (c.f. “Brod und Wein”).145 The constant resonance of labor, aroused by the “Hammer und Amstoß,” suggest an incessant call to labor—the metallic (but distinctly pre-industrial) reshaping of the cultivation of grain and grapes. The verse, “Sag wie lang wir gestorben sind” produces a sense of the totalized alienation of mankind—a historic questioning of when the world became a locus of death, firmly but heuristically tracing the genesis of contemporary issues to the pre-modern world. Theodor Adorno remarks on this line in


his *Minima Moralia*: “Die Einheit des Expressionismus besteht im Ausdruck dessen, daß die einander ganz entfremdeten Menschen, in welche Leben sich zurückgezogen hat, damit eben zu Toten wurden.”¹⁴⁶ The totality of alienation in modernity entails a society of death. And yet, Adorno’s focus on the negativity of this verse does not, perhaps, allow us to understand the full potential that death plays in Trakl’s poetic vision. Trakl locates in the totality of oppression a critical potential; the community of death is not lost in the negativity of alienation, but rather stands as both critique of the present and potential for the future.

Death, suffering, and the negative aspects of human life are revalued as potential sources for new, transformative communities. In the final stanza, this poem yields to the contemplation of the stars and to the suffering mother: “Stern und heimlich Gefunkel / Läßt noch einmal aufschauen. / Erscheinung der Mutter in Schmerz und Graun.” The realization of one’s position within the communal state of death allows the light to shine in the darkness, which returns to a concern for the other. The appearance of this mother in pain and terror reverses the directionality of Marian intercession, democratizing a hierarchical religious operation. Rather than the individual subject appealing to a collective mother to intercede on their behalf, the transcendent mother’s pain appears as a cosmic secret (“Stern und heimlich Gefunkel… Erscheinung der Mutter…”); her presence appears as an extension of our death. Our ability to suffer with the mother stands in for our ability to suffer with the community.

Trakl’s poetry thus operates as a spiritual meditation that helps to reorient the negative aspects of life—darkness, suffering, and death—towards the affirmative network of egalitarian

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relations. While affirmation erupts from the realization that, “So schmerzlich gut und wahrhaft ist, was lebt,” Trakl’s poetry is not merely oriented toward an affirmation of one’s own life, but rather the transference from negativity towards positivity occurs within a communal fashion. Trakl revalues death as a communal practice of placing the other in the foreground. In his poetry, he expands this potential of suffering beyond mere intersubjective dimensions and the metaphorical totality of death in human culture becomes a potential mode of associative force: a grim and mysterious organizer of communities.

IV. Politics of Apocalypse

In the previous two sections, I have explicated the political undertones of Trakl’s lyric, examining the kenotic elements in his poetry; however, there is another formal motif that is relevant to unpacking the thanato-political undertones of Traklian verse, namely the apocalyptic. Regardless of the specifics of doctrinal or confessional content, the apocalypse—understood here as the general destruction of the current world order—always carries with it a conception of the emergence of a new world, a new mode of relations between persons. It is important to be aware that Trakl is writing on the eve, not only of the collapse of the Hapsburg Empire, but also of the first world war. Combined with the emergent literary fascination with apocalypse in fin-de-siècle

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147 Heidegger’s analysis of Trakl also focuses (perhaps too exclusively) on this affirmative moment. He writes, “Alles beseelte ist dem Grundbezug der großen Seele entsprechend nicht nur schmerzlich gut, sondern einzig auf diese Weise auch wahrhaft; denn kraft der Gegenwendigkeit des Schmerzes kann das Lebende sein Mitanwesendes in seiner jeweiligen Art verberrngend entbergen, wahr-haft sein lassen.” (Heidegger, Martin. Unterwegs zur Sprache, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1985.) Heidegger rightly acknowledges the reciprocity of Trakl’s aesthetic form, the way in which his lyric acts to reveal through concealing, the movement of his poetry extends beyond this existential affirmation of the self; however, the trajectory of this affirmation extends towards the community of the suffering and seeks to affirm suffering in order to affirm the living other. For more on the poetic dialogue between Heidegger and Trakl, see: Harries, Karsten, “Language and Silence: Heidegger’s Dialogue with Georg Trakl,” Boundary, 1976.

Austria,\textsuperscript{149} this provides sufficient motivation to begin examining the political significance of Trakl’s apocalyptic imagery. Trakl’s apocalyptic poetics involve a vision of the end-times, or more properly the \textit{eschaton}, which is continually breaking into the present. Trakl’s poetry presents a vision of his contemporary world, where humanity stands on the edge of an eternal abyss (“Menschheit vor Feuerschlünden aufgestellt,”).\textsuperscript{150} Trakl’s lyric brings the poetics of decline to an apex, disclosing an undetermined image of utopia from within the images of the destruction of culture. The cultural \textit{kenosis}, previously discussed, are brought to their most potent moment in poems that seem to prophesy the end of western culture. Furthermore, enclosed in the potentiality of these images one finds a vision of a new society.\textsuperscript{151} The emergence of this order is characterized by the overcoming of difference, and the structuring of human relations in a fundamentally nonhierarchical configuration.

\textit{a. The Politics of Eschatology}

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, German-speaking religious discourse, in both its Catholic and protestant variations, underwent a shift in eschatological thought. Judith Wolfe argues that, previous to this era, the emphasis of eschatology was upon the last judgement—the public erring of transgressions and the personal salvation or damnation of each human individual.\textsuperscript{152} Nineteenth century theologians, beginning with Friedrich Schleiermacher and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{149} See, for example, Herman Bahr’s “Die Moderne,” in: \textit{Die Überwindung des Naturalismus: Die zweite Reihe von Zur Kritik der Moderne}, Dresden: Pierson’s Verlag, 1891.
\item \textsuperscript{150} Trakl, “Menschheit,” \textit{Sämtliche Werke und Briefwechsel}, Vol II, 110. ln.1.
\item \textsuperscript{151} See also the citation of Adorno from the introduction to this chapter: “Gegen den Untergang des Abendlandes steht nicht die auferstandene Kultur sondern die Utopie, die im Bilde der untergehenden wortlos fragend beschlossen liegt.” (“Spengler nach dem Untergang”).
\end{itemize}
perpetuated by figures such as August Isaak Dorner, began to place the doctrine of hell into question, claiming that the eternal punishment of the temporally evil undermines the supposed ‘good’ nature of God. Instead, they proposed theories of *apocatastasis*, emphasizing the temporary nature of the punishments of hell, which until the nineteenth century had not seen widespread acceptance.\footnote{This idea was furthermore held to be ‘anathema’ by not only the Catholic Church but also the Lutheran and Evangelical assemblies.} The eschaton, understood as the immanent movement of the eternal order into the present, correlates an impending divine kingdom with the final chapter of history, with the eruption of a new political order. In the century of the origination of socialism, communism, and other utopian political ideologies, eschatological thought numbered as yet another idealized political push-into-the-future.\footnote{The political aspect of eschatological thought took on different forms within the course of the nineteenth century. Judith Wolfe identifies this aspect in two predominant modes of thought: Millennialism and Adventism. While Adventism, the belief in the immanent possibility of the return of Christ at any given moment, has accompanied Christian thought since the Hellenistic campaigns of Paul, during the nineteenth century, it enjoyed a resurgence amid rapid secularization. Millennialism, a specific political out-spur of Adventism, which “denotes the belief, based on Revelation 20:1–6, that a thousand-year messianic kingdom on earth will precede the general resurrection and the creation of a new heaven and earth,” (Wolfe, “Eschatology”) had however historically been a more minor tenant in Christian thinkers.\footnote{Theologians of the nineteenth century, who were worried about the rapid sociological and political changes of their era, placed a belief in the immanent second-coming of Jesus as a political solution that served as a ‘catchall’ remedy to the processes of modernization.} However, despite several studies into the apocalyptic elements of Trakl’s poetry, there no study has yet

Writing in the final days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Trakl’s presentation of suffering and the degeneration of human society carries with it a concrete apocalyptic vision. Leiva-Merikakis provides a juxtaposition of Trakl’s apocalyptic poetry with the tradition of Christian apocalypticists and argues that the Christian notion of apocalypse as religious *telos*, understood in a broad historical sense, is a constitutive element of Trakl’s poetry.\footnote{C.f., Leiva-Merikakis. *The Blossoming Thorn.*}
emphasized the political elements which visions of the apocalypse have commonly been associated.\textsuperscript{156}

This political vision was especially dominant before the legalization of Christianity but lies latent in strains of Christian thought throughout the millennia. An anonymous Christian letter from the early second century expresses these politics as follows: “[Christians] reside in their own nations, but as resident aliens. They participate in all things as citizens and endure all things as foreigners. […] They obey the established laws and their way of life surpasses the laws.”\textsuperscript{157} This letter expresses the political vision of some early Christians, who conceived of their own political identities both \textit{within} and as \textit{separate from} the Roman Empire, which persecuted them. They conceived their own political structure as yet to be made manifest and in this sense their politics were \textit{eschatological}. During the Roman persecution of Christians as well as during the fall of the Roman Empire, apocalyptic visions fueled this form of political thought by paradoxically proposing the degeneration of the world as redemptive—as necessary for the emergence of a new political formation. Trakl’s apocalyptic politics provides a vision of political praxis that does not require the immediate eruption of a new political world order. If each poem has the potential to be “eine unvollkommene Sühne,” then there is an underlying attempt in Trakl’s aesthetics for the completion of this atonement that is nonetheless almost always refused completion.\textsuperscript{158}

\textsuperscript{156} Even early Christians understood the apocalypse as a mandate for a new form of politics. St. Paul’s statement that, “our commonwealth is in heaven,” (Phil 3:20) formed a political vision in a subset of early Christian thinkers whereby Christians’ political organization was conceived apart from their historical-political contexts.

\textsuperscript{157} \textit{Ad Diognetum} 5,5 and 10; 6,10. (Cited from: \textit{Catechism of the Catholic Church}, 599.)

Trakl’s apocalyptic political vision entails two concurrent strains of thought: the critical presentation of western culture and the identification of a futurity from within the potential self-destruction of the west. Although he wrote very few poems after the outbreak of the first world war, Trakl’s poetry seems to anticipate the catastrophic combination of nationalism with the escalation of technological weaponry that resulted in the war. He presents a vision of modernity that, as we have seen in poems such as “An die Verstummten,” is characterized as constricting, possessed, and overly concerned with profits. Moreover, his is a poetry which seeks to enable the encounter of the spiritual from within the banal.\(^{159}\) The apocalypse is to be located not just in those moments of fiery abyss and downfall, but also within the entire network of negative images that his poems present to their reader. It is also in these moments, when they begin to be placed in the eschatological mode, that is, in the context of the eternal rupturing into the temporal, where we can understand the telos of the movements of cultural kenosis and presentations of bare culture. These moments are ultimately oriented toward the eruption of a new order of human relations, which are promised to emerge from the ruins of a modernity that constantly threatens to destroy itself.

\(^{159}\) One paradigmatic example of this could be found in the poem, “Unterwegs.” Here, the immanence of a divine order is sensed within the most banal of every-day tasks and, yet this order is prohibited by the modern, indifferent, and loveless world. The poem is initiated by the pleasing scent of Myrrh, which is immediately problematized as inextant, the result of the twilight—the dream for another world. The economy is placed in the foreground as a precarious and confusing phenomenon: “Bazare kreisen und ein Goldstrahl fließt / In alte Läden seltsam und verwirrt.” The poem, moreover, surmises a revelatory power to the banal; the dishwater is capable of magically disclosing the decayed (“Im Spülicht glüht Verfallnes”) and the steel towers of the factories to reveal the boundary of the heavens (“Stahltürme glühn am Himmelsrand empor.”). This insight of the revelatory power of the banal moves into mourning the decay of this power, as the enchanting semblance of the modern world purports a glory, which is ultimately predicated upon the suffering of the working class.
Central to an understanding of Trakl’s apocalypse is a dialectical understanding of progress that is embodied in his understanding of western culture. Trakl plays upon the circadian imagery of the German word, *Abendland*, emphasizing that Western culture is both coming towards its natural completion and that it is approaching its end, seen clearly in “Abendländisches Lied,” one of the favorite poems for Trakl’s interpreters. The modern, western world can, on the one hand, be understood as the fulfillment of a long developmental transformation from nomadic shepherds into the civilization of great cities. Still, this societal maturity is obfuscated by the complex political, spiritual, and moral histories that accompany the West. One senses a notion of deep admiration for the spiritual tradition of the west—the progression from the bloody altars of the ancients to the peaceful meditations of the Christian tradition—but simultaneously represents a dialectical understanding of this progress: the spiritual progress is accompanied by displaced forms of barbarism, i.e., war and decline of culture.

**ABENDLÄNDISCHES LIED**

O der Seele nächtlicher Flügelschlag:  
Hirten gingen wir einst an dämmernden Wäldern hin  
Und es folgte das rote Wild, die grüne Blume und der lallende Quell  
Demutsvoll. O, der uralte Ton des Heimchens,  
Blut blühend am Opferstein  
Und der Schrei des einsamen Vogels über der grünen Stille des Teichs.

O, ihr Kreuzzüge und glühenden Martern  
Des Fleisches, Fallen purpurner Früchte  
Im Abendgarten, wo vor Zeiten die frommen Jünger gegangen,  
Kriegsleute nun, erwachend aus Wunden und Sternenträumen.  
O, das sanfte Zyanenbündel der Nacht.

O, ihr Zeiten der Stille und goldener Herbste,  
Da wir friedliche Mönche die purpurne Traube gekeltert;  
Und rings erglänzten Hügel und Wald.  
O, ihr Jagden und Schlösser; Ruh des Abends,  
Da in seiner Kammer der Mensch Gerechtes sann,  
In stummem Gebet um Gottes lebendiges Haupt rang.

O, die bittere Stunde des Untergangs,
The western development of the concept of redemption involves (according to this poem) the displacement of sacrifice with non-religious violence. Crusades, martyrdom, hunts, and snipers progressively fill the void of ancient, ritual sacrifice, of the “Blut blühend am Opferstein.” Peace is postponed until the final end-of-days and yet, the pious individual is purported access to this peace in an interiorized space, where the mystic is enraptured with the presence of the godhead (“Da in seiner Kammer der Mensch Gerechtes sann, / In stummem Gebet um Gottes lebendiges Haupt rang.”). However, the focus on interiorized peace—namely a version of Christianity that has emphasized the individual above the collective—is correlated with the absence of worldly peace. The *Abendland* is entering its final days (“die bittere Stunde des Untergangs”).

The poem thus presents a critique of progress, which does not map onto linear history, but instead mobilizes historical moments in movements of cultural *kenosis*. Any form of direct, linear historicity is complicated by the poem itself. Actual historicity is not at stake here, rather the conflation of historical time periods undermines any notion of progress that the poem purports to convey. While a vague historicity may be assigned to each stanza, the form of the poem suggests that each stanza could equally apply to every moment in history. An ironic

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161 In his analysis of this poem, Richard Millington argues that each of the four stanzas corresponds to a distinct historical time period, suggesting the first stanza, “evokes a primal, pre-historical epoch that is Arcadian and paganistic;” the second is purported to correspond to early Christendom; the third, in turn, is “roughly identifiable with Europe's feudal period;” and the final section introduces the lyric present with the “bittere Stunde des Untergangs.” (Millington, Richard, "Georg Trakl's Ghosts: Haunted Poems at the End of History," 268.) Such an analysis emphasizes the distinct historicity of Trakl’s vision of the west. The Christian overcoming of the pagan myths of atonement provides a comforting hope in the face of the downfall of the present society. The poem, thus understood, is a “flight of memory and imagination that traces the history of the Western World from its beginnings in nature worship right through to its final, bittersweet disintegration in the present day.” (Ibid.269). However, the historicity of the second and third stanzas in particular is deeply problematic. The conflation of the epoch of the
conflation of historical accuracy blends these distinct historical epochs into each other. Progress is merely an internal, spiritual phenomena; the material implementations of the displacement of sacrifice are not portrayed in a positive light. Rather, materiality is shown to be progressively divorced from the spiritual, implying that this process of displacement of violence outside of the spiritual sphere has resulted in a corruption of the material. Whereby spirituality was once united to the bloody sacrifice, it has progressively become divorced from the increasing peacefulness of internal spirituality, reuniting only momentarily in the laborious preparation of the monks for their sacrificial celebration ("friedliche Mönche die purpurne Traube gekeltert"). The apocalyptic moment at the end of the poem secures the promise of a reunion of spirituality and materiality in the celebration of resurrected bodies ("der süße Gesang der Auferstandenen").

Trakl does not present us with a universal understanding of the history and redemption, but rather with a progressive eruption of violence against the geographical other: the victim of sacrifice in the first stanza, the ‘infidel’ during the crusades in the second, and the object of hunts

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162 Such a notion of historicity can also be found latent in Heidegger’s reading of this poem, where he proposes an ontological understanding of Trakl’s historicity. Heidegger contests those who identify historical objects within Trakl’s poetry and proposes a different understanding of historicity: “Meint der Name nur die »Historie«, d. h. das Vorstellen von Vergangenem, dann ist Trakl geschichtslos.” (Heidegger, “Die Sprache im Gedicht: Eine Erörterung von Georg Trakls Gedicht,” 76.) Heidegger argues that Trakl’s lack of precision regarding the progressive succession of events is in fact the historical nature of his poetry: “Sein Dichten bedarf nicht der historischen »Gegenstände«. Warum nicht? Weil sein Gedicht im höchsten Sinne geschichtlich ist.” (Ibid.) Trakl’s poetry is here considered historical because it presents the universal, ontological, and historical destiny of humanity, i.e., salvation. The material progress of human civilization is, however, insignificant to Heidegger. What matters within his interpretation is the underlying, ontological notion of history that he considers central to Trakl’s poetic project, “Seine Dichtung singt das Geschick des Schlages, der das Menschengeschlecht in sein noch vorbehaltene Wesen verschlägt, d. h. rettet.” (Ibid.) While Heidegger resists definitive notions that this redemption is Christian, referring to the lack of redemption within Trakl’s final two poems, “Klage,” and “Grodek,” his inscription of the occidental with the universal fate of humanity is deeply problematic. Millington has since convincingly argued that an understanding of cultural diversity is operative within Trakl’s poetry, which displaces the occidental fate from the universal fate of humanity. (“From the Evening-Land to the Wild East: Symbolic Geography in Three Poems by Georg Trakl.”). Heidegger’s false conflation of western culture with universal humanity ultimately allows him to ontologize the dialectical historical vision of Trakl’s lyric.
in the third stanza. This represents a displacement of peace from a worldly form to a spiritual one. On the eve of the emergence of total world-war, Trakl’s poetic vision emphasizes the emancipatory power of apocalyptic thought. History is not ontologized in Trakl (as Heidegger claims), rather decline is dialectically associated with the Abendland, whose sun has come to set upon its matured culture. This destruction yields to the night and thus acquiesces to the political potential of western futurity. In the downward movement of western culture and the face of destruction, the radiant eyes of the lovers are lifted to the soul incited in the first line of the poem. The wingbeat of the night \textit{[nächtlicher Flügelschlag]}—in mid ascent—is initially revealed as a downward force, but Trakl’s poem operates through a movement of reciprocity; the ascent of the soul into the mysterious potential of the night is mirrored by the historical decent of the west into destructive violence. In the midst of descent witnessing ascent, this reciprocal movement proposes a model of communal futurity emerging from destruction. The final lines propose the organization of an eschatological community, modelled on liturgical relation and suggesting a unification of disparate peoples into a single voice (“der süße Gesang der Auferstandenen”). The liturgical mode of \textit{epiclesis}—a prayer of invocation—is emphasized in its eschatological securement; the resurrected are celebrating together as \textit{one body}, or “ein Geschlecht.” This community is established only through the descent of the Abendland—through destruction and death—and unites persons through a conceptualization of the end-times, which is perceivable in the present if one follows the examples of elevated erotic expression (“Aber strahlend heben die silbernen Lider die Liebenden: / Ein Geschlecht. Weihrauch strömt von rosigen Kissen…”). The conclusion of the poem counters the downward force with which it commenced, promising the resurrection of western culture after its inevitable destruction. After violence has been progressively expelled from the realm of the spiritual and displaced into the
material, liturgical form of organization is combined with the apocalyptic understanding of
history to propose the future potential of communities to reunite the material and the spiritual:
propelling politics forward as a negation of present violence. In the slant of decline, the lovers
raise their eyes toward the undetermined image of utopia—the promise of a future community—
enclosed in the images of the inevitable destruction of the West.

Love is positioned as the enabler of a utopic image within a general movement of
downfall. This love at first appears to be erotic and sexual in nature, emphasizing the raised
eyelids of lovers looking into each other’s eyes, but a closer look at the lovers’ union into “ein
Geschlecht,” emphasizes the complex notion of unity operative in Trakl’s poetry. The ambiguity
of this term, which can be rendered in English either as ‘one sex’ or ‘one race’, points toward the
two models of love, between which Trakl’s eschatology oscillate: erotic love vs. communal love.
On the other hand, “Ein Geschlecht” can also be understood as an overcoming of gender
differences—a rejection of patriarchy and a proposal of non-hierarchical association.163 One
could thus propose communal love as the inspiration for this form of union. Thus understood,
“die Liebenden” begins to separate itself from the conception of erotic lovers, proposing instead
a plural form of human association that overcomes difference through fleshly union of the
multitudes. The loving community becomes a single animated being [ein Geschlecht], an

163 Richard Detsch emphasizes the sexual semantics of “ein Geschlecht,” arguing that Trakl’s apocalyptic vision is
one which transcends gender. Detsch proposes that Trakl’s unique understanding of the biblical conception of
marriage was derived from the following passage in the second creation narrative in Genesis, “Therefore a man
leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” [Gen. 2:24; see also: Math 19:5,
Mark 10:8, and Eph 5:31.] Detsch argues that Trakl understands this process to be an eschatological overcoming of
sexual difference. In his analysis, Detsch turns to the French scholar of primitive religions, Salomon Reinach, who
examines the subject of androgyny in early Christian theology. Perhaps a much more efficient route to the subject of
surpassing gender in the elevation of love would be to turn to the writings of Maximus the Confessor, who was
receiving increasing interest from German-speaking theologians at the beginning of the twentieth century. Maximus
holds that, “The one who is perfect in love and has advanced to the limit of dispassion knows no difference […]
abstracted, formal model of human relation that can be understood as a formal analogy of the unity of Christian believers in the Body of Christ. Communal love, understood as a self-emptying orientation toward incorporative communities, has the power to transform difference and seeks communion with all. These semantics become pregnant with ambiguity, which only enriches the potential held within these final lines. The lovers have transcended the erotic sphere of sexual union and by uniting in “ein Geschlecht,” they have arrived at a moment of unity that fuses the sexual motif to the sense of overcoming the cultural limitations of the Abendland, precisely at its moment of decline. If Trakl’s apocalyptic politics seek to overcome boundaries, then identity must thereby be based beyond culture: within the single, suffering race of humanity. The decline of the West is itself offered up as a prayer of thanksgiving from the eschatological moment: “Weihrauch strömt von rosigen Kissen / Und der süße Gesang der Auferstandenen.” In overcoming the limitations of cultural boundaries through communal love, the hope of an eschatological community emerges.

Still, it is correct to focus on the erotic moment in the apocalypse. Trakl’s apocalyptic vision is often two-fold, exploring both the erotic and non-erotic as modes of love that promise futurity in the face of death. That is to say that erotic love also promises the power to transcend death, but in a non-communal sense. We see such eroticism proposed in a poem, such as “Die blaue Nacht…,” and this erotic vision of apocalypse complicates the political eschatology that is co-extant in Trakl’s lyric. This poem presents two dead lovers, whose bodies lie in the

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164 Here, I am not suggesting that one should not exclude the erotic, androgynous, and queer interpretation that Detsch proposes. If love is the key to this union, one must not hold exclusively to Detsch’s claim that “One must understand ‘Geschlecht’ primarily as sex and secondarily as race.” (Detsch, Georg Trakl’s Poetry, 33). However, this mode of sexual interpretation of the ‘Body of Christ’ has its roots in the Pauline epistles: “Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.” (Ephesians 5:28-30). Marriage is considered by Paul to be analogous to Christ’s relationship to his Church—a micro-body-politic that reflects the universalist message of potential of all humans to associate as one body.
grave, hand-in-hand. In their death state, they contemplate the cosmic scene (“Versteinerte schauen wir unsre Sterne”). As they contemplate the plurality of the night, the poem drastically shifts in focus: their exclusive love, not proceeding beyond the pair, is insufficient to secure universal salvation. As they witness the punishment of the damned, eschatological difference is reaffirmed in a painful mode (“O Schmerzliches! Schuldige wandeln im Garten / In wilder Umarmung die Schatten, / Daß in gewaltigem Zorn Baum und Tier über sie sank.”)\textsuperscript{165} Their love is solipsistic, not extending beyond the beloved, and is thus insufficient for a communal vision. They do not commune with the pain of the damned—instead the painful cries of the damned drift into the distance like “sanfte Harmonien,” as the lovers travel “durch die stille Nacht.”\textsuperscript{166} Their love does fulfill its promise of eschatological salvation, but it is still limited by its erotic form. The form of erotic eschatology is personal and exclusive; such love is revealed as incapable of being the basis of community because the love for the other is limited to the singular object of desire.\textsuperscript{167} In distinction to the erotic poetry of Lasker-Schüler, here \textit{eros} is incapable of being the motivator of communities because its inter-personal form is limited to the domain of the beloved; it does not extend to the damned or to the suffering other. Trakl’s apocalypse only becomes communal precisely when it transcends the monogamous character of erotic love—when love is not conditioned toward a specific beloved, but rather in its self-emptying is opened toward the other, as seen in “Abendländisches Lied”.

\textsuperscript{165} Ibid. ln. 7-9. (Here, in the original manuscript, Trakl originally wrote “uns” instead of “sie.” One could speculate from this that the poem was conceived as attempting to overcome the limitations of erotic love—of allowing the lovers communion with the damned—but that ultimately, this is not achieved by the final version of the poem.)

\textsuperscript{166} Ibid. ln. 10, 11.

\textsuperscript{167} In Trakl’s apocalyptic eroticism, \textit{eros} seems to always take on an element of monogamy. Indeed, this is not a necessary consequent of \textit{eros} as such but is what I mean by Trakl’s understanding of \textit{eros}, which is a heterodoxic interpretation of Christian \textit{eros}, perhaps borrowed from the tradition of German Romanticism.
c. The Ascent of Downfall

Trakl’s sense of societal downfall is carefully curated in resonance with his poetry’s attempt to reveal the eschatological community. This entails a careful mixing of theological and political imagery, which often times results in the oscillation between these modes in Trakl’s creative process. A glimpse at this process allows insights into the semantic field in which Trakl’s religious imagery exists, namely that the theological is nearly always operating as a formal model for natural propositions. One of the most illuminating moments in his poetry, where one can clearly see the semantic exchange of the eschatological and the proto-political, is the poem “Untergang.” Never considered a finished piece by Trakl himself, this poem was originally published posthumously in 1914 in von Ficker’s Journal, Der Brenner. The transformation over at least five highly edited versions of this poem provides a unique insight into how Trakl refined his theological heterodoxy into a distinct proto-political vision of the apocalypse.\[168\] The first draft of this poem provides a vision of the eschatological community, which erupts from within the present moment, but this draft lacks the vision of a society on the brink of collapse. During the process of revision, the ethical character of the eschatological community falls out; the happy saints [frohe Heiliger]\[169\] who accompany the poetic-collective [uns]\[170\] are replaced in the third

\[168\] Although the citations of these different instantiation of the poem are quoted in the Innsbrucker version of the historical critical edition of Trakl’s poems, Sauermann and Zworschina did not understand all of these versions to be the same poem and the first two versions are treated under the working title, “Wenn wir durch unserer Sommer purpurnes Dunkel…” The previous historical critical edition, published by Walter Killy in 1969 under the title Dichtungen und Briefe, treated these five versions as one poem. Sauermann and Zworschina do not provide their reasons for breaking with the decision of Killy; however, they do mention that “Trakl fertigt keine Reinschrift [von „Wenn wir durch unserer Sommer purpurnes Dunkel…”] an, es dient ihm als ‘Steinbruch’ für andere Gedichte, die in derselben Zeit entstanden sind und deren Entwürfe z.T. ebenfalls auf den Blättern G59-65 und G72-79 stehen.“ This second sub-set of drafts are then treated unter the title, “Untergang.” (342)


\[170\] Ibid, In. 356.
rendition by an earthly and corruptible inversion: sad monks [*traurige Mönche*].\(^{171}\) The fourth version abandons the earthly figures entirely, referencing instead dead angels [*verstorbene Engel*]\(^{172}\) and in the final, published version of the poem, this eschatological community becomes eclipsed: the poem takes a distinctly different form and abandons Christian imagery entirely. The fiery apocalyptic visions of the Christian Book of Revelation are inverted and are replaced by the icy petrification of nature ("den weißen Weiher," "ein eisiger Wind").\(^{173}\)

Very little remains from the initial draft, but we see in these revisions of this poem that Trakl’s proto-political vision is initially expressed through religious terms, but in the end is emptied of religious content. This instance of revision reflects increased attention to the material in each subsequent draft. The poem is winnowed, and progressively undermines its ability to signify the vision of a community that is beyond and yet permeating the present. The theological referents, which promise the immanent presence of transcendent saints are shown to be blind signifiers, representing a vacant form of imaginative power. Theological imagery is thus a nexus for the type of political propositions that lie latent in Trakl’s poetry because it provides a semantics for speculation beyond the present conditions of the world. Thus understood, eschatology does not secure the emergence of a universal community, but merely posits such a community as possible. In lieu of Christian conceptions of eschatology, we find a revelation of current instability and future apocalyptic potential.

This problem of theological signification concludes the poem, which functions as an acknowledgement of language’s inability to signify the unknown. The final version of this poem

\(^{171}\) Ibid, Textstufe 5 H. 360. ln. 2.


\(^{173}\) Ibid, Textstufen 6 D, 7 D. 369-70. ln. 2, 3.
concludes: “Unter Dornenbogen / O mein Bruder klimmern wir blinde Zeiger gen Mitternacht.”\textsuperscript{174} In the context of the ostensible ‘downfall’ of the poem, signified by the title, the victorious motion of ascent \textit{klimmern}\textsuperscript{175} takes on a contradictory meaning. As society enters a vacant, lifeless state, the movement towards a spiritual disposition that is encompassed by the mysterious enrapture and identification with the broken brow of the night \textit{die zerbrochene Stirne der Nacht}\textsuperscript{176} allows the process of downfall to become ascent. This movement takes its place from the lowliest of positions (“Unter Dornenbogen”) and begins a process of attempting to ascend from the downfall of modernity. The medium of this ascent is itself aimless (“blinde Zeiger”), lacking the teleological assurances once provided by theology.\textsuperscript{177} The poetic sphere of Trakl’s lyric becomes an infinite ascent of the debased toward the zero hour \textit{Mitternacht} of eschatological realization. Here, the poem falls silent, unable to secure the communal trajectory that it has constructed.

Trakl’s lyric thus also explores the limits of apocalyptic associations; his lyric as a whole teaches us that the promise of love to transcend death does not itself lead to a politics of inclusion. \textit{Kenosis}, self-emptying, and self-gift are, however, modes which promise a lasting political association. The apocalyptic vision in Trakl’s poetry enables us to conceive a political actualization of the possibility proposed by the associative logic in his poetry. Thus understood, the actualization of associative politics comes through a collective response to death, destruction, and annihilation. The cultural-critical identification of a ‘downfall’ within modern culture is not

\textsuperscript{174} Ibid, Ln. 9.

\textsuperscript{175} This word replaces “steigen” in Textstufe 4 T.

\textsuperscript{176} Ibid, Ln. 5.

\textsuperscript{177} For a slightly different (though not incompatible) interpretation of this poem, c.f. Csúri, Károly. “Einzelgedichte und zyklische Struktur,” \textit{Georg Trakl und die literarische Moderne}, (Berlin: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2009).
merely negative, but an insight that, combined with loving affirmation, provides a path toward the transformation of modernity into a non-hierarchical, associative cultural force.
CHAPTER III: ANGELIC AUTHORITY OR RILKE’S ANARCHY

...wie eine Kraft durch ihren Weg
eine andere auf entgegengesetzter Richtung
zu befördern vermöge, so auch die profane Ordnung
des Profanen das Kommen des messianischen Reiches.
~Walter Benjamin

I. Introduction

It is no secret that around the fin de siècle German poets were often positioning their poetic voice in a prophetic manner. Perhaps the clearest example of a self-proclaimed prophet-poet is Stefan George, who gathered poetic disciples and cultivated a religiopolitical vision in lyrical cycles such as Hymnen (1890), Pilgerfahrten (1891), or Das Jahr der Seele (1897). Rilke was fascinated with George as a young poet; in fact, some of his earliest surviving correspondences are letters that he exchanged with the poet he identified as the “Meister.”178 On the seventh of December 1897 Rilke wrote to George asking to join his circle:


While Rilke did not end up becoming a member of George’s inner circle, he was greatly influenced in his early years by the poetic authority with which the “Meister” wrote. This authority was, for George at least, inseparable from his religious attitudes, from his self-assertion

179 Ibid.
of the prophetic nature of his poetry. This influence should not, however, be overstated. Through a series of misunderstandings through correspondence—primarily as a result of Rilke’s constantly changing addresses—the two poets fell out of contact only a few years later.

What the two poets do share is a noticeable focus on establishing themselves through their lyrical engagement with the divine as an *auctor*: an author with a determined literary authority. While George seemed content to position himself as a prophetic figure, Rilke’s relationship to the divine was more tenuous. As Helen Clair Sword notes, Rilke recognized a paradox in establishing an authorial authority as a prophet: “prophecy is also an act of self-effacement, for to claim divine inspiration — literally, the reception of the breath or spirit of a god — is to admit to wilful passivity, the suppression of one’s own individual voice and vision.”

180 Rilke did not establish himself as a prophet, but rather kept a certain distance from religious truth, and as I will show in this chapter, refuses to subordinate himself to a divine authority. And here we find a critical (and political) difference between George and Rilke: whereas George’s poetics were steeped in a hierarchical system (of master and disciple), Rilke’s poetics are oriented toward a more personalist aesthetic: his is an authority unsubordinated to the divine and a voice which does not seek to subordinate his reader.

This chapter approaches the religious character of Rilke’s lyric by arguing that these images take on a political valence that undermine hierarchies of authority and propose conditional religious propositions as sufficient to establish a communal practice. The way Rilke characterizes his relationship to the divine accompanies a resistance towards authority. As Robert Vilain has remarked, “Although the theme of Rilke’s relationship to God is an obvious

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one, indeed one that leaps out as central to an understanding of Rilke the writer and Rilke the man, there is relatively little modern scholarship on it.”

In Rilke’s poetry, the divine continuously resurfaces in Rilke’s attempt to establish this authorial voice, but he also makes clear in his letters that his relationship to God is one of productivity and unfamiliarity:

Das Verhältnis zu Gott setzt, so wie ich es einsehe, Produktivität, ja irgend ein, ich mochte sagen wenigstens privates, die anderen nicht überzeugendes Genie der Erfindung voraus, das ich mir soweit getrieben denken kann, daß man auf einmal nicht begreift, was mit dem Namen Gott gemeint ist, sich ihn wiederholen, sich ihn vorsagen läßt, zehnmal, ohne zu verstehen, nur um ihn ganz neu, irgendwo an seinem Ursprung, an seiner Quelle aufzusuchen. Dies ist etwa die Beimischung Unglauben im Stundenbuch, Unglauben nicht aus Zweifel, sondern aus Nicht-wissen und Anfängerschaft.

Rilke’s constant references to the divine are thus not participating in a theological discourse, nor do they seem to be located in a place of personal religious conviction. Rather the complexity and diversity of theological and religious discourse are sources of inspiration for Rilke: founts of ideas, imagery, and forms from which to create new things. The divine—understood as an idea that cannot be fully comprehended—is a wellspring of poetic language, of undermining epistemologically or hermeneutically secure speech acts. In this sense, God is a source of auctoritas—of an authority that underpins authorship—but one which does not subordinate the poet to the divine voice, in which Rilke (from his place of rejection of the transcendent) has at best an ambivalent faith: one of “aus Nicht-wissen und Anfängerschaft.”

What the present chapter seeks to elucidate is not Rilke’s complicated relationship to religion—his faith or lack thereof—but rather the way in which his religious engagement takes on a political valence: his dialectical process of subverting authority while establishing himself

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181 Vilain, Robert, “Rilke and God,” 475.
183 Ibid.
as an *auctor*. I begin this analysis with a glance at the *Stundenbuch*, providing a short reflection on the way in which Rilke’s early investment in religion participates in the tradition of establishing an authorial authority through a rhetorical relation to the divine. Rilke’s early investment in religion represents a heterodox, but still genuine interest in religious interiority. We witness a shift in the tone of his religious content leading up to and completed by the publication of the *Neue Gedichte*. I investigate this critical shift and argue that Rilke’s religious references transform from mystifying rhetoric in his early poetry to a critical vision that exposes alienation in society. The political undertones in Rilke certainly lie latent in his poetry, never maturing into a direct articulation by the author, whose explicit political beliefs were admittedly regressive.\(^{184}\) However, Rilke’s critical religion is dialectically mobilized to critique the way in which religious beliefs can function as ideology and mystify the alienated relations of modern life, but also to imagine new perspectives with which to see the world and potentially change it. In explicating this religious politics, I reflect on the critical potential in Rilke’s poetics, specifically the way in which his relationship to authority shares structural parallels with Theodor Adorno’s critical engagement with theology. In my conclusion, I also lend attention to Rilke’s often under-examined French poetry to emphasize the anarchic function that the angelic figure plays in his poetry. Ultimately, I excavate a political aspect of the ethical side of Rilke’s late poetics, an inversion of hierarchical forms, arguing that one can detect a latent, formal politics that I term angelic anarchy.

\(^{184}\) For a scholarly reconsideration of Rilke’s conservative or regressive political views see the “Einführung” from Joachim W. Storck in his collection of Rilke’s letters titled, *Briefe zur Politik*, (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1992). A critical review of Storck’s assessment and collection of texts is to be found in Peter Por’s “Rilke und die Politik. Anlässlich einer selbst-zensierten Anthologie.”
II. A Glance at Rilke’s Stundenbuch: The Author in Place of the Divine

In the Stundenbuch, we see clearly that Rilke’s address towards God can often be characterized as an attempt to establish an authority through his poetry. In this way, he (like George) carries forth a tradition that is prominent in German poetry, at least since the Romantics. From Novalis’ desire to write a new bible to Hölderlin’s mobilization of mytho-poetic content to give his lyric authority in a greater western canon, to more general conceptions of the poetic genius, whose authority is derived from a “God-given” ability to express the ineffable, religious themes’ prominence can in part be understood as the poet establishing the lyrical-I as an authoritative voice.

Rilke’s Stundenbuch seeks to establish itself, however, not simply as an authoritative text, but also a text of praxis. Taking its name from the Liturgy of the Hours, a monastic praxis of praying the Psalms at various hours during the day that developed out of Jewish liturgies in early Christianity, this cycle of poetry presents itself as a text that is meant to be read and re-read, a text to be practiced by its readers in a form that mirrors the monk’s relation to the Psalms. Thus understood, the poet’s constant invocation to God can also be understood within a much older tradition of shaping a mystical self. This monastic practice of allowing oneself to become formed through mystical praxis is understood dialectically as an action of receptivity: the monk does not form himself, but by living a life of structure—of ora et labora—allows oneself to be shaped by the divine will. As Foucault teaches us, the origins of this practice take place through submission to a stark hierarchical relation: involving confession to a spiritual director, the lowering of oneself below the community.185 Who has such authority and the limits upon the

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185 See Foucault, Confessions of the Flesh.
authority of a spiritual director or abbot are the subject of several writings and reflections from late antiquity and the medieval period. As we shall see, Rilke’s engagement in this discourse, however, inverts these relations and questions the process of subordination. Rather than finding a pious, obedient monk, we find a poetic subject seeking to establish itself outside of the ecclesial hierarchy: seeking to establish itself atop the poetic order.

In Rilke’s case, the *Stundenbuch* begins to ironize divine authority, positing a practical poetic authority that reflects the medieval relation of the monk to the divine text. Poetry, thus understood, possesses a power to shape the subject; lyric is not simply a mode of expression, but also, is presented as a mode of praxis in shaping subjective experience. In the case of a poem about the renaissance artist, Michelangelo, the poet reflects upon the authority of an artist, writing, “nur Gott bleibt über [den] Willen [des Künstlers] weit.” The lack of reference to the priest or monk which we would expect to find in between suggests a shift in hierarchic elevation of the artist above the priest or the monk. In the case of Michelangelo, the ability to give form to a sculpture (or in Rilke’s own case, to give form to poetry) corresponds to the artists’ ability to feel the weight of human existence in its entirety: “er aber fühlt nur noch des Lebens Masse.” Thereby the poet of the *Stundenbuch* asserts the artist’s authority to approach the world in a way that gives a complete form to the whole: “und daß er Alles wie ein Ding umfasse,” Artistic expression becomes a mode of establishing metaphysical meaning without doing metaphysics, without relying upon a system of hierarchies.

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186 Rilke, *Die Gedichte*, (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 2014), 213.

187 Ibid.

188 Ibid.
Rather than always subordinating poetic creativity to the divine will, Rilke’s poetry from this period questions the hierarchy between poet and God constantly, especially amid unanswered prayers. The poet of the *Stundenbuch* poses the question, “Was wirst du tun, Gott, wenn ich sterbe?” In doing so, he inverts the absolutizing function of monastic subordination to God, who is understood to need nothing from mankind generally and certainly not from an individual monk. In suspending the hierarchy between God and mankind, Rilke’s poem suggests that his authority as a poet also lends something to the divine: “mit mir verlierst du deinen Sinn.” The difference between the authority proclaimed by monastic life and that proclaimed by the poet of the *Stundenbuch* could thus be traced upon the lines of metaphysical difference. Whereas authority of the monastic rule or the liturgy is derived from the Church, which asserts itself as the representative of God on Earth, the *auctoritas* found in Rilke’s *Stundenbuch* is derived from its practicality: its ability to affect change in the self. Put more simply, monastic rule claims to represent the will of God *prima facie*, but Rilke’s poetry only asserts an authority through the praxis of the book of hours—which is a conditional authority based upon the fruits that are born in the construction of the self: whether or not the poem enables one to change their life, whether or not the practice of reading this poetry forms the subject. In doing so, Rilke’s poems seek to establish an *auctoritas* through the institutions and traditions of the monastic life, but they also seek to invert the hierarchies that serve as the source of this authority.

The fashion of divine address in the *Stundenbuch* reflects this lack of metaphysical or ontological assent to a divine authority: God is an extension of the self, a Feuerbachian concept

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189 Ibid, 216.
190 Ibid.
employed to project the potential of the poetic-I. At the beginning of the Stundenbuch, the following poem makes this relation rather explicit:

Doch wie ich mich auch in mich selber neige:
Mein Gott ist dunkel und wie ein Gewebe
Von hundert Wurzeln, welche schweigsam trinken.
Nur, daß ich mich aus seiner Wärme hebe,
mehr weiß ich nicht, weil alle meine Zweige
tief unten ruhn und nur im Winde winken.\textsuperscript{191}

God here is not presented as a metaphysical being, but rather a projected object, by which the poet makes sense of his own relation to himself ("wie ich mich auch in mich selber neige"). God is a concept that belongs to the poet ("Mein Gott"), described through a metaphor of vegetative life ("wie ein Gewebe / Von hundert Wurzeln"). As characterized by this poem, God is little more than an inspiration by which the poet can act of his own accord ("ich mich... hebe"). We find here a moment of transition between divine and poetic authority—an oscillation between which the Stundenbuch continually orients itself: God is a source taken for granted, unexplained, grounded only in experience and praxis of self-relation.

The early phase of Rilke, despite often appearing to be characterized by devout Christian piety, can be better understood as the very opposite: as a rejection of divine authority. This rejection is not characterized by an assertion of metaphysical atheism, but rather by a sort of post-secular, agnostic attitude toward God. The linguistic functions that grew out of devout theology—of epistemic restrictions on the human capacity to comprehend God or the divine will—are refashioned in Rilke’s religious poetry towards a more material end: establishing the freedom of the subject.

\textsuperscript{191} Ibid, 201.
III. Religion as Demystification: Rilke’s Religious Reversal

The *Neue Gedichte* represent a critical shift in Rilke’s lyric, not only in the presentation of images, as many commentators have already noted, but also in his engagement with religion. In contradistinction to the focus on subjective interiority that we find in *Das Stundenbuch*, Rilke’s thing poems represent a more object-centered approach to lyrical presentation. As Thomas Pfau remarks, “Starting with *Neue Gedichte* (1907), Rilke no longer conceives transcendence as an ineffable beyond.”

With this shift, Rilke’s focus on the religious becomes more concrete and historical. The standard narrative is thus that we find a reversal in Rilke’s approach to religion: a turning away from his more interior interests in religiosity, a conversion toward the exterior world.

One can identify four types of poems in the *Neue Gedichte* that deal explicitly with Jewish and Christian content, which generally (although non-linearly) move through the historical development of western religion: the Old Testament poems (“Abisag,” “David singt vor Saul,” “Josuas Landtag”), the new testament poems (“Der Auszug des Vorlorenen Sohnes,” “Der Ölbaum-Garten,” “Pieta”), the cathedral poems (“L’ange du Meridien,” “Die Kathedrale,” “Das Portal,” “Die Fensterrose”), and the subsequent poems that portray the thingly nature of religious objects or rituals (“Gott im Mittelalter,” “Sankt Sebastian,” “Der Engel,” “Die Marien-Prozession”).

It is interesting to note that this development is not to be found in *Der neuen Gedichte anderer Teil*, where the presentation of religious content is less systematic and also less historical. Furthermore, it is also worth noting that the religious interest is not restricted to Jewish and Christian motifs: there are also sporadic poems with Islamic and Buddhist themes.

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mystical, subjective disposition that is found in Das Stundenbuch. Instead, this critical shift in Rilke’s lyrical approach to religion makes the function of religion in his lyric clearer: rather than reflecting a negotiation of the poet’s authority vis-à-vis the divine, we find an authority relocated outside of the realm of the creator within the realm of things. Thereby Rilke disjoints the act of creation—whether divine or poetic—from an assertion of authority over the created.

The form of the Neue Gedichte reveals a broader trend of the role of religion in Rilke’s lyric; beginning with the Neue Gedichte, religious poetry is a clear force for demystification, an exercise in epistemic humility. Such a turn, however, also clarifies the political valence in criticizing the authority of both the poet and the divine. The poems of the Neue Gedichte present us with a series of relations made foreign and thereby resist equivocation between appearance and thing. In doing so, Rilke’s poems rethink the relation of a subject to its environment.194 As many previous commentators have remarked, this relation of the subject to things, found in the Neue Gedichte, takes on a quasi-religious character in and of itself. John Jolly has recently argued that the relation between the subject and things in this collection of poetry reflects a medieval philosophical disposition of the Christian towards the divine, namely the analogia entis.195 This understanding of analogy allows one to make statements that point toward a truth that lies behind the appearance of things while acknowledging an infinite difference between the statement and the metaphysical mystery that cannot be captured in language.196 Such arguments

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194 I have previously advanced these claims in my article: Hoffman, Lukas. “Love of Things: Reconsidering Adorno’s Criticism of Rilke,” Monatshefte, vol. 114, no. 2, June 2022, 245. ©2022 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. All rights reserved.


196 For a clear elucidation of the analogia entis as a philosophical approach that allows one to make metaphysical propositions while acknowledging an infinite difference between the human intellect and God, see: “Reason and Its
help explicate Rilke’s idiosyncratic relation to the world of things through his use of formal elements that he derives from subjective Christian dispositions. But Rilke is far from a systematic theologian: his presentation of the divine is exceedingly heterodox, unable to be placed firmly in any religious tradition, and often inconsistent with itself. As mentioned above, Rilke’s own relationship to the divine was not one of personal subordination, nor of dogmatic belief, but rather of creative inspiration. Rilke’s fascination with different religious traditions (ranging from his native Catholicism to Russian Orthodoxy to Islam) differs from that characteristic of some of his contemporaries’ desire for interfaith dialogue in that he does not appear invested in questions of faith at all. By relocating poetic authority within the thing itself (rather than a mystical construction of the divine), Rilke creates an auctoritas for himself as the poet of the thing: the transmitter of thingly authority. Thus, the religious form remains in many ways: the thing of the Neue Gedichte replaces the God of the Stundenbuch.

In this section, I first examine the way this thingly authority functions in Rilke’s thing poems, beginning with an analysis of the poem in which (perhaps) the most authoritative line in Rilke’s poetry appears: “Archaischer Torso Apollos.” I then turn to examine how this thingly authority is used in a critical manner to demystify religion with a close reading of “Gott im Mittelalter.” I show that Rilke’s poetry takes a critical stance towards religious ideology while leaving room for the possibility of a different, non-ideological religious praxis. Finally, I show the way in which Rilke’s conception of the poet undermines his own auctoritas by demystifying the mystical construct, intertwining the poet in material and economic modes of reification.

Finitude” in Haydt, Joseph, Revelation and Thought: A Study in the Age of Goethe, University of Chicago, 2022. For a historical account of the development of the analogia entis in western thought, but particularly in the intersection of religious thinking and aesthetics, see: Pfau, Thomas, Incomprehensible Certainty, (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022).
[Verdinglichung]. Such gestures complement the epistemic humility found in the genre of the thing poem with a certain inversion of the typical poet / reader hierarchies.

**a. The Authority of the Thing: Politics of the Non-Human**\(^{197}\)

“Du mußt dein Leben ändern.” This infamous ethical imperative of the final line of “Archaischer Torso Apollos” results from a realization of the finitude of the subject that stems from an experience of the autonomy of the thing.\(^{198}\) In this line, Rilke locates a mysterious authority outside of the poetic subject and transfers moral authority into the thing itself. As Sloterdijk suggests in the book that takes its title from this poem, *You Must Change Your Life*, Rilke rejects an enlightenment notion of a clearly delineated and rational system of ethics. In doing so, Rilke relocates an ethical impulse within the authority of the thing, although the authority of this impulse is left unclear. In this poem in particular, the authority of this command seems inspired by the threat of the object. Becoming increasingly aware of the object’s hidden powers, the poetic consciousness responds to the increasing inexplicability of the phenomenon of the statue with critical, but loving attention.

**ARCHAISCHER TORSO APOLLOS**

Wir kannten nicht sein unerhörtes Haupt,

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\(^{197}\) An earlier version of this section was originally published as a part of the article, “Love of Things: Reconsidering Adorno’s Criticism of Rilke” in *Monatshefte*, vol. 114, no. 2, June 2022. ©2022 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. All rights reserved.

\(^{198}\) For a significant discussion of finitude in Rilke’s work more generally, see Hannah Eldridge’s *Lyric Orientations*, where she contends that finitude constitutes a central aspect of Rilke’s poetics, especially after his encounter with Rodin. In the context of Rilke’s middle period (from the *Book of Images* until the publication of *Malte*), Eldridge suggests an epistemological humility that is similar to the impulse I am identifying here as a minimal ethics, writing that, “once the problems of finitude—here the problems of the boundaries of the self—are raised, there are no universal rules or limitations that can satisfy the desire for certainty in drawing such boundaries once and for all” (125).
darin die Augenäpfel reiften. Aber
sein Torso glüht noch wie ein Kandelaber,
in dem sein Schauen, nur zurückgeschraubt,
sich hält und glänzt. Sonst könnte nicht der Bug
der Brust dich blenden, und im leisen Drehen
der Lenden könnte nicht ein Lächeln gehen
zu jener Mitte, die die Zeugung trug.

Sonst stünde dieser Stein entstellt und kurz
unter der Schultern durchsichtigem Sturz
und flimmerte nicht so wie Raubtierfelle;

und brächte nicht aus allen seinen Rändern
aus wie ein Stern: denn da ist keine Stelle,
die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern.199

Why must you change your life? Literary critics have long since attempted to answer this
question, but the authority of this command evades interpretation. Sloterdijk asserts that this
“must” is an “unchallengeable authority,” derived from the form of the poem itself.200 While he
is right to point toward the fragility of the subject in light of this demand, this authority is
perhaps not quite as “unchallengeable” as he claims. As Trop writes, “If Rilke’s archaic torso
tells you, ‘You must change your life,’ it does not tell you how or why. The formal structure of
the poem itself provokes the dispersal of authority into a series of questions rather than
demanding acquiescence to the command.”201 At first glance, it is not clear who is addressed in
the inconspicuous “Du.” Does the poem address the reader, or does it address the poet who

199 Rilke. Die Gedichte. 483.

200 Sloterdijk. You Must Change Your Life. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 26. He writes, “This authority touches on a subtle insufficiency within me that is older and freer than sin; it is my innermost not-yet. In my most conscious moment, I am affected by the absolute objection to my status quo: my change is the one thing that is necessary.” (Ibid.)

encounters the torso? Or could this be the voice of the poet speaking to the torso? The poem itself does not provide an answer. Nor is it clear who or what is speaking in this poem. Does this imperative belong to the gaze of the torso? To the poet? To the poem itself? To the reader’s conscience? The absolute suddenness of this imperative appears to be its only authority. In fact, the imperative manifests an invitation that its own authority be called into question: it begs the question “why?” while refusing an answer. More than providing an authoritative orientation—what Taylor identifies as “epiphanies”—this command upends our understanding of authority more generally. The imperative’s un-answerability thus undermines any authority which it may seem to have.

Ultimately, the ethical exercise provided by the poem is less propositional than the command itself, but the poem thereby conveys in a humble fashion its own authority to communicate the ethical. It lies in the disposition that the poem mediates: a radical openness to the possibilities that escape appearance. The ethical gesture that permeates the entire poem—that is, examining the thing as something that is whole, even when it appears fragmentary—ultimately carries more weight than the infamous imperative in the final line. Rilke’s writings on Rodin are illuminating in this regard.202 For Rilke, the aesthetic presentation of things holds the potential to shape our relation to the fundamentally other:

Das Andere steht nicht in unserer Macht. Und das Ding selbst, das, ununterdrückbar, aus den Händen eines Menschen hervorgeht, ist wie der Eros des Sokrates, ist ein Daimon, ist zwischen Gott und Mensch, selber nicht schön, aber lauter Liebe zur Schönheit und lauter Sehnsucht nach ihr.203

202 As Clair Gheerardyn argues, Rodin’s influence on Rilke during this period is not to be underestimated. During the composition of the New Poems, Rilke worked as Rodin’s secretary and the second part (Der neuen Gedichte anderer Teil), the first poem of which is “Archaischer Torso Apollos,” is dedicated to Rodin. (See: “Les Nouveaux Poèmes de Rilke: effleurer la sculpture de Rodin,” Romanticisme, no. 184, 2019.)

203 Rilke, Sämtliche Werke, (Wiesbaden: Insel Verlag, 1966), 211.
Rilke’s aesthetic of thingness is intimately tied to displacing the priority of the subject from the relationship between subject and thing. The thing is something unattainable—out of the subject’s reach—and is likened to the Socratic eros, which involves constant approach and is never actually obtained. Thus conceived, the thing is completely independent of the subject, inalienable in itself, and thus independent of human forms of estrangement. Rilke’s arrival at this conclusion, however, is predicated on a certain amount of alienation in aesthetic productivity itself, namely an estrangement from the object that is a consequence of aesthetic production. The alienation of the poet points toward a gaff between poet and the authority of the thing, which undermines his own auctoritas to establish an outside authority.

Rather than approaching the object through propositional knowledge, the poem commences with an initial speculation about the previous appearance of the statue’s eyes, stating declaratively that we cannot know the previous glory of the whole statue (“Wir kannten nicht sein unerhörtes Haupt, / darin die Augenäpfel reiften”). The next sentence begins with the negative, contrasting conjunction (“Aber”) that leads back to the appearance of the object itself (“Aber / sein Torso glüht noch wie ein Kandelaber, / in dem sein Schauen, nur zurückgeschraubt, / sich hält und glänzt”). Once the attention is placed upon the object, the reader is confronted with a paradoxical formulation: although decapitated, the torso still has the ability to see. The gaze of the viewer is thus met by the gaze of the statue in the simile of a candelabra. The second stanza continues the act of speculation, shifting into the subjunctive mood and maintaining a distance between the poetic signification of the thing and the thing itself. Here the elusive "you" makes its first appearance as the poem's addressee, with which it shares a fascination in the object (“Sonst könnte nicht der Bug / der Brust dich blenden”). The poem becomes a network of
different relations, mediating thing, and "you" in the midst of a poetic subject who is realizing its lack of autonomy through an encounter with the thing.

This mediation is made possible by the aesthetic characterization of the thing in the poem, which presents the ‘you’ with possibilities that extend beyond the immediate appearance of the thing. Tracing the lines from the top of the statue’s hips down to the groin (“zu jener Mitte, die die Zeugung trug”) and returning up the other side, the poem presents this geometric shape as generally resembling the smile of an archaic statue. Then the poem compares the torso of the fragmentary artwork to the unanswered head of the first stanza, accounting for the gaze (“sein Schauen”) of the decapitated figure. Allowing the viewer of the torso to briefly ascertain, through analogy, the ripening eyes that appearance denies the statue, the breasts each provide a focal point from which the gaze extends outward. The poem thereby acknowledges an epistemological humility about the status of the thing, but ultimately conveys an understanding of the statue that extends beyond its appearance. The poem presents the "you" with possibilities of what the fragmentary statue could be, reversing the typical subject-object relations (in which a subject gazes at an object) by instilling the statue with an imaginary gaze of its own. Respecting the ultimate incomprehensibility of the thing, we can understand this poetic gesture in critical language as the attempt to constrain the over-exertion of cognition on things.
The progression of this poem gradually projects an increasing amount of power into the inanimate torso. Not only does the poetic account of the statue possess the ability to look back at the "you," but it also continues to glow ("sein Torso glüht noch wie ein Kandelaber"). The light emanating from the torso is analogous to Rilke’s analysis of Rodin’s sculpture, where Rilke asserts that aesthetic form lends light to stone:

Es giebt da wirklich Steine mit eigenem Licht, wie das gesenkte Gesicht auf dem Block im Luxembourg-Museum, La Pensee, das, vorgeneigt bis zum Schattigsein, über das weiße Schimmern seines Steines gehalten ist, unter dessen Einfluß die Schatten sich auflösen und in ein durchsichtiges Helldunkel übergehn.204

Just as the unique interaction between light and the form of Rodin’s statues appears as if the light belongs to the statues themselves, so too does the form of Rilke’s poem seem to instill the torso with its own light. Both the archaic Torso and La Pensee are fragmentary statues—the torso is missing its head and La Pensee is only a head—but these fragments are characterized as possessing a will to completion. The torso not only glows like a candelabra, but—explored through a series of reflections emanating from hypotheticals and negations—also flickers like a predator's pelt ("und flimmerte nicht so wie Raubtierfelle"). The invocation of the image of a predator indicates a shift in the dynamic between the "you" and the torso as it is compared to a beast of prey. This predatorial shimmer is communicated to the addressee (dich) as the negation of the fragmentary nature of the statue, implying that the semblance of the torso achieved by the poem—the appearance that dazzles the "you"—unlocks a threatening potential within the artwork. In contradistinction to the predator, the pelt is in and of itself neutral, non-threatening, soft to the touch. Likewise, the torso stands before the viewer and appears like an innocuous stone. Concealed beneath the surface, however, the statue is endowed by the poem with a certain

204 Ibid, 219.
power that threatens the "you," namely a semblance of power that extends beyond the subject’s ability to comprehend. The aestheticization of the thing lends it a certain aesthetic autonomy, allowing it to be more than it appears and emphasizing an existence independent of the subject. In so doing, the poem respects the otherness of the torso—its ultimate incomprehensibility.

The poem thus acts to shape a subject in light of a personalist understanding of autonomy. The ethical practice of the poem extends a non-propositional ethical imperative (not a command) of epistemic humility towards the other, to respect the distance between the subject and thing, allowing the thing’s existence to be experienced independent of the subject’s categories of understanding. This utter ambiguity and epistemological humility, however, threatens the enlightenment conception of a stable, rational, sovereign subject who can conceptualize the entire world. By acting as a mediator between subject and thing wherein the poet’s subjectivity fades away, the poem establishes an authority to speak for the thing without extending that authority to the human subject. Through his thing poems, Rilke seems to replace the role of the divine in giving authority to things themselves in their ineffability. Like God, the thing cannot really be cognized, so like a prophecy’s ability to speak the will of God, the poem’s ability to communicate the thing renegotiates the religious form that gives authority to words, but it does not render it useless. Rilke’s poetry does not "undo" metaphysics, but by modelling its formal approach to the thing on a metaphysical approach to God, he does create a poetic space that claims for itself a power to orient the subject that is like religion but is distinctly different from religion itself.
b. Religion in the Past Tense: Ideology vs. Religious Devotion

Rilke’s ambivalence to religious devotion can be seen throughout the *Neue Gedichte*, despite the numerous poems with religious subject matter. Unlike the other objects rendered lyrical in Rilke’s thing poems, God is not presented as a thing in his own right; instead, God is portrayed as a historical phenomenon.205 One finds a critical potential within Rilke’s religious imagery, namely that the historical presentation of religion becomes a mode of revealing the ideological function of religion in society. We find an implicit critique of the way religion has been used, but not a critique of religion itself.

The poem which perhaps best represents this presentation of the historicity of God can be found in the poem, “Gott im Mittelalter.” Here, God is explicitly examined as a historical concept: a power for the reinforcement of the ideology of the masses. Rilke thus makes explicit what seems implicit in the *Stundenbuch*: God is considered as a construct for establishing authority. Here we find a critique of God’s authority as a mystified ideology where the presentation in this poem differs from the mystical disposition of the monk-turned-poet. As Reinhard Thum comments, “[God] was to serve as little more than a symbolic mechanical device to support the townspeople in their complacency and self satisfaction.”206 Still, here God becomes a violent force that turns against the ideological function that serves the justification of the people’s complacency. This turn, which occurs in the middle of the third stanza, imbues a

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205 Such a historicization of religion participates in a long tradition of German thought since Herder (himself a devout Christian) and does not ultimately refuse a contemporary relevance to religious thinking, but simply remains silent on questions of belief. This revelation is not, however, a rejection of religion as ideology (just as it was not for Herder), but rather an examination of the ideological and sociological roles that religion has historically played.

critical potential into religious thought. Namely, the possibility of religion to act against its own
tendency to function as an ideology.

GOTT IM MITTELALTER

Und sie hatten Ihn in sich erspart
und sie wollten, daß er sei und richte,
und sie hängten schließlich wie Gewichte
(zu verhindern seine Himmelfahrt)

an ihn ihrer großen Kathedralen
Last und Masse. Und er sollte nur
über seine grenzenlosen Zahlen
zeigend kreisen und wie eine Uhr

Zeichen geben ihrem Tun und Tagwerk.
Aber plötzlich kam er ganz in Gang,
und die Leute der entsetzten Stadt

ließen ihn, vor seiner Stimme bang,
weitergehn mit ausgehängtem Schlagwerk
und entflohn vor seinem Zifferblatt.\(^{207}\)

Distinguishing itself from the genre of devotional lyric, the above poem presents God in the past
tense. The poem concern itself with the metaphysical existence of the divine being, but rather
with a poetic reconstruction of the medieval—or perhaps even early modern—conception of
God. Typical of Rilke’s presentation of things in the *Neue Gedichte*, the use of the subjunctive
qualifies any claims that the poem makes upon the being of the object. Instead, the thing—this
particular medieval conceptualization of God—is merely presented within the realm of
appearance. The poem does not make a claim about what God is; instead, the emphasis is placed
upon the relation of the townspeople, who are anonymously identified as “they” [*sie*].

Immediately from the first line, God is presented as the grammatical object of “their” actions
(“Und sie hatten Ihn in sich erspart”). The poem’s description of God persists only in relation to

\(^{207}\) Rilke, *Die Gedichte*, 445.
the townspeople; He is less a being in his own right and more the result of the imposition of their will (“sie wollten, daß er sei und richte”). The enlightenment conception of God as clockmaker is inverted: God is here the clock, and the cathedral architects the clockmakers. One can thus detect a critical, historicist undertone in the poem that resembles Feuerbach’s thesis that humans created God, not the other way around: at least in God’s function in this medieval town.208

The historicity of God is revealed as a power-enforcing ideology. Rilke emphasizes the sociological authority of the divine; God’s purpose is not metaphysical, but rather his existence merely validates the lives of the townspeople (“Und er sollte nur / über seine grenzenlosen Zahlen / zeigend kreisen und wie eine Uhr // Zeichen geben ihrem Tun und Tagwerk”). God’s presence in society acts to justify and give meaning to the lives of the townspeople. Their own creation, God is a force of normativity (“sie wollten, daß er… richtete”), an anchor of values in society. As Bernhard Adamy comments, in Rilke’s earlier medieval-themed poetry we find “mythische Bilder von archetypischer Unbehauenheit, ein vorzeitliches Welttheater, in dem noch der Mensch ohne die Entfremdungen eines Luxus-und Zerstreuungsdaseins mit den Kräften um ihn elementar verbunden ist.”209 Here, however, fascination with religion has shifted: the medieval is itself presented as a world of alienation. The critical turn in the Neue Gedichte coincides with a shift away from religious ornament in his lyric, but the function of religion as a mode of questioning authority remains. Religion here does not represent a zone of potentially unalienated existence but manifests itself as a form of alienation: the medieval God does not signify a mystical being, but rather a societal authority and an authority to be seen critically.

208 C.f., Feuerbach, Das Wesen des Christentums.

209 Adamy, Bernhard, "Rilke und das Mittelalter," Symposium (Syracuse) 30, no. 3 (1976), 191.
This function of the medieval God turns against the townspeople in the latter movement of the poem. Understood as a thing poem, this is not a surprising phenomenon; things take on a life of their own in Rilke’s poems and they often threaten their perceivers.\(^\text{210}\) In this poem, the townspeople’s creation turns against them, causing them to abscond and abandon their creation (“Aber plötzlich kam er ganz in Gang, / und die Leute der entsetzten Stadt // ließen ihn, vor seiner Stimme bang, / weitergehn mit ausgehängtem Schlagwerk / und entflohn vor seinem Zifferblatt.”). While this threatening power of the thing is unsurprising in the context of Rilke’s thing poetry, the final reaction of the poet to the thing differs greatly from other thing poems. In “Archaischer Torso Apollo,” the power of the torso does not cause the perceiver to turn away from it; with the infamous imperative “Du mußt dein Leben ändern,”\(^\text{211}\) the threat of the thing’s autonomy is correlated with a moral obligation of the part of the perceiver, an obligation to love the thing. In Rilke’s thing poetry more generally, we find a minimal ethics to respect the distance between the subject and thing, allowing the thing’s existence to be experienced independent of the subject’s categories of understanding, what Adorno calls “Liebe zu den Dingen.”\(^\text{212}\) The minimal aspect of this ethics lies in the fact that we do not find a system of ethical thought, but rather suggestions, attempts, or dispositions that cross over into the ethical. But with “Gott im Mittelalter,” we do not seem to find such a movement toward the thing while respecting its ultimate foreignness. This is perhaps most astonishing because the subject matter seems to lend

\(^{210}\) See also Annette Gerok-Reiter’s discussion of Rilke’s “Spanische Tänzerin,” where she makes a similar observation on the mimetic disclosure of invisible powers in the poem’s object.

\(^{211}\) Rilke, *Die Gedichte*, 483.

itself most to an object that cannot be ultimately understood or cognized. Instead, the ideological function of the medieval God corresponds to a movement away from the thing: a flight from God ("und [sie] entflohn vor seinem Zifferblatt").

Such a critical conception of religion’s function in early modern society does not, however, restrict religion to a force of negativity in the Neue Gedichte. As previously mentioned, recent scholarship suggests the poems operate in ways that reflect Christian (specifically Catholic) metaphysical thought.\(^{213}\) But much more potent for understanding the political valence—and not just the socio-economic critique—is that we find within Rilke’s Neue Gedichte the function that religious devotion still plays in his thing poems. In a poem such as “Pietà,” for example, we find an address to Jesus that, while not explicitly affirming the divine character of the Nazarian, nonetheless suggests a magnanimity of devotional subjectivity.\(^{391F^{IV}}\) As August Strahl remarks, Rilke framed his “Botschaft von der Herrlichkeit des Lebens nicht nur gegen, sondern auch in enger Anlehnung an die christliche Weltdeutung.”\(^{214}\)

In his later work, religious devotion represents a post-secular moment in Rilke’s poetry: it is not to be understood as strictly religious, but also not as fully secularized.\(^{215}\) We find a mobilization of religion that remains open towards those with a devout disposition, but also that shows its utility without reliance upon divine revelation. As Robert Vilian comments,

\(^{213}\) See “Simile and Symbol in Rilke’s Neue Gedichte: a Modernist Recovery of the Analogia Entis” and “Equivocity versus Analoga: Contrasting Views of the Symbolic Image in Rilke’s Letters and Monographs on the Visual Arts” in John Jolly’s A Transcendent View of Things.


\(^{215}\) By "post-secular," I mean to invoke a reaction against a secular distinction between religious forms and political organization. This is not a return to religion from a secular point of view, but rather an acknowledgement of the richness that religious thought has to offer to non-religious perspectives: religious form without theological content. For more information, see the Introduction to this dissertation.
What the angel, the devil (and thus by implication God) and the unicorn have in common is that they do not need to exist to affect us, to stimulate us, to make us respond, to inspire us, to offer us coordinates in which to frame and understand ourselves, and it is better thus than if they did exist. Those who see God as real, even if hidden or distant [...] are tempted to allow this belief to constrain and circumscribe themselves. Those who are not hampered by such a belief can nonetheless make use of what is real – the people, their prayers, their devotions, the music sung and played in the buildings in response to such a belief – and allow their own beings to unfold.216

The metaphysical existence of God is ultimately not what is at stake in Rilke’s thing poetry, but rather the persistence of religion becomes a praxis of living with uncertainty. Near the end of his life, Rilke reflects back upon his Russian travels—a time in his life where religious considerations were at the forefront—writing that these trips gave him, “die Brüderlichkeit und das Dunkel Gottes, in dem allein Gemeinschaft ist.”217 The absence of God—the need for religious praxis and devotion—thus can also be understood as a movement toward community. Religion becomes a communal disposition, even in the midst of extreme loneliness and devotion becomes a mode of cultivating a communion with the other from a place of isolation.218 But Rilke’s engagement with religion also always involves a subversion of authority; understood communally, this can be cognized as an anarchic poetics. Even in the critical presentation of the townspeople’s relation to God in “Gott im Mittelalter,” we find a communal nature to religion, both in the construction of religious ideals and in the flight from God. The divine is thus a political concept in its ability to bind people together: through devotion, through ritual, through symbol, through lack of faith. Still, in its critical presentation, the authority of the divine is

216 Vilain, Robert, "Rilke and God," 488.
undermined. We thus find religion as a binding force, but in Rilke’s heterodox presentation of
religion, authority does not dictate this community. Instead, we find a praxis of religion that
rejects authority: what we might identify as an anarchic element.

c. The Reified Poet: Political Economy and (De-)Mystification

The critical turn in the *Neue Gedichte* also picks up upon religious imagery as a force for
revealing the material alienation of the poet, undermining the poet as *auctor*. In “Der Dichter,”
the poet is himself examined as a thing and in doing so provides a clear poetic reflection on the
role of the author in Rilke’s thing poem. Rather than culminating in a harmonious reconciliation
between poet and world, we find the poet subordinated to an economically tinged semantics of
alienation. This poem in particular points toward a conception of a broken, alienated subject who
recognizes both his dependence upon his poetic object and that object’s independence from him.

**DER DICHTER**

Du entfernst dich von mir, du Stunde.  
Wunden schlägt mir dein Flügelschlag.  
Allein: was soll ich mit meinem Munde?  
Mit meiner Nacht? Mit meinem Tag?

Ich habe keine Geliebte, kein Haus,  
keine Stelle auf der ich lebe.  
Alle Dinge, an die ich mich gebe,  
werden reich und geben mich aus.220

219 An earlier version of this section (i.e., “The Reified Poet: Political Economy and (De-)Mystification”) was
originally published as a part of my article, “Love of Things: Reconsidering Adorno’s Criticism of Rilke” in
*Monatshefte*, vol. 114, no. 2, June 2022. ©2022 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. All
rights reserved.

At first glance this poem appears to reflect upon a certain mystical character of the poet. The lyrical subject is immediately centralized in the first-person point of view [mir] of the first verse, while in the second stanza, the poet is detached from material possessions and from other human beings. Much like in Rilke’s *Stundenbuch*, the poem begins with the personification of the hour, which is addressed in the familiar fashion of “du.” Still, rather than the mystical relation to the hour that is found in his earlier lyric, time is slipping away from the poet, as the hour is accused by the poet of distancising itself from him (“Du entfernst dich von mir, du Stunde”). Already from the outset, we find an author who is deeply damaged, and this process of increasing detachment intensifies the poet’s wounds (“Wunden schlägt mir dein Flügelschlag”). This violent relation to temporality inverts the mystical relation to time that one finds in Rilke’s earlier poetry. In *Das Stundenbuch*, the hour is admittedly an uncanny figure, but nonetheless provides an orienting structure to the poet’s life. The first stanza of this poem upturns mystical tropes of unification, leaving behind a wounded poetic subject.

This poem thus performs a secularization of religious tropes, inverting aesthetic allusions to mysticism; however, this secularization does not result in a liberation from religion, but rather reveals the alienation of the poetic subject that mystical imagery had once concealed. “Der Dichter” enlists a semantics of loneliness in this task, initiated by the distancing of the hour from the poet and continued in the “Allein” of third line, which functions as an interjection but nonetheless is associated with a semantics of isolation. Amid his solitude, the poet reflects upon his poetic disposition, proclaiming a complete state of detachment from both humans and all material possessions (“Ich habe keine Geliebte, kein Haus, / keine Stelle auf der ich lebe”).

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the one hand, the lack of ownership and the lack of a specific erotic attachment—the emptiness
of the poet—produces a generative source of poetic excess that can bestow its aura on all things;
on the other hand, the material and existential conditions of such a state indicate an ideological
malaise: alienation as condition for creativity. The emphasis of this condition is one of repeated
negativity: “keine... kein... keine.” Written nearly concurrently with early drafts of Die
Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge, in which Rilke explores the connection between
aesthetic sensibilities and urban squalor, the typical self-affirmed, monastic conception of sacred
poverty (paupertās) is inverted; the poet is no longer considered a modern monk but is instead
revealed as someone afflicted by material poverty (inopia). The shift is ever so slight, but the
transposition is clear: the poet’s impoverishment, for all its supposed poetic potentiality, cannot
divest itself from the more materially concrete semantics of exchange and destitution. The
distortion of this religious trope acts to reveal the alienation that lies beneath the ornament of
religion in Rilke’s earlier lyric (c.f., Das Stundenbuch). The poet’s disorientation and
woundedness index a life of suffering; isolation is less a form of aesthetic ascesis than a passive
disposition, the result of being acted upon.

As the poem progresses, the inversion of mystical tropes becomes further shaped by
religious language contaminated by the language of economic exchange. His ability to relate to
the world breaks down in the relation to external objects and persons [keine Geliebte, kein Haus,
/ keine Stelle]. This alienation from persons and things is expressed as an aesthetically generative
poverty. In response to his disorientation and alienation, the poet mobilizes his experience of
poverty to signal a potential alternative to the capitalistic or bourgeois mode of relating to things
(i.e., possession, ownership, use-value). Instead of assimilating things to himself—treating things
as existing for him—the poet gives himself to things, and his material poverty is transformed into
the wealth of objects ("Alle Dinge, an die ich mich gebe, / werden reich"), but in doing so, the poet does not escape an economic lexicon.

Here we find a shift from the negative, economically inflected language of poverty towards a religiously connotated rhetoric of self-gift [sich geben], which is in turn re-contaminated by the economic lexicon of wealth [reich werden]. The poet’s destitute disposition enables him to transform poverty into wealth, but a wealth that is distinctly not his, a wealth that will never belong to the poet. This attempt to redeem economic alienation through an act of self-gift—of love—is problematized by the poem, as the act turns on itself, initiating a process of reification [Verdinglichung]. The poet donates himself to things, attempting to establish a harmonious relation between poet and thing; however, this attempt is made possible through the alienated state in which the poet finds himself at the outset. In other words, the poet's relation to the world, which is one of relationlessness [keine Geliebte, kein Haus], enables an alternative relation to things.222 The deficiency of the poet’s relation to the world is transformed and flows into the richness of things, but this relationship is ultimately unveiled as contaminated by the earlier economic estrangement.

The critical moment in the poem lies within the reversal in the subject / object relations as the poet gives himself to things; by doing so, he becomes subject to things, at their disposal. The poem itself reverses the privileged relationship of the poetic subject over things, treating the poet himself as a thing. The reduction of the poet to thing, however, frames the poet within a logic of reification. The final line transforms the poet into currency, a reified form of potentiality, as the

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222 This relation of the poet to the world can be understood akin to Rahel Jaeggi’s definition of alienation as “a relation of relationlessness.” Jaeggi’s formulation emphasizes that, “alienation does not indicate the absence of a relation but is itself a relation, if a deficient one.” (Alienation, Columbia UP, New York, 2014, 1.) Rilke’s poet, in turn, reveals the productive poetic potential with this deficient mode of relation.
things to which he has donated himself “spend” him (“Dinge […] / werden reich und geben mich aus”). Herein lies a dialectical relation between poet and thing, suggesting that the quasi-religious disposition of the poet to things (his self-donation) is already reified by the political economy in which he finds himself. We might understand the poet’s role as auctor in a similar sense: his authorship is not an authority over the poems, but an ability to allow himself to be used by the things about which he writes, to subordinate himself to the things as a prophet subordinates himself to God. Here too, we find an undermining of authority in the inversion of the mystical with a contaminated sense of economy. Far from reconciliation of author and thing, we find in this poem a politically inflected critique: there is no escape from alienation and reification. The poet is himself not freed from his alienated state; rather, the conclusion of the poem imbues things with an authority that lies beyond the poetic subject, and which possesses a submerged critical potential. The auctor is displaced of his auctoritas, which lies in the ineffable realm of things.

IV. Returning to the Religious: Rilke’s Angels

One of the most peculiar and idiosyncratic religious images in Rilke’s oeuvre is the recurring motif of the angel. Most notorious in the Duineser Elegien, Rilke’s angel does not participate directly in any particular religious confession, but rather pulls from various confessions, becoming a figure of its own in Rilke’s poetry (interestingly, his main source is Islamic theology, which I will discuss shortly). As Ben Leubner comments,

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223 For a similar, but slightly different reading, see Paul de Man’s argument in “Tropes (Rilke),” in Alegories of Reading (1982) where he similarly asserts that the subject’s loss of autonomy in the Neue Gedichte is associated with an increase in autonomy in the world of things.
Rilke’s stance towards angels, towards the unknown, the invisible, and the life beyond, consists of three components: terror in the face of its power, admiration in the face of its disdaining to destroy us, and receptiveness in the face of its wanting to make itself, at least in part and temporarily, known to us, visible, beautiful.224

As we will see, the angel, like the general function of religious images in Rilke’s lyric, combines the aesthetics of religious sentiment with a drive towards epistemological humility: towards constricting the subject’s imposition of knowledge claims upon the mystery of things.

In the contraction of the possibilities of knowledge, however, the angel becomes a figure that gives authority to Rilke’s poetic voice, positioning his poetry to have a prophetic quality. Ingeborg Solbrig describes this prophetic nature of the elegies as follows: “Was in den Elegien den Poeten befähigt und auszeichnet, bezieht sich hier auf den Propheten: die Aufgabe, der Welt das wesentliche Wort zu vermitteln, das den "anderen Bezug" garantiert.”225 The angel secures an “anderen Bezug” for Rilke and maintains a critical relation between human knowledge and the mystery of thingly existence. In this section, I will examine the figure of the angel more closely in Rilke’s poetry. Beginning with a short analysis of the Islamic influence in Rilke’s angelic thought—how Rilke positions himself as a figure akin to Mohammed—I will show the roots of Rilke’s understanding of the Angel in the Neue Gedichte to be connected to securing a poetic auctoritas that is separated from the poet’s own authority. I then look towards the Duineser Elegien, attempting to give an account of how the angel both secures an authoritative voice for Rilke—a particular auctoritas—while also working to restrict the human’s epistemological access to the mysteries of the thingly world.


225 Solbrig, Ingeborg, “‘Da las er: so, daß sich ser Engel bog’: Zu Rilkes Gedicht "Mohammeds Berufung" (1907),” Modern Austrian Literature 13, no. 3 (1980), 33-45.
a. Mohammed’s Angel: The Paradox of Submission

The past few decades have seen a rise in interest in the Islamic influence upon Rilke’s understanding of angels, especially in connection to his Elegies. Although Christian theologians tried for decades to assume Rilke’s angel into their own dogmatic systems, such attempts are always unfaithful to Rilke’s poems themselves, not to mention to his own understanding of his poetry.226 In addition to Rilke’s own ambivalent relationship towards the Christian faith, he also comments explicitly that the angel of the elegies has nothing to do with Christianity: “Der ‘Engel’ der Elegien hat nichts mit dem Engel des christlichen Himmels zu tun (eher mit den Engelgestalten des Islam).”227 As Karen Campbell remarks, these epistolary comments only “become comprehensible and compatible amongst themselves if we accept that he read the Quran not primarily as sacred history but as a document of prophetic self-assertion.”228 In contradistinction to the Christian figure of the angel as a predominantly protective figure—a guardian of the human in the fight against the devil—Rilke’s angel figures as a mode of assertion of his own voice as akin to that of a prophet. In other words, the relation between the poet and the angel in Rilke’s lyric is modelled upon the Islamic tradition that relates the prophet to the angelic word.229

226 See Maesseneer’s “Angels as Mirrors of the Human” for a discussion of the difference of Rilke’s angels and those of Christian theology.

227 Rilke, Briefe II, 484.


229 The Islamic tradition holds that Mohammed received the word of God directly from the angel Gabriel. Mohammed transcribed these revelations in the Quran. Thus, the authority of the word in the Quran differs strongly from the authority of written revelation in Christian and Jewish traditions, which tend to emphasize divine inspiration over direct and literal divine intervention in the composition of holy texts.
Ingeborg Solbrig was one of the first scholars to shed a light on the Islamic influence on Rilke, predominantly focusing on the poem “Mohammeds Berufung” in the *Neue Gedichte*. As she notes, this poem gives a particular insight into Rilke’s fascination with the figure of Mohammed as the most authoritative prophet. However, as Karen Campbell notes, “[Solbrig] stops short of considering that Rilke's declared preference for the ‘angel figures of Islam’ may be inspired as much by his appreciation of their rhetorical function within the Quran as by his interest in their non-Christian phenomenology.”

As Campbell focuses mainly upon the role of the angels in the *Elegien*, it may be helpful to return to Rilke’s poetic account of Mohammed’s vocation in order to reflect further on the way that prophetic authority functions in his poetry.

**MOHAMMEDS BERUFUNG**

Da aber als in sein Versteck der Hohe,
sofort Erkennbare: der Engel, trat,
aufrecht, der lautere und lichterlohe:
da tat er allen Anspruch ab und bat

bleiben zu dürfen der von seinen Reisen
innen verwirrte Kaufmann, der er war;
er hatte nie gelesen - und nun gar
ein *solches* Wort, zu viel für einen Weisen.

Der Engel aber, herrisch, wies und wies
ihm, was geschrieben stand auf seinem Blatte,
und gab nicht nach und wollte wieder: *Lies.*

Da las er: so, daß sich der Engel bog.
Und war schon einer, der gelesen *hatte*
und konnte und gehorchte und vollzog.\(^{231}\)

What is particularly noteworthy, when we read this poem through the lens towards its vision of authority, is that God is completely absent. Despite the title, an understanding of Mohammed’s


\(^{231}\) Rilke, *Die Gedichte*, 536.
vocation—that he is called by God to be the final, definitive prophet—is left unexamined.

Instead, we find an interaction between Mohammed and an anonymous angel, where the non-human authority of the angel gives Mohammed an authority in his humanity, in his ability to read. The angelic nature here is revealed to be opposed to the act of reading (“er hatte nie gelesen”); in fact, the angel is too wise to have ever read a word (“und nun gar / ein solches Wort, zu viel für einen Weisen”). The angel’s deficit leads to Mohammed’s calling: his ability to read corresponds to the angel’s imperative (“Lies”). Rilke’s fascination with Mohammed’s prophetic voice results from the fact that it is—from Rilke’s unique and heterodox understanding of Islam—removed from a reliance upon the divine and located in a novel way of perceiving the world: the authority of the illiterate angel.

The angel’s authority is established in the opening stanza, but the angel does not remain a figure of authority; instead, he abdicates his authoritative position vis-à-vis Mohammed. Upon descending from his heavenly hideout, the angel disposes of his authority (“da tat er allen Anspruch ab”) and asks Mohammed for permission to remain who he is, namely a confused merchant or trader (“und [der Engel] bat // bleiben zu dürfen der von seinen Reisen / innen verwirrte Kaufmann, der er war”). The angel establishes its authority in its alterity, but immediately undermines his own authority, lifting up Mohammed and locating a new authority in Mohammed’s humanity, within the capacity to relate to language: the ability to read. The angelic order is thus one of upending expectations, undermining authorities, and equalizing power relations between disparate beings.

We find here a transference of alterity from the angelic to the human through the act of reading, establishing the text (not the person) as an authoritative voice. Mohammed—like the poet in “Der Dichter”—has no real authority, but rather is a medium for an authoritative alterity.
As the poet lends his voice to the thing, undermining his authority over his poetry in the process, so too does Mohammed’s reading lead to his subordination to the angelic text (“Und [er] war schon einer, der gelesen hatte / und konnte und gehorchte und vollzog”). Still, Mohammed’s act of reading is presented in a purer fashion, not materially alienated through economic processes of transaction. That is not to say that the angelic relation is entirely free from processes of economic alienation; the angel is likened to an illiterate salesman who is tired from his long journey. But, unlike the poet who becomes a currency, Mohammed’s action also reflexively leads to praise from the angel (“Da las er: so, daß sich der Engel bog”). We see, then, that Rilke’s understanding of the relation between Angel and prophet (inspired by the story of Mohammed) mirrors his understanding of the relation between thing and poet, although the prophetic authority maintains a certain purity that is corrupted in the case of the non-prophetic author: Mohammed ascends to a position that the poet in “Der Dichter” fails to attain.

Where the *Mönchgestalt* failed to maintain purity amidst a world of economic alienation, the legend of Mohammed promises an alternative. But what exactly maintains this angelic purity? Why is the angel-prophet relation not subject to the same power imbalances as the thing-poet relation? It may help to return to the letter in which Rilke demarcates his understanding of angels from the Christian and read a bit further:

Der ‘Engel’ der Elegien hat nichts mit dem Engel des christlichen Himmels zu tun (eher mit den Engelgestalten des Islam)... [sic.] Der Engel der Elegien ist dasjenige Geschöpf, in dem die Verwandlung des Sichtbaren in Unsichtbares, die wir leisten, schon vollzogen erscheint. […] Der Engel der Elegien ist dasjenige Wesen, das dafür einsteht, im Unsichtbaren einen höheren Rang der Realität zu erkennen […]; einige Sterne steigern sich unmittelbar und vergehen im unendlichen Bewußtsein der Engel-, andere sind auf langsam und mühsam sie verwandelnde Wesen angewiesen, in deren Schrecken und Entzücken sie ihre nächste unsichtbare Verwirklichung erreichen.232

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The angel is, for Rilke, a portal into another world, an ability to begin to see the world differently. Because the Angel can see the unseeable [Unsichtbaren], this different vision is asserted as a higher level of reality: a mode of alterity. In the following section, I will expound on this angelic form, but what is important to the understanding of the particularly Islamic influence here is that it is rather ungrounded in the faith of Mohammed. Rilke’s understanding of the Islamic angel is not derived from an intense study of the Quran, but rather, as Campbell puts it, “the Quran becomes for Rilke an extended ‘thought experiment’ in which the archangel, impressively conveyed as he may be, figures not as God's creature but as Muhammad's.” I will argue that this heterodox interpretation of angelic theology refuses an ontological grounding and utilizes the angelic figure to aestheticize a new perspective with which to examine the world, allowing moments of intense immanence to transform our understandings of worldly relations.

b. The Angel as Inverse Theology: An Assumed Authority

A helpful analog for understanding Rilke’s angel as a sort of thought experiment—and indeed Rilke’s general engagement with religious thinking—can be found in Theodor Adorno’s critical engagement with theological thought, discussed briefly in the introduction of the dissertation, which he terms “Inverse Theologie.” Although Adorno is himself often critical of Rilke’s engagement with religion, rejecting it as “Religion als Ornament,” there exists parallels

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233 Campbell, Karen, “Rilke’s Duino Angels and the Angels of Islam.”

234 An earlier version of this section was originally given as a conference presentation at the German Studies Association Conference in 2019 under the title “Inverse Theology and Rilke’s Angel; Re-examining Adorno’s Assessment of Rilke” on the panel Rilke and Philosophy.

235 Adorno. Jargon der Eigentlichkeit. GS 6, 469.
between Rilke and Adorno’s ways of approaching religion that are mutually illuminating. By taking a brief moment to explicate Adorno’s understanding of inverse theology, I hope to be able to better explain Rilke’s approach to and understanding of the angelic order in the Elegies. Adorno’s understanding of inverse theology represents an engagement in religious thought that simultaneously takes seriously theological modes of thinking, while resisting an assent to the metaphysical systems that underly such modes of thinking. As Sebastian Truskolaski comments, “this idea depends on a particular historical dynamic that might – following Freud – be called the ‘Entstellung’ of traditional theology: a far-reaching topological inversion that allows Adorno to critically re-purpose theological terms.” Such a mode of simultaneously engaging the religious and resisting its claims aids therefore in understanding Rilkean religious imagery, especially the figure of the angel.

This term, ‘inverse theology,’ has been taken from a letter that Adorno wrote to Walter Benjamin on 17 December 1934. Here, in the midst of developing his reading of Kafka and its affinity to Benjamin’s Passagenwerk, Adorno mentions the position of theology in relation to their respective projects:

Das betrifft aber zugleich auch und in einem sehr prizipiellen Sinn die Stellung zur ‘Theologie’. Da ich auf eine solche, [sic.] vorm Eingang zu Ihren Passagen, drängte, so scheint es mir doppelt wichtig, daß das Bild von Theologie, in dem ich gern unsere

236 For more on the ways in which Adorno’s critical theory can be helpful for reading Rilke’s poetry see my article: Hoffman, Lukas. “Love of Things: Reconsidering Adorno’s Criticism of Rilke” in Monatshefte, vol. 114, no. 2, June 2022. 245.

Theology here is likened to a photographic image and inverse theology is thereby understood as a photographic negative of this image, containing the form but not reproducing the same content. Adorno’s inverse theology is thus the inversion of theological imagery towards a critical mode of thinking that does not assent to a strict metaphysics, nor to a conception of divine revelation.

Passage §153, the final entry in *Minima Moralia*, is particularly illustrative of inverse theology in the thought of Adorno. He writes, “Philosophie… wäre der Versuch, alle Dinge so zu betrachten, wie sie vom Standpunkt der Erlösung aus sich darstellten.” The employment of theological language here points towards the transcendent potential that theology promised in a previous age as mere mode of thought, although the subjunctive formulation suggests the possibility that such a transcendent form is mere semblance. Adorno continues in *Minima Moralia*, “Perspektiven müßten hergestellt werden, in denen die Welt ähnlich sich versetzt, verfremdet, ihre Risse und Schründe offenbart, wie sie einmal als bedürftig und entstellt im Messianischen Lichte daliegen wird.” I would like to suggest that that we can understand Rilke’s angel as a manufactured perspective that reveals the cracks and fissures of the damaged life.

In the context of Adorno’s thought, inverse theology is not a reflection of the divine being—thinking from the human towards God—but rather a theoretical experiment: an attempt to think from the divine perspective towards the human. This shift in perspective has the following result: “Das mittlere Reich des Bedingten wird infernalisch unter den künstlichen

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240 Ibid.
Engelsaugen.”

To present things as though from the ‘standpoint of redemption’ also does not guarantee or secure the ontological existence of such a position. Rather, such a presentation can be a mode of thinking that erupts from negativity. As Elizabeth Pritchard states, “Inverse theology ‘feigns’ the divine or angelic standpoint in order to see the fallenness of the world.”

Furthermore, Truskolaski complicates this understanding, arguing that inverse theology “does not require a standpoint removed from the sphere of existence by however little. Accordingly, Adorno cannot be seen as proposing to inhabit the ‘Standpunkt der Erlösung’ as a fictive utopos located in ‘another world’.” In order for this light to be revealed one must develop different perspectives from which to perceive the world—perspectives that reveal these cracks and fissures within the material world, within the here-and-now; in other words, immanent but epistemically occluded possibilities.

And here lies the similarity between Rilke’s angel and Adorno’s inverse theology: the angel of the elegies is not ‘religion as ornament,’ but rather, has an important formal function of revealing the infernal within the present world. The figure of the Angel appears as a feigned or assumed divine standpoint, which resists traditional forms of religiosity, but nonetheless turns the gaze of the suffering subject beyond itself, revealing an infernal vision of the world. Here, I’d like to make a distinction between the formal mode of thinking found in Adorno (inverse

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241 Adorno, “Prismen,” GS 10a, 284.
242 Pritchard, Elizabeth A, “Bilderverbot Meets Body in Theodor W. Adorno's Inverse Theology,” The Harvard Theological Review, Vol. 95, No. 3 (Jul. 2002), 309. (Truskolaski also warns against understanding this ‘feigning’ as an ‘as if’ proposition that is congruent with enlightenment notions of infinite progress.)
243 Truskolaski, Sebastian, “Inverse Theology: Adorno, Benjamin, Kafka.”
theology) and the poetic sentiment in Rilke (inverse religiosity). To treat Rilke’s poetry as a theological treatise would be to misunderstand the way in which his lyric operates as a text.

A careful analysis of the first lines of the elegies makes it abundantly clear that, at least initially, the ontological grounding of the angelic is problematized by its subjunctive characterization. The first elegy begins, “Wer, wenn ich schriee, hörte mich denn aus der Engel / Ordnungen?”245 In this question, which is constituted by a double subjunctive, the poet professes the inadequacy of human invocations of the divine—from the human perspective, the abyss between a divine realm and the immanence of human existence appears here as unbridgeable. The subjunctive formulation points towards a restriction on the postulation about the existence of angels; the angels remain unaddressed and unresponsive. The alterity of the angelic order is established from the outset—but as a hypothetical—as if there is a chasm between the poetic voice and the angelic beings: the refusal to posit metaphysics while speculating metaphysically with an “as if.”

The ensuing verses reflect upon the postulation of this divine order, and the consequences that such alterity has for human existence. The poet inverses the traditional theological directionality with the assumption of the divine standpoint (a sort of ‘what if?’ thought experiment), hypothesizing what would happen were this supposed order of alterity to come into contact with a human poet:

 […] und gesetzt selbst, es nähme einer mich plötzlich ans Herz: ich verginge von seinem stärkeren Dasein. […]246

245 Rilke, Die Gedichte, 689. (Emphasis added).
246 Ibid.
If the abyss between human and angelic is to be bridged, it is presented here as both being initiated by the divine being as well as having devastating consequences for the poet—whose weak existence would dissolve in the mere presence of the divine. The postulation of an angelic standpoint reveals the weakness of the human position: the mortal being perishes in confrontation with the immortal. The hypothesis about the existence of angelic beings is not advanced toward a metaphysical vision of the world, but rather in order to expose the cracks and fissures of human life: the weakness of humanity to persist in confrontation with heavenly perfection or purity.247

The assumption of the divine standpoint (i.e., the artificial or poetic perspective of the angel), in order to examine earthly life, results in the realization of the fractured nature of human existence, the impossibility of communion with the fully other. The poetic exploration of the possibility of divine existence refuses speculation about the nature of the angelic, but instead is mobilized to question the human. The poet laments,

[...] Ach, wen vermögen
wir denn zu brauchen? Engel nicht, Menschen nicht,
und die findigen Tiere merken es schon,
daß wir nicht sehr verläßlich zu Haus sind
in der gedeuteten Welt. [...]248

The terror, resultant of the conditional encounter with the angel, shocks the poet into the realization of the finitude of transcendence—to the isolation of the rational subject, the subject who lives in the interpreted world, a world immanently closed under interpretation. This isolated state is paradoxically expressed through a collective pronoun (“wir”), emphasizing a

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247 In some ways, you could liken the encounter of with the angel with the concept of determinate negation. What the angel reveals as the weakness of humanity—and eventually as the angel reveals the world to be infernal—is acting to reveal a world that would be better without this particular quality.

248 Ibid.
commonality through our insecure position in the world of meaning. Our reason—or rather, our ability to give meaning to the world—is characterized as having responsibility for our suffering, being liable for an over-determination of meaning.

The alterity of the angel—its inconceivability—represents a return to possibility from over-determined rationality and in its lack of ontological grounding it resists forms of traditional religiosity. But, as discussed above, this understanding of the angel is closely linked with Rilke’s engagement with Islam, with establishing an authority for his own poetic voice. However, the ungrounded nature of this authority—the subjunctive assertion of angelic existence—leads to a poetic auctoritas that undermines any absolutist notion of authority. Rilke ultimately presents us with an angel of his own creation, intertwining angelic authority with the human through the act of poetic creation. In the second elegy, the poet asks,

[...] Fangen die Engel wirklich nur Ihriges auf, ihnen Entströmtes, oder ist manchmal, wie aus Versehen, ein wenig unseres Wesens dabei? [...]^{249}

As in “Gott im Mittelalter,” Rilke thereby gestures toward a latent Feuerbachian tendency to locate the divine within the human. In other words, the angel is an extension of the human mind, of human consciousness, emphasized as alterity. The angel represents the ungroundedness of the divine concept—the glorious metaphor, which is reflected in the angelic description in the second elegy.^{250} The angel is pure reflection of the indeterminate, which allows for the recognition of the frailty of human experience. The poet writes,

^{249} Rilke, Die Gedichte, 692.

^{250} „Frühe Geglückte, ihr Verwöhnten der Schöpfung, / Höhenzüge, morgenrötlische Grate / aller Erschaffung, – Pollen der blühenden Gottheit, / Gelenke des Lichtes, Gänge, Treppen, Throne, / Räume aus Wesen, Schilde aus
Engel (sagt man) wüßten oft nicht, ob sie unter Lebenden gehen oder Toten, […]²⁵¹

This places the divine perspective within the undetermined sphere that encompasses both life and death. The angel, having its origin in the lyric of the poet, remains in relation to the world and reveals the brokenness of the human condition from within the world. The angelic authority is derived precisely from its uncertain ontological status: it is an authority to divulge, but not to command or control. The authority of the poetic voice that is derived from this angelic postulation—as in “Mohammeds Berufung”—points towards a capacity in the human to think alterity, to imagine a different world through the restrictions and limitations of human existence. Angelic authority does not legitimate power, but rather points toward the capacities and potentiality of the human (“Der Engel aber, herrisch, wies und wies”). It is a force for decentralization, a mode of resistance to the accumulation and assertion of a centralized notion of authority.²⁵²

Ultimately, the actual existence of the angel is not important but rather it is the viewpoint of the angel that is the operative hermeneutic of Rilkean angelology. For a very clear expression of Rilke’s understanding of the angelic viewpoint, it helps to glance at Rilke’s French poetry, where the motif of the angel is common, and where the form and language of poetic expression is not quite as complex as in the Elegies. The poem “Vues des Anges” (“As seen by the Angels”) is very enlightening in investigating Rilke’s understanding of a hypothetical angelic perspective:

Vues des Anges, les cimes des arbres peut-être sont des racines, buvant les cieux;

Wonne, Tumulte / stürmisch entzückten Gefühls und plötzlich, einzeln, / Spiegel: die die entströmte eigene Schönheit / wiederschöpfen zurück in das eigene Antlitz.” Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid, 690.

²⁵² Rilke, Die Gedichte, 535.
et dans le sol, les profondes racines d'un hêtre
leur semblent des faîtes silencieux.

Pour eux, la terre, n'est-elle point transparente
en face d'un ciel, plein comme un corps ?
Cette terre ardente, où se lamente
auprès des sources l'oubli des morts.  

The angel is an ungrounded mode of seeing that maintains an authority over the conditioned nature of human existence. The angel represents an inversion of typical modes of lyrical expression. The viewpoint of the angel looks through the earth (“Pour eux, la terre, n'est-elle point transparente[?]”), shifting the perspective such that up is down and down is up (“les cimes des arbres peut-être / sont des racines, buvant les cieux ; / et dans le sol, les profondes racines d'un hêtre / leur semblent des faîtes silencieux.”). The shift in perspective reveals the infernal nature of earthly existence (“Cette terre ardente”) while also questioning the authority of human perspective. The encounter with angelic inversion produces a new, infernal vision, but it remains unclear if this vision is human or angelic. Do the angels see an infernal earth? Or does the poem realize the infernal nature of human existence through an encounter with the limitations of our perception, through a realization of our finitude? Does this new vision represent progress or regress? The poem begs the question: if the earth could be viewed so differently so as to appear as something different entirely, then how can we assert an authority to our own perspective? The angelic viewpoint thus participates in a contraction of rational human authority: an exercise in epistemic humility. The poem presents us with hermeneutic problems and no source of authority to begin answering them. Is it the dead who are lamenting or is it the forgetting of the dead,

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253 Rilke, *Poèmes français*, (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1988), 29. (“As seen by the Angels, perhaps the tops of the trees are roots, drinking the skies; / and in the ground, the deep roots of a beech seem to them silent ridges. // For them, is not the earth transparent in front of a heaven, so pregnant as a body? / This burning earth, where the oblivion of the dead laments beside the springs.”)
which is producing the lament? The encounter with the angelic viewpoint de-certifies our status of the earth, de-certifies the authority of the human perspective, de-certifies the authority of language. Rilke’s angel can be understood as a rejection of human authority in general; like Apollo’s Torso, the angel’s alterity secures a different mode of existence, the possibility of a different mode of human relations. The poem itself produces an epistemic humility, in form and content.

The aesthetic of the angel can thus be understood as having an anarchic quality: a groundlessness of perspective that nonetheless maintains a relation to the world. In a letter to Ellen Delp on 27 November 1915, Rilke writes: “Diese, nicht mehr von Menschen aus, sondern im Engel geschauten Welt, ist vielleicht meine wirkliche Aufgabe.”254 The angel is an aesthetic viewpoint—an attempt to perceive (αἴσθησις) the world in a new way—to see the world as “nichts / als des Schrecklichen Anfang.”255 The angel encompasses the realm beyond language and rational differentiation—the realm of pure, unconditioned possibility. The realm of angelic perspective represents the alternative to human assertions of the authority of reason: the connection between perception and the realm of being. This is clear with Rilke’s invocation of the angel at the end of the 5th Elegy, where the mere invocation of the word “Engel!” leads to a conditional realm (“Es wäre ein Platz…”).256 This thought experiment—the attempt to think the world from the perspective of the angel—can thus be understood as carrying a critical potential. The authority of the angel to show the brokenness of human life is artificial, but also enables the perception of the conditioned appearances of the world. The angel allows the presentation of a

254 Rilke, Briefe: Zweiter Band, 51.
255 Rilke, Die Gedichte, 689.
256 Ibid, 703.
realm of possibility—a groundless world (“wo Boden nie war…”)—which is ultimately the aesthetic ability to imagine that the world could be otherwise.\textsuperscript{257}

In the seventh elegy, the proclamation, “Hiersein ist herrlich,” initiates a movement towards interiority (“Nirgends… wird Welt sein, als innen.“).\textsuperscript{258} Here, of course, one must acknowledge a critical difference between Rilke’s angelic viewpoint and Adorno’s. Rilke’s notion of interiority in the elegies is, however, less about a rejection of materiality than it is a rejection of the world of appearances, with the historically conditioned mode of perception:

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

Rilke’s inner world is not divorced from the material world, but rather proposes a utopic possibility of an atemporal perception of the world: perception outside of one’s \textit{Zeitgeist}. The inner world is connected to the potentiality of material existence, to the ability to see a house that no longer stands (“Wo einmal ein dauerndes Haus war, […] als ständ es noch ganz im Gehirne”) or to understand a now-disenchanted reverence for a thing (“Ja, wo noch eins übersteht, / ein

\textsuperscript{257} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{258} Ibid, 707.

\textsuperscript{259} Ibid.
einst gebetetes Ding, ein gedientes, geknietes -, / hält es sich, so wie es ist, schon ins Unsichtbare hin.”).

The centrality of materiality in the elegies is further elucidated in the presentation of the animal in the eighth elegy. Kári Driscoll provides a central insight into the connection of the animal in the eighth elegy, arguing that, “Rilke’s angelology applies to the realm of the animal as well: specifically to what, in the eighth Duino Elegy, Rilke calls ‘the Open,’ which is inhabited by the angels and which all animals except man gaze out upon.”260 Rilke presents the possibility of ‘angelic’ perception within the material figure of the animal, providing the possibility of non-conditioned vision from within a material being.

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 wissens 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.261

The animal mirrors the angel in its ability to perceive the world in an unconditioned fashion. The animal differs from the angel only in its inability to communicate its vision—its inability to “show” like Mohammed’s angel. The animal simply gazes, simply exists without the need for authority. Interestingly, Adorno once similarly theorized animality, when he wrote, “Tierheit

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261 Rilke, Die Gedichte, 709.
[ist] die Menschheit so, wie sie von einem Standpunkt der Erlösung aus erschienene." The animal grounds the angelic perspective—the standpoint of redemption—in the material world as a possibility of perception that is not inherently closed-off to humans. Rilke’s elegies seek to orient their reader towards such a perspective—towards a form of seeing not conditioned by historicity or determined rationality, not conditioned by human authority.

This orientation is, however, left unfulfilled. The linguistic medium of the lyric limits the teleological orientation from securing its end. The lyric consciousness is itself in tension with the thingly encounter in its desire to give a name. The poet writes,

[…] Sind wir vielleicht hier, um zu sagen Haus, Brücke, Brunnen, Tor, Krug, Obstbaum, Fenster, – höchstens: Säule, Turn . . . . aber zu sagen, verstehst, oh zu sagen so, wie selber die Dinge niemals innig meinten zu sein. […]

Human language attempts to correlate to the thing, but in its present state, the completion of this attempt cannot be guaranteed. The poet conceives of here-ness as linguistic consciousness („Hier ist des Säglichen Zeit…”), but also as a non-imagistic language. This time of the speak-able is understood as a specific type of fallen encounter between subject and object; the speak-able [das Sägliche] is in tension with the real, with how the things wish to be in themselves („wie selber die Dinge […] innig meinten zu sein.”). The encounter with the object initiates a linguistic response in the subject but the poet characterizes this response as “ein Tun ohne Bild.”

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263 Special thanks to Thomas Pfau, whose commentary on a previous essay helped me to express this thought.
264 Rilke, Die Gedichte, 711.
265 Ibid. 712.
266 Ibid.
of speaking the thing *is* presented as a violation—in some sense, a failure to love the thing in its foreignness—but this failure leads to a mutual participation between poet and thing that makes the thingly foreignness known. In other words, this violation of thingly sovereignty is resolved through peace, where peace is understood in the Adornian sense: “Friede ist der Stand eines Unterschiedenen ohne Herrschaft, in dem das Unterschiedene teilhat aneinander.”267 In praising the world, the poet allows things a participation in his subjectivity, without reifying the linguistic response as essentially adherent to the thing. A distance is achieved through the artificial assumption of a divine consciousness, but this distance allows an affirmation of the material world in its contingent relation to the subject—the here-and-now.

It is here, however, that we observe the implications of the conditional assent to angelology for the understanding of linguistic authority found in the *Elegien*. Authority is constantly undermined: in many ways, the lament in this poetic cycle can be described as the mourning of the poet’s own *auctoritas*. This is, however, a rhetorical strategy that emphasizes the dissimulation of *methexis* in language; in other words, this is a rhetorical strategy that emphasizes the non-identity between word and thing.268 Rilke, having discovered a love of the material world, turns away from the world and praises the world to the angel:


268 Rilke’s tension between the unspeakable truth—the higher reality that only the angel can see—and the speak-able account, which violates a thing’s ability to be as it wishes, can be understood akin to Nietzsche’s critique of language in his essay, “Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne.” In Nietzsche’s essay, the critique of language can be understood much more potently as an epistemic contraction—a quasi-skepticist critique of our ability to arrive at ‘the truth of things,’ per se. Here Nietzsche writes, “Verschweigt die Natur ihm nicht das Allermeiste, selbst über seinen Körper, um ihn, abseits von den Windungen der Gedärme, dem raschen Fluß der Blutströme, den verwickelten Faserzitterungen, in ein stolzes, gauklerisches Bewußtsein zu bannen und einzuschließen?” (Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Die Geburt der Tragödie, Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*, 877.) The intellect thus does not synthesize the world of appearance into a representation (as in Kant’s description of the *Vorstellung*, or presentation of sense-data), but rather has as its motive a useful self-illusion. Nietzsche thus inverts the Kantian account of the mind’s ability to synthetically unify the manifold of appearances in the representation (*Vorstellung*) by mimicking this word in his use of the word *Verstellung*, or dissimulation. Here, Nietzsche writes, “Soweit das
Language’s correspondence to the thing is not guaranteed. Revealing the illusion of methexis undermines the authority of the poetic word, pointing toward the artificial nature of authority in language. The assumed nature of the angel—the conditional divine standpoint—provides a solution to this problem of authority, allowing the poet to continue speaking while undermining the authority of his own voice. In the end, Rilke’s angel provides an authority that is a non-authority: an ability to say what cannot be said. A reflection of the auctoritas of the poet in the Elegies undermines the ability of the poet to stand above the reader, establishing an anarchistic community—an order of language that follows no real authority—through the form of a poetry with an assumed, but non-extant authority.

V. Concluding Thoughts: Angelic Anarchy

What does it really mean, then, to read Rilke as a poetic anarchist? To do so is not to suggest that Rilke’s personal political perspective would align with anarchist movements from the early twentieth century. Rather, such a suggestion looks at the proto-political element of Rilke’s poetry that takes on anarchic notes: the formal elements of his poetry that establish and destroy hierarchies in language, subject-formation, and communities. Rilke himself considered many

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Individuum sich, gegenüber andern Individuen, erhalten will, benutzt es in einem natürlichen Zustand der Dinge den Intellekt zumeist nur zur Verstellung.” (ibid.) In this case, both Nietzsche and Rilke are questioning the authority of language and the authority of human reason more broadly.

269 Rilke, Die Gedichte, 712.
aristocrats to be close friends, and his letters show a rather apolitical mode of thinking in his private life. I recognize the indefensibility of the suggestion that the philosopher’s poet shared sympathies with explicit anarchists, such as those who wrote the *Manifeste des Seize* (1916).\textsuperscript{270} This is, however, not my position. Instead, we can identify a trajectory through his *oeuvre* from an attempt to establish his own poetic authority—the attempt to establish himself as an *auctor*—towards an ultimate rejection of authority through a critical, yet humble approach to the world of things. It is this rejection of authority, especially as it manifests itself in Rilke’s religious imagery, that we can identify an anarchic order: an arrangement without authority. Thus, the argument here has nothing to do with explicit political manifestos, nor with institutional politics, but rather with the expressions and reflections on poetic authority that one finds in Rilke’s poetry.

I would like to summarize these reflections on Rilke’s angelic anarchy with a glance at a poem from the French cycle of poems *Vergers*, published in 1925, just one year before Rilke’s death. As mentioned above, the French poems provide a unique insight into Rilke’s late poetic approaches because of the quite compact and straightforward presentation of their content. Like the *Neue Gedichte*, Rilke’s French poetry is formally succinct, but the poetic persuasion is linked more closely to the *Duineser Elegien* and *Die Sonette an Orpheus*. This particular poem, “Si l’on chante un dieu,” provides a quite clear schematic presentation of the anarchic form in Rilke’s angelic poetry:

*Si l’on chante un dieu,*  
*ce dieu vous rend son silence.*  
*Nul de nous ne s’avance*  
*que vers un dieu silencieux.*

\textsuperscript{270} The *Manifeste des Seize* is an anarchist manifesto written during the First World War advocating for an anarchic order to erupt from the ashes of the European continent following the war.
In this poem we find a series of pronouns (on, vous, nous), through which one can track a progression of mediation of a collective through a poetic auctoritas that does not set itself above the collective. The grammatical subject of the first line, “on,” is an impersonal pronoun, but in French this pronoun is commonly used as a colloquial way to express a collective action (e.g., on y va, which would be rendered in English as "Let’s go"). This anonymous collective is characterized in a provisional act of poeisis, singing a god into being (“Si l’on chante un dieu” | “If we sing a god”). With this conditional creative act, an asymmetric relationship of exchange commences, one which implicitly implies a certain alienation of the poet. This god responds to an informal, plural you (vous) with his silence, suggesting that the poet is not the recipient of this exchange. The poem, however, responds to this exclusion of the poet with the constitution of a belonging in the following expression, which characterizes a collective through the negative pronominal signifier, “Nul de nous” (“None of us”). In the final stanza, this “nous” becomes personalized in its response to the exchange (“qui nous fait frémir”). What we see in this progression of pronouns is the genesis of a communal identity through a lyrical-I that does not assert itself (the first-person singular is absent in the poem). The pronouns in this poem suggest the poet’s presence but do not proclaim it, clarifying the poetic voice within the typical genre of an I without expressing the I at all. The poet speaks for and with the collective, but in the invocation of the ‘you’ also stands in a separate position: a position to speak poetically.

271 Rilke, Poemes francais, 10. “If we sing a god / this god responds to y’all with his silence. / None of us moves forward / except towards a silent god. // This imperceptible exchange / which makes us shudder / becomes the heritage of an angel / without belonging to us.” (Translation mine).
In the constitution of community, however, the poem no longer belongs to the poet, just as the exchange does not belong to the community. The exchange relationship we find in this poem is thus not based on ownership; it is not appropriable. Likewise, the creation of the divine with a votic announcement escapes an ability to be co-opted; the trajectory of the poem denounces divine authority, while providing the structure of the divine as a common (albeit negative) orientation. We find an unconditioning of the divine / human relationship through silence, a silence which is dispossessed in the non-ownership of the exchange. Here it is worth pointing out that the god of this poem does not belong to a monotheistic worldview (“un dieu” / “ce dieu” | “a god” / “this god”); even in the metaphysical proposition of the potential existence of a god, this god is dethroned and found without authority. The poem upends our expectations of authority at every turn. Even the poet’s insight is not claimed for himself, but rather is emphasized as the manifestation of a communal understanding. The logic of the poem subsumes the individual to communal action without abolishing the I, without destroying the poet’s individuality.

We thus find here a succinct expression of the trajectory that I have been describing, of the movement towards subverting the hierarchies between divine and human, paralleling the relation between poet and reader. In this poem, the divine is presented as the product of an aesthetic creation (“on chante un dieu”)—one which is also only performed conditionally (“Si”). Here we see the auctoritas displaced outside of the particular voice of the poet, not just by the conditionality of the song, but also by the choice of grammatical subject—either in an indeterminate collective “we” or an impersonal “one.” Just as in Rilke’s thing poetry, we find a poetic expression that conceals the poetic I, but a poetic subject is nonetheless implied in between the use of pronouns: “vous” and “nous.” In the I’s potential non-experience of this
silence, we find a specter of authorial authority within the subversion of normal authorial hierarchies; that is, in establishing a poetic voice that does not reveal itself, the poetic authority mirrors the divine, whose gift is his own silence.

Nonetheless, the inverse image of the divine (a God who is both created and silent) begins to orient the collective (the “nous”) towards a common goal, but only in a negative sense (“Nul de nous ne s'avance / que vers un dieu silencieux”). In the radical subversion of authorial hierarchies—in a cosmic anarchy where God is subsumed under the human and the poet under the collective—we find a double poetic creation. Not only does the poem produce the silent God, but also a community that advances together through their collective creative expression. The exchange of this double creation and the paradoxical establishment of the communal order that results from the approach of the inverse divine image, becomes “l'héritage d'un ange,” suggesting that this collective is involved in the same praxis as the order of angels. The subversive suggestion here is that the angels sing God into being—like the impersonal “on”—and the “we” of this poem can participate in this subversion of religious hierarchies. The poem establishes a communal order of subverting order: anarchy in poetic form.

The angelic order, being an order without authority, does not belong to anyone because it is simply a conditional state of being: an aesthetic proposition that provides orientation for communal life. What holds the community together is neither the exchange of markets, nor bourgeois concepts of ownership or possession, but rather the authority of the poetic voice, which in turn is attributed to the community. Rilke seems to provide a critique of methexis; the binding operation of the community is not found in a shared property, or state of being. Instead, it is an orientation taken from religious form that lends trajectory towards the anarchic nature of his poetry. His own authorial voice—his established auctoritas—is constantly in a process of
undermining its own ability to speak with authority. This is the formal element of Rilke’s poetry where we can identify a political gesture: in the telos towards angelic anarchy.

The order of the angels (Elegien and Vergers), the authority of things (Neue Gedichte), and the God of the Stundenbuch all have one thing in common: they establish an auctoritas for the poem while diluting the authority of the author. The result is a paradoxical humility on behalf of the poet: as if his poetry repeats the mantra, “I could not possibly say what I am saying.” This epistemic contraction contributes to an understanding of a poetic subject—to a protopolitical moment—that subverts hierarchical relations, advocating an egalitarian approach to the relationship between humans, but also between humans and things, between humans and the world beyond perception. The politics of Rilke’s poetry—or rather put, the political forms that one finds in the poetry of Rilke—are anarchic in a restricted, intellectual sense, but nonetheless contribute to a broader political imagination that we find in the religious investments among the modernists.
CHAPTER IV: POLITICS OF INVERSION: Proto-Democratic Mediation in Celan’s Religious Poetics

[Messianismus] zu erstreben, auch für diejenigen Stufen des Menschen, welche Natur sind, ist die Aufgabe der Weltpolitik, deren Methode Nihilismus zu heißen hat. ~Walter Benjamin

I. Introduction

In his acceptance speech for the Georg Buchner Literary Prize, Paul Celan writes that the purpose of poetry is orienting the individual towards the “ganz Anderen,” towards the completely other.272 In contradistinction to previous poets whom this dissertation has analyzed, Celan’s poetry is not involved in a project of world creation, as in Lasker-Schüler for example, but instead this orientation harbors a political valence in its ability to intervene within the world, molding forms of gathering from already existing arrangements. In many ways, Celan’s speech contains his most poignant expressions on poetics. Poetry, according to Celan, interposes itself upon the world and possesses the function of distancing language from the quotidian, from the status quo. While discussing the concept of the foreign other, the “ganz Anderen,” Celan states that

Das Gedicht verweilt oder verhofft – ein auf die Kreatur zu beziehendes Wort – bei solchen Gedanken. // Niemand kann sagen, wie lange die Atempause – das Verhoffen und der Gedanke – noch fortwährt. [...] aber [das Gedicht] hält unentwegt auf jenes

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Poetry’s interjection in the mundane, creaturely, and threatened existence is intertwined with a sense of liberation (“als freizusetzen”) in its orientation towards the complete other. This twofold function of Celan’s poetry—to orient the individual towards the extraneous and to interrupt the status quo—harbor a certain messianic promise within Celan’s poetry, which is strengthened by his lyric’s constant engagement with religious imagery.

Responding to the terrors of a systematic and industrial genocide, to which his parents were victims, his poetry undermines many typical religious world views such as the goodness of God, or any sense of theodicy. Still, the remnants of religion that remain in his poetry are potent; his lyric portrays a continued commitment to religious forms (e.g., liturgy, prayer, etc.), even if it distances itself quite drastically from theological content. These religious forms represent not only linguistic conventions – traditional modes of expression – but also inform modes of gathering and organizing. In religious praxis, liturgy and prayer operate to bring people together and to mediate diverse individuals and groups of people. While recent Celan scholarship reflects an increasing acceptance of the thesis that Celan’s later poetry contains a strong political valence, there remains a rift in the general scholarship as to how to approach his religious content. It is my thesis that the religious imagery, especially in collections of his middle-

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273 Ibid, 197.

274 For more on this orientation, see: Bark, I. N., Dichtung des Anderen: Sprache und Tod in der Poetik Paul Celans im Lichte der Sprachphilosophischen Schriften Maurice Blanchots, (Berlin: Frank & Timme Verlag für wissenschaftliche Literatur, 2019).

275 For examples of recent perspectives on the political dimensions of Celan’s poetry, see: Badiou, Le Siècle; Bleiker, “‘Give It the Shade’: Paul Celan and the Politics of Apolitical Poetry;” Salminen “February 13: Paul Celan’s Political, Spiritual and Poetical Anarchies;”; Glazova “Paul Celan in Conversation with Walter Benjamin: ‘The Secret Open;’” or Parry, Schreiben jenseits der Nation. If I may briefly generalize on the scholarship regarding Celan’s religious poetry, there are three main hermeneutic approaches to his middle phase, all of which possess
period such as *Sprachgitter* and *Niemandsrose*, has a direct correlation to the political
imagination harbored in Celan’s poetics.

The inversion of which I speak here is formal in nature and as I have argued in the case
of Rilke’s *Elegies* in the previous chapter, might be helpfully conceptualized in terms of
Adorno’s conception of inverse theology. The difference between Adorno’s inverse theology and
Celan’s inverse religion can be drawn along the lines of theory and praxis: in the fact that
theology is a way of thinking about (God and) the world, whereas religion provides a certain
praxis for living within the world. Celan applies an inverse poetic operation on religious form in
the separation of this form from its contents: ritual without transcendence. What remains after
this inversion is a way of organizing, gathering, and relating to one another. Here, the orientation
towards the “ganz Anderen” replaces the orientation toward the fully other, namely the divine.276

Werner Hamacher comments on the formal function of inversion in Celan’s poetry as follows:

> Denn die Inversion ist nichts anderes als die Negativsetzung des Negativen und kraft
ihrer Negativität die strikte Verbindung der Geschiedenen; sie ist die Bewegung der Zeit

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276 Some scholars (e.g., Brierly, “Das Meridian,” 1984), have also associated Celan’s concept of the fully other with
Rudolf Otto’s conception of the sacred as an epistemically inaccessible category beyond human reason. In post-
Hellenistic philosophy (and theology), the conception of God as a “completely other” being is a common motif;
however, Celan’s poetics invoke a more material concept of the other: not God, but rather an unknown, personal
“thou.” Thank you to Henry Pickford for pointing this out to me.
selber, sofern sich diese – wie bei Hegel, aber bei ihm nicht allein – als das Kontinuum der auf sich selbst bezogenen Negativität und weiterhin als negative Einheit des Verschiedenen bestimmt.277

Put more simply, inversion retains form (in the case of the present inquiry, of religious gathering), while entirely emptying out the positive (or in this case, normative) claims upon which that form was initially predicated. In doing so, religion no longer becomes a force of splintering, separating, and polarizing communities (as has been the case in Europe at least since Luther), but rather, emptied of propositions that rely upon divinely inspired truths, becomes a formal model for gathering.

It is important to take seriously the religious imagery in Celan’s poetics in all the diverse allusions and allegories with which they present us—Jewish, Christian, or otherwise. However, it would also be a mistake to treat his poetry as containing a “verborgene Theologie” in the sense that one postulates a concealed understanding of the divine that underpins his lyric.278 I argue that the main religious function that we find in Celan’s middle phase is an inversion of Jewish and Christian liturgical and spiritual practice. Although Celan’s personal identity involves an ambivalent relationship to the faith of his Jewish heritage and never appears to involve a sympathy with Christian elements of belief, his poetry does take up culturally relevant symbols which have their origins in Christian traditions. The inversion of Christian imagery in Celan’s poetry is particularly important to my argument precisely because it points to the way inverse form empties religious imagery of its normative content. By examining this inversion, we can begin to recognize another political contribution of Celan’s poetry, namely the way in which it


278 For more on the critique of scholars who impose theological thought onto Celan’s poetry, see: Lackey, Michael, “Poetry as Overt Critique of Theology: A Reading of Paul Celan's ‘Es war Erde in ihnen.’”
mimics a messianic operation of referencing the universal through the particular, mediating the minority and the majority, witnessing to oppression while pointing toward redemption. What has thus previously been recognized as “anarchic” in Celan might be more properly incorporated into a proto-democratic vision that surpasses the liberal model of majority rule. We might understand “proto-democratic” in the sense of an analog or precursor to what Rancière calls the “logic of the demos,” which entails actualizing egalitarian principles of collective empowerment and resistance to oppressive power structures. As I describe in the introduction, the prefix “proto,” in this sense, highlights latent dispositions in Celan’s poetry that are necessary antecedents for thinking about new forms of democracy rather than democratic forms themselves: an imaginary that predisposes towards democratic modes of belonging. In the course of reframing Celan’s politics, I offer a more positive vision of what is happening in Celan’s middle-period than is standard in Celan scholarship, but this account is rooted in a traditional way of understanding Celan’s poetics. His poems are immersed in the particular and yet—as the theological readings pick up upon—they seem to point beyond themselves, towards an intimation that other forms of organization are possible. Here inverted religious forms play a significant role, separating dogmatic content from forms of liturgical organization, and pointing towards a-theological potentials for human organization found in such rituals.

Perhaps the most important function of Celan’s inverse poetics can be found in his unique engagement with Christian religious content. Ihmku Kim acknowledges the hazardous nature of examining the Christ-motif in the lyric of a poet with a Jewish heritage, but he also makes a compelling case that Christian imagery plays a significant role in Celan’s poetics, particularly the

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poetics concerned with bearing witness to the horrors of the Shoah. Kim argues convincingly that Paul Celan “findet in dem Motiv der Passion Christi ein symbolträchtiges äquivalentes Medium, mit dem das Unsagbare sagbar gemacht werden kann.” Still, Celan’s Christian imagery seems to be elevated to more than a medium to explore a world-shattering tragedy. Celan’s engagement with Christianity can perhaps be better understood as a re-writing of the universal Christian messianic promise in light of the mass genocide of the Jewish people.

Thus understood, Celan’s poetry offers a revision of Christian messianism through a post-holocaust Jewish perspective. His messianic poetry does often allude to Christian imagery—it is not immanently Jewish in that sense—but Celan also does not align himself with a Christian perspective, either. In other words, an inverted religious form of gathering promises the possibility of a path forward after the Shoah that refuses to justify atrocity with metaphysical theodicy. His poetry operates (in a mode similar to Trakl’s, but with a more individualistic tone) as a mode of kenosis. Celan’s poetry focuses intensely on both constructing and deconstructing the individual. In his engagement with religious imagery, the impetus seems to lie upon an emptying out of individuality that corresponds to a nihilistic construction of the self as a precondition to participating in a community beyond ethnic/linguistic identity distinctions. As Christoff Parry argues, Celan’s poetry continually undermines ethnic and linguistic boundaries, but still insists upon a collective identity above and against the nation state. Celan scholarship has long since focused on the Mehrsprachigkeit in his poetry, which can be understood as a

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281 This focus on individuality in Celan’s poetry has been explicated by scholars such as Derek Hilliard C.f., Hillard, Derek, Poetry as Individuality: The Discourse of Observation in Paul Celan, (Lewisburg PA: Bucknell University Press), 2010.

282 C.f., Parry, Christoph, Schreiben jenseits der Nation, (Berlin: de Gruyter), 2021.
contribution to the imaginary of a people that exist beyond ethnic identity. However, the particular political implication of this messianic revision of Christian imagery is to propose the language of silence, of poetry, to become the binding identifier beyond the nation. In doing so, Celan’s poetry proposes a non-exclusive understanding of egalitarian mediation. What we might call a proto-democratic organizing principle, this associative force relates disparate subjects, not suppressing the oppressed but also not silencing the oppressors. His poetry, as already proposed by Salminen, mixes mystical messianism with political purpose. In doing so, Celan emphasizes the people of the diaspora as a model for the suspension of nationalism and the overcoming of the oppressive developments in Christian culture, which has been defined for millennia in positive relation to “European” ethnic groups and in negative relation to the Jews. Finally, in Celan’s poetry we thus find a notion of mediation in poetic language that renders present a traumatic past. This conception of remembering the traumatic by rendering it present mirrors the messianic thought of Christian traditions (for example, the messianism of Paul’s writings) but, like some strains of Jewish messianism, emphasizes that the disjointed nature of messianic time does not necessitate redemption. Trauma replaces the messianic redemption of Christianity and becomes a non-exclusive model of binding people together outside of an ethereal, mystical context. In mobilizing inverted liturgical imagery, Celan replaces the role of sacrifice in religious worship with past trauma. In doing so, the liminal language of Celan’s poetry mediates traumatic events as quasi-messianic moments, which are disjointed from history and point negatively toward the possibility of solidarity and proto-democratic organization. In invoking the terms "solidarity" and "democracy," I acknowledge that I am framing Celan’s project in a more positive sense than is typical in scholarship. However, I am not invoking these terms in the sense of realpolitik, but rather as a more abstract mediation of humans that has an egalitarian principle.
at its core: solidarity as an ethereal bond that escapes time and place and proto-democracy as mediation (but not resolution) of conflicting points of view.

In this chapter, I will begin with a look at the messianic temporality in Celan’s poetry, showing how religious forms are inverted to provide a post-secular political possibility. Analyzing the poem “Es ist nicht mehr,” I show that the messianic temporality of Celan’s poetry provides a mode of relating to historical trauma, drawing upon the terrors of the holocaust, but also abstracting beyond the singularity of Auschwitz in the poem’s limitations to witness to such terrors. From here, I look at the role of liturgical allusions in Celan’s poetry, arguing that in poems such as “Tenebrae” and “Psalm,” he provides a politics of liturgical organization that extends beyond religious confession. By separating the religious mode of organization from metaphysical content, Celan thus gestures towards the possibility of liturgy as a mode of political organization that is not oriented around an identity-based principle of gathering. This gathering through non-identity can also be understood as a sort of solidarity with the unknown other. I then turn to a reading of the poem “Radix, Matrix,” showing that Celan’s inverse religion provides a non-exclusive reconsideration of identity, promising a messianic Heimat within the state of exile. I conclude with reflections on Celan’s poetry as a whole to connect the aforementioned readings to Celan’s greater oeuvre and show that the collective poetic voice that we find exclusively in his middle period is imagined as a lyrical response to trauma that bears some important similarities with Benjamin’s nihilistic messianism.

II. Trauma’s Temporality: Inverted Messianism

As alluded to above, Celan’s poetry—at times—enters into dialogue with Christian subject matter. This does not mean that Celan was himself invested in Christian terminology or ways of
thinking, but rather can be best understood as the immanent mobilization of cultural currency from the worlds in which he persisted. Born into post-Hapsburg Romania and exiled in Catholic Paris, Celan was not unfamiliar with Christian traditions. In explicating the messianic undertones of his poetry, it is helpful to look first at a Christian account of messianic thought, in order to then see the way in which Celan inverts this thinking, reincorporating it into a Jewish perspective. In *The Time that Remains*, Giorgio Agamben argues that St. Paul’s conception of messianic time involves a break in history: it is “when the division of time is itself divided.”

The messianic event, according to Agamben’s account, involves a rupture of time, “time contracts itself and begins to end. […] Time explodes here; or rather, it implodes into the other eon, into eternity.” The messianic event is one that fundamentally alters history and the way in which history conducts itself; the succession of events that preceded the messianic event are foreclosed and what follows is a new time, a persisting present that opens toward the eschaton. He writes, “Messianic time is that part of secular time which undergoes an entirely transformative contraction.”

Messianic time, here understood, should not be conflated with the eschaton, which is a future moment, but rather as a contraction of time itself, “the time that time takes to come to an end.” The messianic event, thus understood, inaugurates a new temporality that no longer has continuity with the time that preceded it, and which confines itself but also breaks beyond time, participating in eternity while also bringing it about.

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284 Ibid. 63.

285 Ibid. 64.

286 Ibid. 67.
In Celan’s poetry we find a similar conception of temporality, although it differs in distinct ways; instead of resulting from a salvific moment in history, the event which breaks with chronological time is a world-historical traumatic event. The temporality of Celan’s poetry, especially during his middle phase, seems to thus invert this conception of messianic time, substituting trauma for the messianic event. As Jenny Edkins reflects,

Traumas, by definition, are events that are incapable of, or at the very least resist, narration or integration into linear narratives or, in other words, into homogeneous linear time. Trauma is not experienced in linear time; there are no words, no language, through which such an experience could take place. A traumatic event cannot be integrated into our symbolic universe, the very universe that has been called into question by the trauma. It cannot be narrated.287

The form, or more specifically, the temporal structure remains—time is disjointed from what came before and contracts on itself toward the infinite abyss—but the religious content has been removed. In the case of Celan, the disjointed, non-narrative form of lyrical expression contributes to this sense of traumatic temporality. Without a messiah figure, temporal salvation—eschatological time—has been removed from the structure of messianic temporality. What remains is the break, the rupture, the caesura, the contraction of time upon itself. Time continues to bring about its own demise, to wait for its own end, but that end is no longer positively connotated. An inverted messianism means that a hopeful future as well as a connection to the past has been denied.

As a reaction to the Shoah, this traumatic fissure in temporality seems in line with readers of Celan who emphasize the importance of Vergangenheitsbewältigung in Celan’s poetry. Still, Celan’s lyric, while constantly incorporating allusions to the particular and horrific trauma of the

Holocaust, also finds expression in a language whose generality (or lack of specificity) makes space for the inclusion of other traumatic experiences. I will focus on explicating the linkage between temporality and trauma shortly, but first it is important to emphasize that the temporality in Celan’s poetry—particularly the inversion of messianic forms that we find here—takes on a unique political character. As Edkins notes, “Thinking politics or the political through notions of time enables productive parallels to be drawn across a series of accounts from different traditions, and opens out [sic.] a dimension of political thinking that often remains unexplored but that proves vital if forms of political life are to be refigured.”

By understanding traumatic temporality as an inverted messianic structure, we also find a vision of politics and futurity which has precluded its own actualization.

Let us look at a specific poem to analyze how this temporality functions more concretely in Celan’s poetry. In the poem, “Es ist nicht mehr,” (originally published in Niemandsrose, 1963) Celan presents the reader with a disrupted relationship as a result of an ambiguous past event. The first line suggests a previous point in time that is no longer, and the poem explores the consequences of this temporal break:

ES IST NICHT MEHR

diese
zuweilen mit dir
in die Stunde gesenkte
Schwere. Es ist
eine andre.

Es ist das Gewicht, das die Leere zurückhält,
die mit-
ginge mit dir.
Es hat, wie du, keinen Namen. Vielleicht
seid ihr dasselbe. Vielleicht

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288 Ibid. 127.
nennst auch du mich einst
so. 289

The relationship between the poetic voice—not explicitly an "ich" and in the context of
*Niemandsrose*, potentially a "wir"—and the "du" has been disrupted. A previous and repeated
level of intimacy and closeness, an ability to sink into the weightiness of relationality, life with
another person or persons ("zuweilen mit dir / in die Stunde gesenkte / Schwere"), has been lost,
resulting in something different, perhaps a different weightiness ("eine andere [Schwere]”).
What remains is different from what came before, cut off from and discontinuous with the past.
The different weightiness exists in a present moment that contracts upon itself, in post-traumatic
temporality. The temporality here is not of cause and effect—action and consequence—but
rather points toward a rupture with the past, with a time with which the present lacks continuity.
This resembles messianic time as the rupture with the past leads to a contraction of time into
something beyond temporality: the closing of time upon itself.

This broken and contracting time is reflected in the form of the poem itself, which
reflects a stilted *Kairos*, not the “right” time, but still an immanent present moment. The
enjambment of each sentence points towards a broken temporality, a struggle to continue to
speak, a struggle into the future. There is a certain temporal rupture, especially as reflected in the
use of enjambment, which also points toward a rupture in meaning. Words that are separated by
lines ("mit- / ginge" or “einst- / so”), but also the successive form by which information is
presented, suspends the comprehension of meaning until a delayed moment: each line
successively turns the poem away from what one may have understood up until that point. The
temporality of the verbs, moreover, provides an interesting disconnect between the past event,

which is signified by the language and the present tense of the expression. The invocation of the present tense to refer to both past and future formally reflects the stilted Kairos, which inflects the poem. The verbs in the poem point toward the ability of the present to reference both the past and the future (e.g., “Es ist nicht mehr…” or “Vielleicht / nennst du mich einst / so.”), which is further emphasized by the penultimate word, “einst,” which usually refers to a past event, but in this case is positioned in an idiosyncratic form as to suggest a future possibility. The form thus also reflects the inverted messianic temporality of the content: the poem is formally separated from past and future, caught in a traumatic present that seems to collapse upon itself. The future is problematized but is not foreclosed: it is referenced by adverbial modifications that press the present towards something new.

In the center of the poem, this lack of relationality is further developed in its inverse form. We find a constellation of inverted relationality crystalized in the first sentence of the second strophe. Here we find the triangulation of “the weight,” “the void,” and the “you,” all of which are removed from relation to the poet:

Es ist das Gewicht, das die Leere zurückhält,
die mit-ginge mit dir. 290

The weight here stands in a certain semantic relation to the “heaviness” that the poet encountered in the previous communion with the you (“diese / zuweilen mit dir / in die Stunde gesenkte / Schwere”). In the absence of the heaviness of relation with the you, a weight holds back the possibility of relationality; the empty [die Leere] is held back as the departure of the "du" disrupts the prospects of relating to an other. This contraction results in a monadic temporality of immanence. The poet is isolated and alienated, no longer in communion with the you, seemingly

290 Ibid.
no longer in relation at all, caught in the emptiness that remains after the you’s departure. This lack of relationality inverts a Christian messianic structure (at least as described by Agamben); rather than a time that contracts upon itself toward an eschatological notion of time, we find here a rupture in temporality that has precluded a future that is associated with you.

As the poet was powerless against the you in its departure, the poet remains powerless in his ability to constitute the poetic world which he describes, unable even to ascribe a name to this weight:


At a purely linguistic level, this lack of a name points to a breakdown in signifiers, an inability of a name to point towards the you. Here is an inversion of the prelapsarian, adamic power, which sought communion with the human other.292 In the case of this poem, however, the lack of a name points to a crisis of relation, an inability for the poet to commune with the "du." Moreover, the lack of a name—or the inability of the poet to participate in the process of naming—suggests a messianic form deprived of its divine content. The name of God, which remains unpronounced in Hebrew, has been understood in some parts of the tradition as a non-name, an expression of silence.293 This inverted messianism is presented as a problem for the most basic building block of communal relations: the I and the you.

291 Ibid.

292 See the elation of Adam as he meets Eve, experiencing human communion for the first time: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” (Gen 2:23).

293 Notice that this mirrors what Celan says of the poem in his Meridian Speech: “das Gedicht zeigt, das ist unverkennbar, eine starke Neigung zum Verstummen.” (Celan, Gesammelte Werke: Band 3, 197).
The messianic function of names in Celan’s poetry, and the Niemandsrose in particular, is helpful to explicate the formal structure of inversion, from which this chapter seeks to excavate a political valence. Anna Glazova identifies this function in a religious form that has been emptied of religious content. She writes:

[Celan] cannot be read as an invocation of religious contexts. [His poetry] can and must also be read independently of its hints toward the power of naming within the realm of Judaism. Celan in his poems about names does, however, repeat the thought common to all kabbalistic texts: that naming is a power needed for creation.294 The lack of an invocation of religious content does not mean that the religious allusions are insignificant, but Celan does significantly distance himself from any sort of religious position. What remains is an inverted form, religion upturned and without dogma, the breakdown of the logos: a hope for a future gathering, the emergence of a communal organization. Unlike a religious poetry that promises to communicate a divine truth, Celan’s poetry “is messianic precisely because it promises nothing and says nothing about the divinity of the name that remains unnamed and unnameable.”295 The unspoken name and the anonymous "du" harbor together a hope for a future communion: the restitution of a time which has been lost to trauma. The name points toward reconciliation with a lost time, whereas the lack of a proper name in this poem (and many others in Celan’s oeuvre) points toward the difficulty of poetry to communicate such a reconciliatory, messianic moment after historical trauma.

It may help here to specify what I mean by "historical trauma." In particular, I am of course referencing the genocidal terrors of National Socialism, which Celan experienced first-

295 Ibid. 149.
hand alongside millions of European Jews and other persecuted groups (Sinti and Roma peoples, communists, LGBTQ+, etc.). But with this term I also wish to point toward a more general conception of trauma, towards which Celan’s poetics also often signify—a conception of trauma beyond the particularities of this tragic event in world history. Without sacrificing the very obvious fact that Celan is a post-holocaust poet, I wish to also acknowledge that his poetry cannot be reduced to a response to the Shoah. His poetry surely responds to the possibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz, represented perhaps most concretely by Adorno’s hyperbolic statement that “nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frisst auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben.” Celan makes clear that not only is it not barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz, but it is possible and perhaps even necessary. But moreover, his poetry often serves as a response to traumatic history in general. A poem such as “Es ist nicht mehr,” can and should be read as a post-holocaust poem, but the generality of the language does not restrict itself solely to this event; the "du-mich" relation also suggests an intimate personal relationship, the traumatic loss of which causes a disruption in the temporality of the poem. The conclusion of this poem (“Vielleicht / nennst auch du mich einst- / so.”) locates this capacity to name in a dialogic form of communication, that is, in the linguistic interaction between the you and the I. The you’s ability to name is qualified, uncertain, and yet to be executed, qualified by the adverb “Vielleicht.” Still, even the possibility to be named, even “einst- / so,” lends a subjectivity to the poet which the poem could


297 As John Taylor writes, “Although his poetic oeuvre courageously engages with the Holocaust (in which his parents perished) and with the redoubtable task of writing German verse "after Auschwitz," much of his later, vertiginously polysemous work—with its multiple "you's"—also explores, cryptically, love's possibilities. As Celan despaired deeply, he also hoped violently.” (Taylor, John, "Review: And how Hope is Violent: The Poetry of Paul Celan," Poetry 178, no. 6 (2001), 338).
not previously express. Here in the penultimate line of the poem, the poet is identified for the first time: as the object of another’s act of naming: a mich. The "du" thereby expresses its messianic personality in the ability to confer a name, pointing to a future moment where a communion may re-emerge, where the poet may once again interact with the you. This poetry, however, does not obtain that which it seems to hope for: it rests in waiting for the "du" to reveal the name.

The inversion of messianism means that the temporality of this poem does not promise the eschaton of reconciliation, does not secure redemption, but instead is itself simply broken. To proclaim brokenness is, in this case, not a form of defeatism, rather it is a form of hope for a future coming-to-terms with the traumatic event through a mediated relation to the other. The gesture of the poetry is thus to create a dialogue in the hope of the completion of the messianic form. The question a poem such as this does not answer is: what makes this mediation possible? Such an answer is withheld, left for the dialogue’s future to discover. In the aftermath of a traumatic event that places the very notion of relationality into question, in a point in time that has severed continuity with the past, Celan’s poetry attention towards religious forms draw hope for the potential that lies in the future, hope that messianism might fulfil its promise. To emphasize Celan’s project as a positive, hopeful vision would be an exaggeration of the material at hand, but we do find a critical possibility in religious form that remains unactualized. Surely, Celan’s poetry calls into question and problematizes the idea of a collective response to trauma, but in doing so, he also interrogates the viability of messianic possibilities.
III. Inverse Liturgy and a Mediated Collective

In order to better see the political nature of Celan’s religious imagery, let us turn first to a poem where Celan engages with the intersections of Jewish and Christian liturgy. In the context of his liturgical poetry, we find a religious form implemented to elevate the collective above the individual. Many readers have commented on the role of the individual in Celan’s poetry, arguing that his lyric is tied intimately to a drive towards individuation. Moreover, such overarching claims about Celan’s poetics tend to over-emphasize the early and late periods of his poetic production, where the collective pronoun is almost entirely absent. Such an emphasis on individuation in Celan’s lyric, however it may appear at first glance, is not ultimately in opposition to the conception of a political collective within Celan’s poetry. Anti Salminen, for example, has argued that the formation of the individual in Celan’s poetry is oriented toward an anarchic collective. On the other hand, in the context of his liturgical lyric, the mystical disposition of the poetic voice orients the individual towards a collective mediated by a poetic transcription of the liturgy. Here we find a poetic text that identifies with the voice of its reader, similar to how, in the context of the Celan’s “Engführung,” Peter Szondi argues “daß es unmöglich wird, zwischen dem, der liest, und dem, was er liest, zu unterscheiden; das lesende Subjekt fällt zusammen mit dem Subjekt des gelesenen Gedichts.” In the liturgical context, this reading achieves a new significance; the individual’s voice is joined to the voice of the collective, they are one and the same. Just as a liturgy mediates the prayers of the individual and

298 See especially Derek Hilliard’s *Poetry as Individuality: The Discourse of Observation in Paul Celan*.


the collective, binding them together, so too does the act of reading Celan’s poetry act to connect reader and poem, gesturing toward the possibility of the poem to mediate a collective body of readers.

In the case of Celan’s liturgical allegory the collective voice is no longer oriented toward the divine, as in Jewish or Christian liturgies; in fact, it is no longer a religious orientation at all. Instead, the religious becomes inverted, being mobilized toward political ends. In the poem, “Tenebrae,” originally published in Sprachgitter (1957), Celan inverts the typical Jewish and Christian relation between man and God. Instead of praying to God, the poem instructs the “Lord” to pray to the anonymous collective “us.” ("Bete, Herr, / bete zu uns, / wir sind nah"). In doing so, Celan is not addressing a community, but rather constituting one through the use of the collective pronoun. In understanding the significance of this inversion, the liturgical context is important, despite having been systematically ignored by previous readers of this poem. Tenebrae is the name of a traditionally Catholic service that involves the collective recitation of Psalms which takes place at twilight during the Triduum: the three days preceding Easter Sunday. One of the oldest liturgical practices in the Catholic Church, the Liturgy of the Hours—and Tenebrae in particular—dates back to early Christian appropriations of Jewish

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302 Celan, Gesammelte Werke: Band 1, 163.

303 Tenebrae services combine liturgical elements from the first two ‘hours’ of the Liturgy of the Hours, the Officium lectionis and Lauds. This liturgy consists of the singing of four Psalms, a longer reading from the Old Testament, a longer reading from a Church father, three more Psalms, a short New Testament reading (usually from Paul), and a gospel canticle. This liturgy is usually sung in a form of chant, alternating between the different sides of the church.
prayers and liturgical practices. This ancient practice of liturgy represents an anomaly in Christian organizational structure: it is a non-hierarchical mode of collective prayer—no monk is elevated above the other in prayer, no priest is required to mediate the prayer of the Church. In the liturgical recitation of the psalms, prayer is a non-hierarchical binding agent to gather the intentions of disparate individuals and communities into a single invocation of the divine.

As the “I” of the Psalmist is understood to equally be the “I” of all individuals praying the liturgy, so too does the “we” to which the “Lord” is directed to pray constitutive of a collective that stands open to incorporate Celan’s readers. The pronominal invocation that we find in liturgical texts shifts from the I to the we. Whereas in the recitation of Psalms during a Jewish or Christian liturgy, the we says “I,” here a private reader (an I) says “we.” The traditional liturgical relation between the community and the text is thereby inverted, as is the relationship with the divine. The collective "we" does not need to be drawn close to God; but they are already close: “nahe und greifbar.” Rather than a typical psalmic praise, in this poem we find instead an invocation that God pray to the collective (“Bete, Herr, / bete zu uns, / wir sind nah.”). This inversion carries with it a significance of maintaining the unitive form of address but orienting this form towards constituting a collective "we" rather than approaching the

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304 After the destruction of the Jewish Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E., the performance of animal sacrifice in the Jewish liturgy was substituted with “sacrifices of praise,” which in practice involved the recitation of the Psalms. The early Christians also began this practice of praying with the psalms and by the time that Monasteries were beginning to be formed in Europe, they formalized these prayers into different hours of the day, so that two groups of monks would alternate throughout the day to “pray constantly” (1 Thes. 5:17) as Paul commands. The alternation between the monks provided a binding factor to their community, drawing the monks together through liturgical practice. This practice was traditionally separate from the celebration of the Eucharist, which happens only once during the entire Triduum (on Holy Thursday), and instead was thought to be a constitutive part of every monk’s daily routine—not just those who were elevated to the priesthood.

305 Celan, Gesammelte Werke: Band 1, 163.
The result is an address that seeks to bind the collective together, while distancing itself from the original purpose of this form of address. The resulting religious imagery in the poem should be seen in line with this gesture. For example, we find an allusion to the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist in the following stanza. Here, instead of being separated from the liturgy of the Eucharist as the liturgy of Tenebrae, we find eucharistic imagery in this poem as the central mediator of the unity of the "we."

\[
\text{Gegriffen schon, Herr,}
\]  
\[
\text{ineinander verkrallt, als wär}
\]  
\[
\text{der Leib eines jeden von uns}
\]  
\[
\text{dein Leib, Herr.} \]

The image here confronts us with the reality of the collective, which does not consist of neatly arranged members; instead, their bodies are united in conflict ("ineinander verkrallt"), the grammatical objects of violence ("Gegriffen schon"). The collective is bound through their bodily existence through an assumed “as if” statement that recalls the body politics of eucharistic theology ("als wär / der Leib eines jeden von uns / dein Leib, Herr")—the joining of the flesh of the many with the messiah. This image can also be understood an inversion of Eucharistic imagery, where the peaceful and liturgical consumption of the mystical body joins the faithful to their “Lord.” Here, not mystical union, but conflict and desperation are what unite these bodies, a scene which calls to mind corpses near the door of a gas shower. The religious form effects a form of unity, but not a mode of unity that is free of violence; religion operates as a metaphor to

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306 This invocation has often been interpreted to be an appeal to sacrilege (See, Lorbe, “Paul Celan, Tenebrae;” or Pöggler, Der Stein hinterm Aug), but following Kim (“Die Sublimierung des Leidens”), who suggests this inversion is a response to the problem of evil in light of the mass genocide carried out against God’s favored people, I argue that there is a deeper significance to this inversion than simply a lack of reverence for the divine.

307 Celan, Gesammelte Werke: Band 1, 163.

308 Ibid.

309 Thank you to Henry Pickford, who helped me see this reference within this image.
express unity, but the transcendent underpinning of such a unity falls away. Such an expression leaves open the possibility that the Lord asserts the bodies as his own. Ultimately, we find distorted bodies that are twisted together to form a whole, or perhaps more precisely made whole through the reflective, postulate proposition of an “as if” statement in order to make sense of the violence enacted upon the “wir.”

We thus find a collective made equal not by their status as they approach God with praise (as the monks consider themselves while praying the Liturgy of the Hours), but instead we have an equality formed through an external and violent pressure, through victimhood. The way in which the bodies are entangled, undifferentiated from each other, undermines any attempt at establishing a hierarchy within the collective. This collective is formed under pressure and threatens to erupt into disunity like the volcanic geographies of the fourth stanza, towards which the collective bows down. The victims of history and those who are opposed to injustice seem to be bound together in a final address to the divine to rectify the traumas in the world.

Windschief gingen wir hin,
gingen wir hin, uns zu bücken
nach Mulde und Maar.\textsuperscript{310}

The inversion of the disposition between God and man elevates the collective above the divine. As Anton Vishio succinctly puts it, “we come first, before the \textit{Lord}, whom we find wanting.”\textsuperscript{311} The mystical transformation that is commenced with the “as if” statement that compares the distorted bodies of the collective to the body of the Lord finishes in the consummation of the collective by drinking the blood of God, which also contains his image. Mimicking the

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{310} Ibid.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{311} Vishio, Anton, "\textit{Leçons De Tenebrae: Brian Cherney, Paul Celan, and a Music of Witness}," \textit{Intersections}, 159.}
institutions of the Eucharist almost to the point of mockery, Celan inverts the relationship between the collective and the sacrament, not mediating it through a class of priests, but instead through a poetics of the image.

Zur Tränke gingen wir, Herr.

Es war Blut, es war,
was du vergossen, Herr.

Es glänzte.

Es warf uns dein Bild in die Augen, Herr.
Augen und Mund stehn so offen und leer, Herr.
Wir haben getrunken, Herr.
Das Blut und das Bild, das im Blut war, Herr.312

The context of the Triduum (the suffering and death of God followed by a descent into hell) stands in the center of this poem as it does in the liturgy of Tenebrae; however, the elevation of man above God dislocates suffering and sacrifice from a Christian world view. We find an in-between mode of faith: a religion without revelation, without a secure teleology. The collective motion towards the watering hole or trough (“Zur Tränke gingen wir”) suggests at the same time a communality of shared inhumanity, of animality, a history of degradation. There remains a “Lord” figure who has shed blood, but the link between redemption and sacrifice is placed in question. As Chiara Conterno, points out, the shedding of blood is actually quite ambiguous: “Dem Partizip »vergossen« könnte sowohl »hast« als auch »lässt« bzw. »ließest« folgen. Die Bedeutungen wären diametral entgegengesetzt. Entweder hat Gott sein eigenes Blut vergossen oder er hat das Blut der Menschen vergießen lassen.”313 What is clear from this verb is that blood has been spilled and that the addressee of the poem, “Lord,” has approved of or is responsible for

312 Celan, Gesammelte Werke: Band 1, 163.
this sacrifice. The inversion of the order between the “we” and the “Lord” thus acts as a trial for God: a final demand to make visible the redemption promised by the shedding of blood. There remains a trauma, but the allusions to Christian imagery seem to invert the promise of a messianic redemption: the shedding of blood is not redemptive, but Christian rhetoric is revealed as barbaric.

In “Tenebrae”, the form of the Christian liturgy lacks Christian content. Celan thus seems to reject a Christian notion of suffering as a positive phenomenon—as something redemptive or sacred—and instead he emphasizes the community who witnessed genocide and lost hope in external redemption. The liturgical context thus binds together a community of the oppressed: the collective action of approaching the sacramental consumption of blood seems to draw the collective out of their pressure tank, out of their distorted entanglement, and to bind the oppressed together into a community through collective action. In the aftermath of the trauma of sacrifice, it is no longer the responsibility of the community to approach the divine through liturgy. Liturgical form is used in order to hold community together, and in doing so, to inform the divine of its failure to secure redemption from genocide. Religious form remains a mode of coming to terms with the tragedies of history, but in its inverted form, this coming-to-terms establishes a community, a new collectivity. Not the divine, but the collective will determine the future, the consequences to be drawn from tragedy. Understood in the political-theological sense, Herr can also be understood not as the divine “Lord,” but rather as a ruler: the masculine, sovereign subject. There is a certain Hegelian dialectic to be detected in the inversion of the collective and the Lord: the Herr becomes the Knecht and the oppressed collective is elevated to the position of the Lord. Liturgy offers the debased community the possibility of founding political order, of establishing their own sovereignty as a community. The entire liturgical
practice is banalized, rooted in the debasement of the collective, who find the image of the Lord as they approach a watering hole like animals. The understanding of Lordship, of any elite, ruling class, is thus found reflected in the community inversely as they posit a revolutionary demand to invert the hierarchies as a result of a traumatic event that has not been redeemed. Tragedy is no longer a path of securing redemption, but instead the barbarism of the sacrifice is accentuated. The event of the Holocaust is emphasized to delegitimize both divine and secular sovereignty of the one over the many.

Many previous readers have pointed to Hölderlin’s “Patmos” as an important intertextual reference in this poem, which further helps to explain how inversion operates in Celan’s poetry to separate the religious act of sacrifice from redemption. As Conterno contends, “Das lyrische Ich spricht nicht die anderen Menschen an, sondern es wendet sich an Gott. Dadurch erfährt das Verhältnis der sprechenden Instanz zu Gott eine radikale Umkehrung, insbesondere wenn man die Fortsetzung der Hölderlinschen Strophe beachtet, die für Celan jede Gültigkeit verloren hat.” Hölderlin’s poem begins by invoking the nearness of God and proposing a Christian theodicy as a consequence of this nearness:

Nah ist
Und schwer zu fassen der Gott.
Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst
Das Rettende auch.

Here, the proximity of God to man is combined with the difficulty to grasp the concept of His goodness and is followed by an assertion of the salvific potential harbored within “dangerous”


316 Hölderlin, Friedrich, Sämtliche Werke Band 2, (Stuttgart 1953), 172.
moments. In other words, in the danger of tragedy and negativity is where one finds redemption. Celan’s formulation in Tenebrae inverts this completely, proclaiming the relative proximity of the collective "we" and the tangible, concrete nature of this community (“Nah sind wir, Herr, / nahe und greifbar.”). Celan seems to be operating immanently within religious form (and lyrical tradition) in order to question the justifications that religious ideology provides for the dangers and evils in the world: to undermine Christian theodicy in light of the horrors of the Holocaust. Rather than praise God for his benevolence to humans (as in Hölderlin), the divine position is called into question and the invocation of “Herr” seems to demand a messianic response to the already occurred traumatic sacrifice. Celan’s poem does not find this redemption, but rather concludes with a final invocation of liturgical practice (“Wir haben getrunken, Herr”) and a final assertion of the sovereignty of the community over the Lord (“Bete, Herr. / Wir sind nah”). Inverse liturgy, thus understood, provides a form of collectivity that elevates the oppressed, debased community to a superior social footing to their ruler or oppressor.

In Celan’s poetry, liturgical form thus becomes a mode not just of constituting a community, but also of liberating this community from oppression. In inverting Jewish and Christian theodicy of sacrifice (i.e., a sacrifice that would redeem injustice in the world), danger no longer intuitively harbors salvation. Composed four years later and found in the collection Niemandsrose, we find this rejection of theodicy through inverted liturgy also in the poem "Psalms."317 This poem emphasizes the agency of the "we" to react to evil in the world: any

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317 For complementary and alternative understandings of this poem that I do not have space to engage with in the present study, see: Baker, Robert, “The Poetics of Encounter: Paul Celan’s ‘Psalms’ and George Oppen’s ‘Psalms,’” Religion & Literature, 2016; Dutt, Carsten, “Celan’s Counter-Psalms: Religious Negativity, Paradox, and the Freedom of Poetry,” Religion & Literature, 2016; Kostal, Ernst, “Paul Celan zwischen Nihilismus und Metaphysischer Spekulation,” Literatur und Kritik, 1971; Nicholls, Peter, “Psalms: Reading Oppen with Celan and Rilke,” Religion & Literature, 2016; Weller, Shane, “From 'Gedicht' to 'Genicht': Paul Celan and Language
potential theodicy lies in the would-be collective’s reaction to the terrors of evil. Potential salvation is found within the communal "we," in the ability of the collective to respond to the terror of the world. It is an impulse towards self-salvation that relocates human agency from the individual into the collective:

Gelobt seist du, Niemand.
Dir zulieb wollen
wir blühn.
Dir entgegen.318

In “Psalm” we find a characterization of a collective prosperity through a mystical orientation towards absence. That is, the form of mystical orientation toward the divine is inverted, oriented toward No One instead of God. This poem establishes a community through the particularities of the Jewish traumas from the Shoah, without reproducing an exclusionary mythology that only includes those who have suffered the particularities of this trauma. As Celan put it, he wrote this poem for “Nicht-nur-Juden.”319

This poem goes one step further than “Tenebrae” in inverting hierarchies, replacing the figure of the sovereign creator figure with the ambiguous signifier, “Niemand.” Readers of this poem have long since debated the ambiguity of this reference, suggesting that this term signifies everything from literally "no one," to God,320 to the Homeric feint, or “the addressee that would


318 Celan, Gesammelte Werke: Band 1, 163.
recognize all the temporal adumbrations, would be mindful of all the poem’s dates.”321 It is clear, however, that no matter which hermeneutic approach one takes to parse the meaning of the mysterious "no one," that this poem as a whole (and the collection in which it appears) bears an unquestionable relation to the horrors of the Shoah. The process of inversion of the Psalmic liturgical function distances Celan’s poem from its context in the Jewish liturgy from its religious function, but nonetheless the form of the psalm, which is traditionally recited in a communal setting to gather the diverse intentions of the community into a single song of praise remains. This binding function of liturgical practice is translated to poetry and, in this poem, proposes the evolution of a traumatized community into a blossoming, organic whole. The creation of this community harbors the messianic promise: but precisely this creation is problematized from the start.

The poem commences by establishing this community’s origin in direct relation to the inversion of the biblical account of the creation of humans. The first line reflects and formally inverts God’s creation of Adam out of the dust of the ground, denying God the occasion for another attempt at creation. Here, having disqualified himself by allowing such great evil, God is replaced by Niemand as the figure of creation. The collective alone is not poised to take the place of God—not poised to "drink up the sea" as Nietzsche’s madman might put it—but by inverting the figure of divinity with the name “Niemand,” Celan produces an ambiguous relation between his Psalm and the creation of the collective:

Niemand knetet uns wieder aus Erde und Lehm, niemand bespricht unseren Staub.

It is unclear whether the action of creation—the formation of the "us" out of earth and clay—remains un-accomplished because no one has performed it, or if the action is actually performed by Niemand. Peter Horst Neumann comments on this invocation of the creation myth as follows: “In der Verneinung einer Wiedererschaffung aus Erde und Lehm erscheint im selben Augenblick auch die Negation dieser Verneinung als Gewißheit: Die Schöpfung könnte noch einmal von neuem anheben.” We find in this negation a simultaneous un-doing of creation with the institution of a new creation by the elevated Niemand, who stands in as a negative image of a divine figure. As the Anglo-Australian theologian, Kevin Hart argues, this poem “straddles the border between apophatic theology, in which God is figured as "beyond being," and atheism, according to which God does not exist.” In other words, this poem deals with a God who has succumb to Schrodinger’s paradox: God simultaneously does and does not exist, depending on one’s own perspective while reading. Still, one should not interpret this merely as a negative, or "hidden" theology, but rather as a response to the failure of faith to provide an adequate response to the horrors of the Shoah. The Niemand of this poem is thus distinctly not a God-figure but does take on the form and role of the divine within the context of a liturgical form of praise, which has the consequence of simultaneously distancing Celan’s poetics from institutional
religion and adjoining his aesthetics to an inverse religious Gestalt. Niemand is reflected in the identity of the blossoming collective:

Ein Nichts
waren wir, sind wir, werden
wir bleiben […] 326

Marlies Janz (among other commentators) suggests that this “Nichts” is representative of the divine identity at the center of this collective, created in the image of the inverse God. 327 What this means for the collective is that this communal form is modeled upon the religious structures of Jewish and Christian traditions, but is distanced from the dogmatic content through the process of inversion. What Celan seems to be proposing is an ahistorical, but post-secular mode of binding a community. The poem mournfully emphasizes a continuity of past, present, and future (“waren wir, sind wir, werden / wir bleiben”), but such a binding is neither secular nor religious. The logic of the community does not rely upon the contents of religious revelation but is modeled upon pre-existing religious thought.

Moreover, the negative identity of “Nichts,” resists positive collective identity formation that draws exclusionary boundaries. This negative identity ("Nichts") suggests a more general scope; such a conception resists a notion of collective identity that relies upon reference to a national or ethnic community, or even some ethereal, enlightenment conception of "humanity." On the one hand, the assertion of the “Nichts” as a collective seems to resist a simple lack of existence. On the other hand, however that is to say that this community was, is, and will remain

326 Celan, Gesammelte Werke: Band 1, 225.

a “Nichts” reflects a lack of common identity, while maintaining a collective formation. The religious Gestalt thereby indicates a potential political form of organization. The orientation of this community towards the nihilistic figure of No One harness a vital organizing potential that is beyond propositional representation, just as God has been conceived for millennia theologians—both Christian and Jewish—to be beyond all that can be thought. By replacing the religious content with ‘Nothing’ but maintaining the binding force of religious form, Celan’s poetry imagines the possibility of materializing a collectivity modeled from the ideal of religious communities.

The collective in this poem thus mobilizes a liturgical form in order to mediate and orient the collective "wir," but it is also not without importance that in “Psalm” we also find the organic metaphor of a flower which draws the "wir" together: the “Niemandsrose,” the namesake of the collection in which this poem first appears. This metaphor of the rose is similar to organic Christian liturgical metaphors used to explain the unity of the Christian Church throughout historical and individual division (i.e., the mystical body, the vine, the tree, etc.). However, if one takes Celan’s familiarity with Dante into account, the metaphor of the Rose as a nexus of political gathering becomes clearer: the Rose of the Paradiso, upon each pedal of which resided a member of the heavenly Kingdom, is here inverted. This Rose is not one of a mixed identity (Maria, Sarah, Rebecca, Judith, Beatrice, Bernard, and divine love), but rather of non-identity: the Niemandsrose. The process of blooming, of the community continuing to flourish, points toward a conception of a historical community that changes throughout time, but continuously grows and thrives into the future:
wir bleiben blühend:
die Nichts-, die
Niemandrose.  

The rose attributes an organic wholeness to the “wir” while also mirroring the non-extant (or extant as absence) creator figure, “Niemand,” for whose sake the collective continues to blossom (“Gelobt seist du, Niemand. / Dir zulieb wollen / wir blühn.”). The specific religious content is absent, but the form of Psalmic worship remains as a binding agent for a new mode of collectivity that is established through collective aesthetic praxis (song) and distinctly not through identity (“Ein Nichts / waren wir, sind wir, werden / wir bleiben…”). The negativity here both rejects an identity-based collective mythology (in the annihilation of the we as a “nichts”) as well as any sovereign or creative figure who is responsible for the collective. Any sort of feudal differentiation—be it religious or political—is rejected in favor of a generalized, organic mode of collectivism. The final stanza acts to explain the nature of this action within an ambiguous constellation of images that rest in the nexus between an organic floral metaphor, the imagery of the passion of Christ, and allusions to the creation of poetry itself:

Mit
dem Griffel seelenhell,
dem Staubfaden himmelswüst,
der Krone rot
vom Purpurwort, das wir sangen
über, o über
dem Dorn.  

The multiple semantic registers in this final stanza certainly make it difficult to parse, but most simply, we find here a description of a rose, particularly the male and female sexual organs of the rose (the Griffel, or pistil, the shaft extending from the center of the flower that contains the

328 Celan, Gesammelte Werke: Band 1, 225.

329 Ibid.
ovary, and Staubfaden, or filiment / stamen, the other stalk which extends from the center of the flower and contains the pollen). While the female organ is represented in a life-giving, positive manner ("seelenhell"), the stamen stands erect, but impotent, extending into the heavens as a desert ("himmelswüst"). One senses the exposure of what Robert Mitchell calls cryptogamia—the hidden generation of plants—which picks up on a romantic fascination with botany as a locus of constant transformation and uncanny sexuality. Still, generative potentialities are inverted by the infertility of the plant. Celan’s implementation of the hidden reproductive organs in the flower, however, points toward a threatened sense of future: an aftermath of trauma. Even though the collective is blossoming, the flower is also shown to be barren: the male organ incapable of producing further life. The poem thus places the potential for transformation within the ovary-shaft [Griffel]. A “Griffel,” while in this context clearly describes the female sexual organ of the flower, can also refer to a stylus or pen, the medium of poetic language.

Transformation and fertility are relocated in the linguistic nexus between the female botanical sex organ and the stylus, which is traditionally linked to a masculine authorial subject.

Celan thus positions the uncanny in the poetic as a mode of simultaneously responding to trauma and binding the collective in an organic metaphor that scrambles the codes of difference that order communities in normative ways. The crown of the rose, where the plant stems meet the roots, is depicted as red rather than green ("der Krone rot"), suggesting it has been stained with a red substance flowing along the ground—perhaps by blood. This red coloring is further clarified as "vom Purpurwort," from the crimson word. The characterization of this word as "crimson" [Purpur], extends the semantic field beyond the organic into the realm of political

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theology. The color crimson has since antiquity been used by royalty to exhibit their wealth. During the Crucifixion of Jesus, the Roman soldiers mocked his claims to be a king by dressing him in a crimson robe and placing a crown of thorns upon his head. The final stanza uses the metaphor of the rose to present an inverted hierarchy, where the signs of lowly lordship and/or messianic kingship appear at the base of the organic structure. The inversion of the Christian imagery combined with the psalmic liturgical context provides a model of hope for future collectivity: a political promise communicated through the nexus of religious and poetic imagery. Having been repeatedly sung (“vom Purpurwort, das wir sangen”), which of course in the context of the psalm also means having been prayed, this crimson-word, this kingly word, this bloodied *logos* becomes adjoined to the life-center of the rose.

What is left is an organic metaphor—the rose—which carries with it notes of a messianic promise. There is no longer a messiah, no longer an individual figure who is expected to establish a new kingdom. Instead, the hope lies within the collective bound together in the rose, whose sovereignty is established where the roots are soaked in the trauma of a bloody experience (“Mit.../ der Krone rot”). It is a future which is threatened and described as potentially infertile (“Mit ... / dem Staubfaden himmelswüst”), but nonetheless promises to flourish through an organic form that binds the disparate people together. In short, to flourish through solidarity, through a unity of communal orientation. It is precisely this capacity to flourish in the face of nihilism that harbors the messianic, this collective promises futurity in the face of unspeakable trauma. Poetry becomes the new binding force, a source of life in the midst of the threat of death.

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331 See, Markus 15:16-17: “Die Kriegsknechte aber führten ihn hinein in das Richthaus und riefen zusammen die ganze Schar und zogen ihm einen Purpur an und flochten eine dornene Krone und setzten sie ihm auf.” (Translation: *Lutherbibel*).
(“Mit / dem Griffel seelenhell”), providing sovereignty to the collective through the crimson word (“[das] Purpurwort”), the source of the bloodied laurel (“Krone rot”).

Celan’s poetry positions itself as a space of gathering multiple voices into one—the liturgical function of the Psalm, but also the Gestalt of Dante’s rose—and by doing so, establishes a mode of collective sovereignty as a response to trauma. Organic conceptions of politics, of course, have a problematic history from Romanticism to fascism, but in Niemandsrose, Celan’s poetry attempts to come to terms with this violent history. Celan presents us with a post-secular version of messianism, where the messianic future is promised in the collective response to trauma. The collective sovereignty here is not founded on an exclusionary mythology, but rather the inverted liturgical form generalizes the process of collectivization, providing a binding force not based upon identity. The amalgamation of various semantic fields (the organic, trauma, political theology, poetics, etc.) is shown as the base of a form that stands in for a collective whole, modeling a mode of organization that proceeds from the ground up, blossoming toward the desert of the heavens, occupied by No One. The authority of the bloodied logos is inverted in the organic metaphor and stands in for a collective form that responds to trauma. We find here a mode of collectivity emerging from a bloody, violent event—a form of organization that draws upon liturgical structures in order to propose the emergence of an alternative form of collective identity, where the source of sovereignty is located within the resilience of the base in the face of violence. But in the life-giving nature of the “Griffel,” poetry thus becomes a mode of potential futurity as well as a nexus of communal binding.
IV. Beyond Nationalist Politics of Positive Identity

Celan’s poetry continuously works to both incorporate and move beyond specific ethnic, linguistic, national, or religious identities. The imagery of his poetry—especially the religious allusions—gesture beyond any identity that is defined in terms of ethnic, linguistic, national, or religious confession. In doing so, he gestures towards a non-exclusive conception of group identity, resisting any notion of identity that necessarily excludes others by means of providing a particular, exclusive definition for membership. As Christoph Parry notes in Jenseits der Nation, “Von einer doppelten Randposition abseits der Nation und der Nationalliteratur aus konnte Celan seine deutsche Muttersprache in eine besonders ergiebige Synthese mit der 'Weltsprache der modernen Poesie' einbringen.”

Celan thus resists the connection of place and identity, between nation and poetry, working immanently within the German lyric tradition to expand the German poetic tradition beyond the particularly German, opting for a more global, meridian poetics: a conception of Heimat that is separated from ideas of soil, from legal political boundaries.

Celan’s poetry, understood as a poetry of exile, also becomes a mode of reconceiving origins, of understanding exile as a pilgrimage: the poem as “Eine Art Heimkehr.” In doing so, Celan’s poetry continually places conceptions of Heimat on trial, treating such a conception as more of an aenigma than an actual location. He speaks of “die Fremde in der Heimat,” and suggests that Heimat is a distant nexus of cosmic material and human creation. In Niemandsrose, Celan reconceives his conception of Heimat, distancing it from a type of

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332 Parry, Jenseits der Nation, 142.
333 Celan, Gesammelte Werke: Band 3, 201.
inherited relation to a place, and qualifying the term with familial language (“von einer Heimat
her Ver- / schwisterte,”336 or “die Länder verbrüdert.”337). Vivian Lishka and Ashraf Noor argue
that Celan’s conception of Heimat resists nationalism by proposing exile as the ethical
alternative to the nation state, in some ways mirroring the thought of Levinas:

Both Levinas and Celan succeed in configuring exile as the ethical refusal to anchor
oneself in the soil without negating the vulnerability of such a state. They conceive the
exemplary association of Jewishness and exile while maintaining both its concrete history
and its meaning as a universal predicament.338

Celan thus resists the assertion of a static place as the generator of community. Instead, his
poetry proposes a universalized, proto-democratic neo-Judaism, emphasizing foreign existence
and exile—similar to that of the Jewish diaspora—as a model of collective organization that
orients groups towards the other, rather than closing themselves off from what might be
conceived of as "foreign." Poetry itself takes this process as its goal. In his “Meridian Speech,”
Celan notes, “Das Gedicht will zu einem Andern, es braucht dieses Andere, es braucht ein
Gegenüber. Es sucht es auf, es spricht sich ihm zu. Jedes Ding, jeder Mensch ist dem Gedicht,
das auf das Andere zählt, eine Gestalt dieses Anderen.”339 As the designation of "meridian"
poetics suggests, the process of extending outward is also the process of returning; it is a journey home.

In his “Meridian Speech,” briefly discussed in the introduction to this chapter, Celan
speaks of the importance of poetry to escape exclusive understandings of identity: “[Das

336 See, “Radix, Matrix.” Ibid. 239.
337 See, “In der Luft.” Ibid. 290.
Gedicht] hält unentwegt auf jenes ‘Andere’ zu, das es sich als erreichbar, als freizusetzen, als vakant vielleicht, und dabei ihm, dem Gedicht […] zugewandt denkt.” The poem is so strongly oriented toward the other that it causes Celan to state that he can no longer use the word "foreign" while talking about poetics, “ich denke, daß es von jeher zu den Hoffnungen des Gedichts gehört, gerade auf diese Weise auch in fremder – nein, dieses Wort kann ich jetzt nicht mehr gebrauchen –, gerade auf diese Weise in eines Anderen Sache zu sprechen – wer weiß, vielleicht in eines ganz Anderen Sache.” Because he distances himself from the concept of the "foreign" in favor of speaking of the "other," if there is a conception of Heimat to be found in the poetry of Celan, this must be one that is beyond boundaries and is oriented toward a non-exclusive inclusion of the other, a space that is detached from the earth: poetic space. His poetry begins within the German tradition, and travels the globe, before returning back to an expression the German language. His poetry seeks to provide this homeland, similar to how Daniel Boyarin identifies the Talmud as a “travelling homeland” for Babylonian Jews. The result of transcending these national boundaries is a conception of Heimat that is no longer connected to national, ethnic, or even linguistic boundaries.

Here, the concept of exile is quite important to understanding Celan’s reconceptualization of Heimat. John Felstiner argues that we can identify three distinct, yet co-extant exiles in Celan’s lyric: “from Bukovina, from Jerusalem, [and] from the German language itself.” The first level of exile is very straightforward; born in Bukovina, Celan spent his early adult life

340 Celan, Gesammelte Werke: Band 3, 197.
341 Celan, Gesammelte Werke: Band 3, 196.
fleeing authoritarian regimes and eventually settled in self-chosen exile in Paris. The second exile is a bit more complicated; Felstiner contends that Celan’s exile from Jerusalem involves a combination of his youthful opposition to his father’s Zionism and a feeling separated from his own Jewishness—a feeling removed from Jewish community. The third exile, from the German language, Felstiner argues, is the result of “writing [in] the mother tongue that became the murderers' tongue.”\textsuperscript{344} The Mehrsprachigkeit within Celan’s poetry—the application of Hebrew, Yiddish, Latin, Arabic, French, and other languages within his predominantly German-language poetry—has long since been emphasized in Celan criticism. This process of rendering the mother tongue foreign to itself can thus be seen not only in the way Celan’s poetry bears witness to the terrors of genocide, but also in the way he renders German language "foreign" by constantly invoking and introducing foreign words into German syntax.\textsuperscript{345}

The conception of living in exile or as part of a diaspora—of transplanting one’s roots—can ultimately be understood as a conception of international solidarity in Celan’s poetry. This can also be understood in Celan’s understanding of a ‘meridian,’ namely a metaphorical connection between different subjects. Celan thus rethinks solidarity beyond utopian presentations that link solidarity to positive identity. Instead, the solidarity we find in this poetry is the result of a negative, emptying out (kenosis) of the particularities of identity: negative solidarity. The break with the past—the messianic caesura—provides a source of non-exclusive identity that doesn’t commit the violence of forced inclusion, nor the violence of exclusion. The separation from which comes before thus enables a new political possibility: the possibility of a negative, ungrounded identity. Such a conception takes the violence that is historically

\textsuperscript{344} Ibid. 50.

\textsuperscript{345} As Henry Pickford pointed out to me, it is also important to note the way in which Celan’s poetry also breaks German syntax, disfiguring the German language.
perpetrated against the Jews and inverts its meaning. Celan’s emphasis on the violence of imposed identity conducted during the Shoah inverts the negativity of unrootedness; the opposite of *Blut und Boden* ideology, detachment from physical place becomes a positive characteristic of a collective form. As Adorno and Horkheimer write, “Alle Großtaten der Prominenten haben die Aufnahme des Juden in die Völker Europas nicht bewirkt, man ließ ihn keine Wurzeln schlagen und schalt ihn darum wurzellos.” On the other hand, fascist ideology in Germany emphasized the collective based on a rootedness in the soil: not only was the *Volk* connected through pseudo-scientific conceptions of race, but also through a mythical rootedness to the land.

The poem “Radix Matrix” provides an insight into Celan’s concept of finding one’s roots in the unrooted state of exile. The title suggests that the poem deals with the roots (“Radix”) of a maternal lineage or family tree (“Matrix”). This title could also be translated to English as “Roots of the womb,” drawing from the tradition of matrilineality in Judaism, where Jewish identity is derived genealogically from the mother. While exploring the role that one’s roots play within identity, the conception of *Heimat* is de-rooted, removed from a positive identity defined in negative relation to an Other and thereby finds its roots in an infinite regress to No One (“Niemandes / Wurzel – o / unser”). Here, the abyss functions as the "place" of *Heimat*: “vom Abgrund her, von / einer Heimat her…” This universal identity of Celan’s inverse religious operation is thus located “zwischen Heimat und Abgrund.” Such a semantic association of *Heimat* with the abyss is not unique to “Radix Matrix” but is a common motif in Celan’s poetry, bearing also upon the origin of language; the separated prefixes and suffixes

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346 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp), 199.


348 “Stumme Herbstgerüchte,” Ln. 3. Ibid, 223.
focus upon the “unrooting” of language itself. The first stanza of “Radix Matrix” includes a series of words separated from their prefix (“Ver- / schwisterte… Zu- / geschleuderte… Be- / gegnete…”), whereby, as Christy Wampole asserts, “the trait d’union becomes a trait de separation.”

The root itself represents these successive separations, as roots grow apart from each other, but this growing apart serves the function of nourishing the plant. Thus, this trait de separation can also be understood as a mode of unity over distance—like a diasporic people who maintain a common identity although separated through time and space. The botanical metaphor for the collective reappears as the roots of the No One’s Rose [Niemandsrose] are removed from their fruitful ground (“auch dieser / Fruchtboden klaßt,”), inverted and transplanted into nothing. By exploring the organic metaphor through a blossoming root system that is uprooted from the ground, Celan also uproots the organic political metaphor from Blut und Boden ideology. Inverting the toxic use of organic political metaphors can thus be understood as a way of conceiving the collective apart from its fascist semantic history. Such an act of uprooting a plant also calls to mind the imperialist practice of transplanting exotic plants to state-run gardens, of which Robert Mitchell notes a certain form of resistance on the part of the transplanted plants: “Yet if we consider these gardens and the networks of which they were a part from the perspective of plants, they also emerge as vectors for a vegetative imperialism moving in the reverse direction, as species formerly limited to other continents suddenly had new European vistas open up.”

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resists the importance of kinship for collective identity. Like a diasporic people, the uprooted plant’s identity emphasizes a unity through difference while maintaining a separation between identity and soil or place.

Celan’s poem places an emphasis upon the historical development of roots within Jewish history, providing three categories, each one of which suspends the classification which precedes it. In this repetition of different types of roots, we can identify Celan’s poetic conception of the history of the Jewish people, the history of a diasporic identity. Found as a parenthetical stanza in the center of “Radix Matrix,” this stanza provides a historical aside to the explication of a non-exclusive re-conceiving of exile identity:

(Wurzel.
Wurzel Abrahams. Wurzel Jesse. Niemandes
Wurzel – o
unser.)

Here we are presented with three successive categories of genealogical relation through two biblical figures and the figure of No One. Abraham, as the father of faith in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faith traditions, represents one mode of relating to one’s ancestors through the category of faith. Abraham’s covenant with God includes a promise of a future nation (“I will make of you a great nation”), but grounds this promise of a future political arrangement in a faith in God’s word. Jesse, in turn, represents a different genealogical source, namely a kingly lineage that is prominently alluded to in messianic readings of the Pentateuch. Jesse is the father of David, the third king of Israel and a forefather of the Hebrew messiah in both Jewish and Christian literature on prophecy. Thus, while the roots of Abraham emphasize a genealogy of

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351 Celan, “Radix, Matrix,” Gesammelte Werke: Band 1, 239.

352 Gen 12:2
faith, the roots of Jesse allude to a genealogy of messianic order; they point toward a future, divinely instituted political kingdom. The third category of roots (“Niemandes / Wurzel – o / unser”) problematize both of these patriarchal lineages. It undermines genealogical relation as constitutive of political order, providing a sense of familial binding outside of familial identity. The relation to No One can also be understood as a critique of the Nazi’s race definitions, where persons (like Celan himself) who might not identify as Jewish themselves were classified by others under such an identity with violent consequences. Thus, in the succession of Jesse’s roots with the roots of No One, Celan pushes back against two troublesome aspects of collective identity formation: the external imposition of identity from outside and a tightly defined identity from within that excludes the other. Just as the uprooted plant resists the Boden in Blut und Boden ideology, so too does the suspension of kinship as an operative mode of identity formation resist the Blut notion of national unity. Here we find an understanding of mediation of parts through an organic whole—a proto-democratic binding—that doesn’t rely upon a common identity, but rather on the unsolid ground, the uncanny that rests between and mediates identities.

The supplanted, negative conception of roots—the roots of No One—thereby posture towards a non-exclusive conception of identity: the suspension of restricted identity groups. A second order meaning of the allusions to Abraham and Jesse refer to a Jewish origin (or root) for the Christian lineage: Abraham, the father of faith, and Jesse, the head of the kingly dynasty to which Matthew traces Jesus’ lineage. Celan’s addition of the Niemand to the successive lineages of Abraham and Jesse thus serves to suspend Christian appropriations of Jewish figures. Celan thus negates Jesse’s lineage of kingly messianism, democratizing the kingly status, just as

353 See, Matthew 1:6.
early Christians rejected hereditary restrictions of who could be included into the kingdom of God. Early Christian identity—as opposed to later Christian identities that formed in contradistinction to other faith traditions—was understood based upon a conception of exile from Christ’s kingdom. As such, Christians conceived themselves as “citizens of heaven,” and thus as foreigners in every place in which they resided. One is reminded of the ancient letter from the second century that I discussed in the context of Trakl’s poetry in the second chapter, which describes Christian existence as follows:

They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labour under all the disabilities of [resident] aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country.355

Early Christian identity thus universalized the messianic promise: anyone who believed could be included in the promise of a peaceful kingdom yet-to-come. As history continued and Christianity became the legal religion of the Roman Empire, the Christian identity developed above and against the conception of the foreigner: to be Christian was to not be a Barbarian, to not be Jewish, to not be a Moor, etc. The development of Christian identity in negative relation to the ‘other’ contributed to the development of legal conventions which refused legal status to Jews (e.g., the right to own property). This prevalence of anti-Judaism, in turn, informed the creation of a racialized antisemitism in the modern era, the results of which include the Shoah. In the wake of the Holocaust, Celan re-preforms the universalizing function of Christianity against exclusionary Christian politics; however, rather than doing so with claims of universal truth, he does so through processes of negativity. Jesse’s lineage is superseded with those of No One, the


355 Ad Diognetum 5,5 and 10; 6,10. (Cited from: Catechism of the Catholic Church, 599.)
inverse godly figure that resurfaces throughout Niemandsrose. The result is a relation of non-relation (a relation to No One) that serves as the source of an identity that promises a mode of collectivity that supersedes time and place. Here, we find a conception of Heimat that escapes the pitfalls of identity discussed before through its universal potential for application.

The basis of this collective is, however, not completely disjointed from Jewish tradition. The annihilation of two Jewish patriarchs within a poem that invokes the maternal family tree in its title, “Radix Matrix,” is also not without importance. Celan thus draws attention to the tension between a tradition and legal system that emphasizes belonging through maternal lineage while also emphasizing a patriarchal origin. Moreover, the addressee of the poem can also be understood as a mother-figure. A cursory glance at the introductory stanza casts light on the relation between the poet and the mysterious “du” to whom the poem speaks:

Wie man zum Stein spricht, wie
du,
mir vom Abgrund her, von
einer Heimat her Verschwisterte, Zu-
geschleuderte, du,
du mir vorzeiten,
du mir im Nichts einer Nacht,
du in der Aber-Nacht Be-
gegnete, du
Aber-Du –:357

The “du” exists in an intimate relation to the poet, but this intimacy is placed into the distant past (“du mir vorzeiten”), which along with the title suggests a figure within the familial relation to the poet (“Verschwisterte”). The reference to the you as “Begegnete,” moreover, suggests a

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356 See, the references to “Niemand” in Celan’s “Psalm.”

357 Celan, “Radix, Matrix,” Gesammelte Werke: Band 1, 239.
relation to a female family member. The familial address also thus distances itself from conceptions of the patriarchal lineages that are suspended later in the poem, as well as from conceptions of the nation state that emphasize citizens as brothers (*fraternité*). This emphasis on the past relation to a female family member also contains a certain elegiac tone that mimics the inverted messianic temporality that was previously identified in “Es ist nicht mehr.” With a short glance at Celan’s personal life—Celan's mother was murdered by the SS during the Shoah—this potentially redemptive relation to the matriarchy stands in an annihilated state, but the inverted structures still instill the reader with a stilted hope, an inverted messianic promise:

Ja,
wie man zum Stein spricht, wie
du
mit meinen Händen dorthin
und ins Nichts greifst […]358

In this passage, one can detect a certain ambiguity of messianic potential. On the one hand, the address is oriented towards something inanimate (“wie man zum Stein spricht,”) and does not expect an answer.359 On the other hand, this motherly “du” is represented with the power to act through the poet (“wie / du / mit meinen Händen dorthin / und ins Nichts greifst…”). This anonymous, motherly “du” acts through the poet and gives him a new orientation, towards nothing (“ins Nichts”), toward a salvific notion of identity through no-one, a non-patriarchal community gathering through non-relation. Here we witness one of “those rare moments in which the gift of the word arrives, this abyssal site, the site of our apartness, opens, in the same


359 After the SS arrested Celan’s parents, they were first brought to a quarry (in German, *Steinbruch*). “Wie man zum Stein spricht,” could be understood as a personal reference to this *Steinbruch*, or more generally, to a crime scene, a trace of a horrific event. Thank you to Henry Pickford for pointing this out to me.
arrival, the prospect of a sort of communion and the memory of our mortality."³⁶⁰ This prospect remains problematized, unpromised, but possible.

In this poem, we thus find a possibility for the emergence of an ethereal, messianic communal structure, while also problematizing the possibility of any persistence of community at all in the wake of historical trauma. In the middle of the poem, we find this complication distilled in the following stanza, which both immediately references genocide as well as questions the possibility of the continuity of a lineage in its aftermath:

Wer,
wer wars, jenes
Geschlecht, jenes gemordete, jenes
schwarz in den Himmel stehende;
Rute und Hode –?³⁶¹

Here, too, we find the masculine element questioned and undermined: without a future. With the question, “Who were they?” the poem seems to struggle to identify the identities of those who were annihilated by genocide, but with this struggle to witness to their identities, the masculine components of sexual regeneration (“Rute und Hode”) are problematized. Werner Hamacher argues that this turn of phrase is radically inverted of its masculine semblance, writing:

Rute und Hode isolieren den sexuellen Aspekt des Geschlechts, aber nicht, wie es den Anschein haben könnte, seinen phallischen. Denn Rute ist das Wort für die »radix «, die im Lateinischen nicht nur für die vegetabilische Wurzel, für Ursprung, Quelle und festen Grund und Boden, sondern als »radix virilis« auch für das männliche Glied steht; »Hode« aber leitet sich her vom lateinischen »cunnus«, der weiblichen Scham, und entspricht insofern der »matrix«, die ebenso wie »radix« Quelle, Ursprung und Stamm bedeutet,


aber in ihrem weiblichen Aspekt als Stammmutter, Mutterstamm, Gebärmutter und Mutterleib.362

By associating the abyss (the uprootedness) with femininity earlier in the poem, we can only locate any futurity in this poem by calling the masculine into question. The matriarchal lineage is that which is unrooted, un-identified, un-named, but is ultimately this lack of ground for identity that makes it an ideal model.

The poem’s attempt to recover identity from the annihilated people results in the positing of an abyssal identity in the invocation of No One, who stands in for those whose particular identities have been stripped by violence (“jenes / Geschlecht, jenes gemordete, jenes / schwarz in den Himmel stehende”). Jacques Derrida argues here that, “the evocation of the exterminated race designates the race and root of no one: black erection in the sky, verge and testicle, race, and root of no one. Uprooting of the race, but equally so of the sex (‘Geschlecht’) in ‘Radix, Matrix.’”363 Here too we find a twofold meaning. On the first order of meaning, we find a reference to the terrors of the holocaust, a re-claiming of an annihilated identity for the victims. A second order level of meaning, however, provides an imagination of a collective response to trauma. In a 1959 letter to Rolf Schroers, Celan writes, “Wo ist Deutschland? Ausserhalb seiner Grenzen, in der Luft. Bei den Juden, die es gemordet hat.”364 As a result of the annihilation of the Jewish people, Germany has also lost its claim to be a nation, lost a claim to posit its own sovereign identity through political borders. The future of the de-rooted community stands in question, but a messianic hope can nonetheless be derived from the form of the poem. The form

362 Hamacher, Werner, "Die Sekunde der Inversion," 349.
of succession gives way to a new conception of a blossoming collective, freed from roots in soil and released into the air, freed from a conception of Heimat as relating to time or space. This re-conception is tied to the traumatic event of the Shoah.

In this poem, we find an action of (un-)grounding, of (un-)setting roots into an abyss, an action which reconceives a collective beyond a community with ties to a place. Here, the form of inversion applies also to grounding as the poem describes the ground turning into an abyss:

auch dieser
Fruchtboden klafft,
dieses
Hinab
ist die eine der wild-
Blühenden Kronen.\textsuperscript{365}

The opening of the fertile ground reveals a wild-blossoming crown, presumably the same crown of the rose referenced in “Psalm.” This divergence point proceeds both towards the heavens and into the gaping ground. In “Psalm,” we found a description of the No One’s Rose that represents a collective identity and here too the roots are described also as belonging to a collective (“Niemandes / Wurzel – o / unser.”), but the orientation towards No One is also performed in the uprooting of the rose. The conception of a Heimat as a source of identity is preserved, but is simultaneously degenerated, uprooted from any nationalist, ethnic, or religious ground. This models the Heimat as a future, promised land and breaks beyond a politics of identity by invoking an infinitely negative identity of relating to those cast out of history.

What we thus find in “Radix Matrix” is a constellation of religious imagery that becomes inverted: uprooted from its tradition and universalized in a messianic hope for a future beyond the traumas of history. The blossoming-yet-uprooted rose plant becomes a model of collective

organization; the organic whole draws the members into a single body, but this organism is removed from a single place, but extending infinitely outwards with growing roots that travel into the abyss. As Hamacher states, “Radix, Matrix beschreibt die Figur eines unmöglichen Dialogs.” We find an invitation in this poem to partake in a shared fracturing modeled from the form of a root, which grow apart from each other but nourish the plant, nonetheless. As roots grow apart, their ability to supply nourishment to the plant increases. In the metaphor of a collective, the plant thus represents a proliferation of diversity, the mediation of intensified difference through negative identity. The poem thus gestures toward (ever so slightly) a hope for the possibility of the impossible, the coming together of a people in non-relation to each other: detachment as mediation, as raw egalitarian relation.

V. Poetic Collective as a Poetic Response to Trauma: Concluding Thoughts

The model of a messianic politics following from poetic inversion of religious imagery permeates Celan’s early and middle phase lyric, reaching its peak within the Niemandsrose collection. Beginning with Atemwende (1967), Celan’s poetry retreats from presenting a collective in a distinctive manner. We thus find an abandoned development in Celan’s early to middle phases, a moment when he considers the possibility for poetry to shape a collective. In

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367 In Atemwende, for example, there are only two poems that employ the collective pronoun “wir.” Moreover, these instantiations of a “we” are marked by an I-thou relation that becomes the primary mode of interpersonal relations in his later poetry. In this later poetry, the focus of Celan’s poetry becomes increasingly focused on the individual, on the creation of an “I” through poetic language. In a poem titled “Ich höre zu viel von Euch…,” which was unpublished during his lifetime, but written two years before his death in 1968, he seems to emphasize the individual above a collective “Euch.” In this poem, Celan isolates the I from any sense of collectivity, concluding, “Ich lebe, stark.”
this final section, I will look at multiple poems to finish the sketch of this restricted expression of collectivity in Celan’s poetic oeuvre, a twinkling that models proto-democratic dispositions by mediating—and sometimes even creating—collectives through poetic language. Here, I will examine poems where the collective erupts through the course of the poem; that is, where the poem does not begin with the assertion of a “we,” but where the “we” is created through the movements of the poem itself. In doing so, I hope to highlight an important moment in Celan’s early, but especially middle period, where his engagement with religious concepts produces a latent political valence. In response to historical trauma, Celan’s poetic output models a mode of proto-democratic mediation that rescues the individual from the drive to isolation following traumatic experience.

Thus understood, trauma becomes a catalyst for the creation of poetic collectivity. The reaction to trauma we find in Celan’s poetry acts simultaneously as a mode of isolation and a force towards collective response. In a poem such as “… Rauscht der Brunnen,” we find the force of isolation feeding into a communal reaction. The isolation here is found within a silence that is characterized by a prayerful, blasphemous, and violent disposition of silence:

Ihr gebet-, ihr lästerungs-, ihr gebetscharfen Messer meines Schweigens.³⁶⁸

The relationship between poetic silence and prayer binds the poet to the plural you, who enter into belonging with the poet through the invocation of the poet’s words:

Ihr meine mit mir verkrüppelnden Worte, ihr

³⁶⁸ Celan, “… Rauscht der Brunnen,” Gesammelte Werke: Band 1, 237.
meine geraden.\textsuperscript{369}

Here, the impersonal but plural you gives way to a personal address; the poet confronts a “du,” acknowledging the particularity of the individual:

\begin{quote}
Und du:
du, du, du
mein täglich wahr- und wahrer-
geschundenes Später
der Rosen -.\textsuperscript{370}
\end{quote}

Through this confrontation with a “du,” the disposition of silence from the first strophe finds its expression in a collective but disrupted “Wir - -,” constituting the roots of communal existence in action. The final stanza connects this collective response—quite naïve in nature—to the pre-extant trauma:

\begin{quote}
Wir werden das Kinderlied singen, das,
hörst du, das
mit den Men, mit den Schen, mit den Menschen, ja das
mit dem Gestrüpp und mit
dem Augenpaar, das dort bereitlag als
Träne-und-
Träne.\textsuperscript{371}
\end{quote}

The collective recitation of naïve poetry, a nursery rhyme (“das Kinderlied”), becomes a poetic expression of solidarity that weaves a disconnected humanity back together (“mit den Men, mit den Schen, mit den Menschen”). The poem seeks solidarity with the “Men” as well as with the “Schen,” the two syllables that can be brought together into the word for humans (“Menschen”). The poetic act of grafting is summarized in the organic metaphor (as seen already above) of an undergrowth, a system of plants that become indistinguishable from each other as their branches

\textsuperscript{369} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{370} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{371} Ibid.
grow between each other. In the final “mit” clause, the traumatized eyes are included into the poetically constituted collective (“dem Augenpaar, das dort bereitlag als / Träne-und- / Träne.”). It is important that the collective is seen as a response to the traumatic experience of the individual, but also that this response does not cancel the trauma, nor does it wipe away the tears. Not only does Celan’s poem constitute a community, binding the “ihr” to the poet through the “ich-du” relation, but also the exclusivity of the poet’s own pain is abandoned. Solidarity does not mean erasing individual experience, but it does involve a conscious binding of oneself to others. Such an understanding of solidarity is invoked by the poet, drawing in the collective through an individual acknowledgement of each person and inviting them to share in his own grief.

Proto-democratic politics can be identified in the mode of mediation in which the individual is joined to the collective in Celan’s poetry and trauma plays an important role here. In a poem such as “Verbracht,” the “ich” is first presented as opposed to a collective “sie,” which is characterized by a lack of sight (“sie sahn nicht”) that eventually leads them to a state of sleep (“Schlaf / kam über sie”). After this first-person speaker turns toward the collective in an informal address (as “ihr”), the trauma of the holocaust is invoked:

Asche.
Asche, Asche.
Nacht.
Nacht-und-Nacht. – Zum
Aug geh, zum feuchten.372

In the next stanza, this traumatic experience produces a collective pronoun, binding the “ich” to the “sie / ihr” through the trauma of ashes, a “wir” pronoun emerges through engagement with

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the poetic word, in the act of reading (“wir / lasens im Buche”). This collective is, however, not peaceful, but instead it is compared the violent, destructive energy of a hurricane:

Orkane.
Orkane, von je,
Partikelgestöber, das andre\textsuperscript{373}

As a hurricane can be described as a particle flurry, the collection of different air particles into a common motion, so too is a collective bound up of individuals and brought into a common orientation. This act of binding is connected to language as well; a particle is also a unit of speech that expresses a connective or limiting relation between words.\textsuperscript{374} The opposition of the I to the you is drawn together, but the negative energy is not yet dispersed. This collective orientation of disparate parts (“Partikelgestöber”), however, draws together the collective with the other (“das andre”). Here, purged of their historical religious origin, liturgical elements emerge as the poem concludes with an act of singing and remembrance:

Chöre, damals, die
Psalmen. Ho, ho-
sianna.

[...]

Ho-
sianna.\textsuperscript{375}

As shown above in the context of “Tenebrae” and “Psalm,” poetry and song become the force behind collectivization, the forces that give the individual particles motion. Artistic productivity

\textsuperscript{373} Ibid, 200.

\textsuperscript{374} One should also note the blasphemous connotation of the word, “Partikelgestöber.” “Ein Partikel,” is also a small eucharistic host that Catholics consume during the sacred liturgy, believed to have become the body of Jesus Christ. This image thus also conjures up a flurry of hosts being distributed by a storm; a violent account of manna being distributed from the sky.

\textsuperscript{375} Ibid, 203-4.
harbors the power to enlist the strengths of religious forms and to orient these forms toward a political collectivization: a force for solidarity between disparate individuals. Trauma becomes a catalyst for this process: a mode of awaking the collective that has traditionally opposed themselves to the Other.

Celan’s invocation of liturgical form—of singing the psalms—invokes a sense of coming together in commemoration; however, the inverse nature of this liturgy (it’s mixing of Christian and Jewish elements) leaves this collective disposition void of the teleological orientation conceived in religious liturgical practice. In lieu of theodicy, an ideology that presupposes catastrophe as the route to salvation, we find a collective orientation towards a collectivist Messianism that takes responsibility for its own future. In this sense, we find a messianism that shares similarities with that of Walter Benjamin when he writes, “Darum ist das Reich Gottes nicht das Telos der historischen Dynamis; es kann nicht zum Ziel gesetzt werden.”376 As Anna Glanzova (among others) has argued, Celan was a close and avid reader of Benjamin, sharing a sympathy with much of Benjamin’s heterodox reconceptualization of Jewish traditions.377 It is thus not surprising that Celan’s poetic messianism takes on a similar character; however there are also striking differences in their semantic representations of the messianic future. Benjamin speaks of the “Kategorie des Reichs,” suggesting a much more standard and material political entity that would erupt within messianic Time. Celan, in turn, shifts his language of the


messianic collective towards organic metaphors that have been inverted from their semantic pre-history in fascist politics by rejecting the category of the nation or nation state.  

Celan’s conception of a collective represents a less legalistic and more communal understanding of the collective, drawing upon mystical understandings of mediating eschatological groups (as in Trakl). In *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle*, for example, the poem “Nächtlich geschürzt” describes a liturgical orientation through the (messianic) word, which becomes “eine Leiche.” The conclusion of the poem draws the collective towards this corpse:

Laß uns sie [die Leiche] waschen,
laß uns sie kämmen,
laß uns ihr Aug
himmelwärts wenden.  

Inverting the act of genocide that burned the bodies of its victims, releasing ash into the sky, this collective action respects the corpse, laying it to rest. The community constituted by Celan’s poetry is often times envisioning a future opposed to the horrors of the Shoah, but this future speculation does not produce images of utopia. As discussed above, in *Niemandsrose*, the development of a collective poetic practice culminates in the image of the No One’s rose, which is then joined to the collective itself. Here too, however, one might find a precursor in Benjamin’s messianism when he states, “Denn messianisch ist die Natura us ihrer ewigen und totalen Vergängnis.” The organic metaphor of the collective—and of the rose in particular—

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378 As shown above, this includes the No One’s Rose, but is certainly not limited to this one collection. Already in *Mohn und Gedächtnis*, in a poem titled “Der Tauben weißeste flog auf,” Celan speaks of “the great flower” as a gathering point of the post-traumatic collective: “Wo sie [die große Blume] nie war da wird sie immer bleiben. / Wir waren nie, so bleiben wir bei ihr.” (Celan, *Gesammelte Werke: Band 1*, 61.)


draws Celan’s vision of a collective into a vision of the natural process: blooming does not promise eternity. Still, in the midst of the transience of nature and the terrors of the modern world, Celan maintains a hope in the midst of uncertainty, quoting Benjamin in his poem “Port Bau-Deutsch,” as he concludes the poem with the words, “Kein Zu-spät, / ein geheimnis / Offen.” The vision of community is tied into the potentiality of futurity: a potentiality which remains mysterious, but which does not preclude its own actualization.

This minimal messianic hope—that there is no "too late"—can be detected throughout Celan’s poetry, even after his semantics turn away from collectivity. Celan locates this messianic potential within the temporal break of traumatic experience and (in a manner similar to Benjamin) proposes a nihilistic praxis of breaking down identities, borders, and political structures that perpetrate such trauma. However, Celan’s vision of messianism differs from Benjamin in critical ways as well: it does not rely upon a hidden messianic order or theorize a potential theodicy. Ultimately, Celan’s poetry attempts to orient its reader towards the radical open, towards the complete other, but he conceives of this meridian poetics as “[e]ine Art Heimkehr.” The messianism in Celan seeks to witness to the terrors of historical trauma by evoking inverted religious language and in doing so, rejects theodicy that would justify terror while simultaneously treating trauma as a potential catalyst for non-exclusive proto-democratic organization.

381 Celan, “Port Bau-Deutsch?,” Die Gedichte, 519.
382 See Benjamin’s Über den Begriff der Geschichte.
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: REFLECTIONS ON RELIGION AND POLITICS IN LYRIC

...wie eine Kraft durch ihren Weg eine andere auf entgegengesetzt gerichtetem Wege zu befördern vermag, so auch die profane Ordnung des Profanen das Kommen des messianischen Reiches.
~Walter Benjamin

Religion, understood as a praxis of relation, conceals a political vision within its rituals, its prayers, its mysticism, its self-understanding. This political vision cannot be translated into a programmatic politics without the betrayal of Abrahamic religion’s most potent potential to actualize the promise of a messiah in history. Walter Benjamin’s *Theologisch-politisches Fragment* speculates upon the relation of theological thought—separated from systematic and dogmatic thinking—and a coming political order, upon the potentiality for the actualization of the promises of messianic thought. This fragment teaches us that, “die Ordnung des Profanen [kann] nicht am Gedanken des Gottesreiches aufgebaut werden, darum hat die Theokratie keinen politischen sondern allein einen religiösen Sinn.”384 Benjamin’s critical separation between religion’s promise and the potential of politics to enact the same (the result of his critical reading of Block’s *Geist der Utopie*), participates in a project of secularism that separates political and religious interests. The central political insight of this dissertation can in many ways be understood as a slight adjustment of Benjamin’s thesis: to explicate the contribution of religious

thought to a form of political thinking that refuses to cross over into the realm of theocracy. Benjamin, Adorno, along with many contemporaneous philosophical thinkers (most polemically, Heidegger) attempted to exploit the unravelling of systematic thinking from theology accomplished by the German tradition of liberal theologians (from Schleiermacher onwards, culminating in the dialectic theology of Tillich). Likewise, the poets within the same Zeitgeist enlist the richness of images, forms, and semantics from religious traditions to express their hopes and visions for the future of human relations.

Such an insight into the religious nature of the political imagination does not entirely refute theories about secularization in modernity, but rather only their naïve instantiations. The constant processes of translation, of inversion, and the resistance to dogmatic assertions at every moment reflect the insights that the secularization thesis seeks to further. However, the diminution and privatization of the religious is complicated by the constant persistence of religious imagery in the literature (and especially poetry) of the twentieth century.

In this dissertation I have shown that the realm of the religious, understood in its modern manifestation as more of a principle of subject formation and less an institutional power (c.f., Braungart 2016), contributes to the political imagination in quite pungent ways. Lasker-Schüler’s erotic communalism, Trakl’s apocalypticism, Rilke’s angelic order, and Celan’s inverse liturgy capture four unique moments within German modernism where religious content translated into lyrical form takes on a political valence. The present study has highlighted not only the ways in which lyric—as a genre—can be understood as a locus of constituting communities, but also serves as a paradigmatic exploration of the post-secular in German modernism.

Rather than thinking in terms of the opposition of secular and religious categories, the post-secular examines modes of relating the religious to the profane and vice-versa. This
destabilizes the role of dogmatic thinking within religious discourse, but also undermines the claim that, with modernity, religion has begun to be relocated into the private sphere. In the course of the four paradigmatic studies in this dissertation, we have encountered various generic and historical constellations that correlate religious thought with political experiments: mysticism, messianism, eroticism, liturgical forms, and processes of inversion to name a few examples. Each of these constellations enables diverse community-forming operations that seek to reshape public and political bodies.

a) Mysticism

In all four chapters, we have seen mysticism play a key role in modernist poetry, however Lasker-Schüler, Trakl, Rilke, and Celan engage with diverse mystical tropes and mobilize mystical elements of their poetry within a wide arrange of political concepts. Celan’s engagement with mysticism translates the mystical orientation of the individual towards God into a collective orientation, constituting a community in the process. Likewise, the concept of cultural kenosis in Trakl takes on a communal significance; however, in the case of Trakl, the poetry in question is less involved in the task of constituting a community and is more involved in preparing individuals for communal association (free association as proto-politics). Lasker-Schüler’s mysticism (seen most potently in “Weltflucht”) similarly takes on a proto-political tone, representing a retreat into interiority that aesthetically prepares the subject to sustain itself in relation to a threatening community. Rilke’s mystical tropes differ from the other authors by inverting medieval mystical motifs, and in so doing, drawing attention to a submerged economic alienation. Ultimately, drawing on ancient and diverse traditions, motifs of mysticism provide
our authors with semantic richness to express hope for human relations that do not align with the status-quo.

b) Messianism

Messianic imagery also plays a significant role in German modernist poetry, taking on a unique tonality with regards to each of the authors examined in this dissertation. Lasker-Schüler’s poetry banalizes Christian messianic language to imbue erotic desire with a transformative power to redeem catastrophe. Likewise, Trakl presents us with a contracted, material messianism, a poetic sign that illuminates the potential for a distant redemption in the face of decline. The present study did not discuss the concept of messianism in detail in the context of Rilke’s poetry; however, our structural comparison of Rilke’s angelic vision with the inverse theology of Theodor Adorno imbues the angelic figure with a certain (inverted) messianic character: to disclose a messianic light in the infernal nature of earthly life. Here, we can draw a certain parallel to Celan’s inverted messianism, which presents us with a messianic temporality in the face of world-historical trauma, relocating the potentiality of a messianic future away from the Godhead and into communal action. Messianism is, in many ways, the most evident religious form that contributes to the political imagination. The vast differences between the content of their versions of messianic thinking and their specific historical conditions of emergence should give us pause before drawing too many similarities between the assorted political visions of our poets. However, the way in which religious thinking informs and guides their conceptions of human relations—the proto-political form that arises from their poetry—can be detected most powerfully in its messianic currents.
c) *Love and Eroticism*

The poetry in this dissertation undertakes recurring meditations on love and eroticism, supplementing a drive-based model of love with an erotic/loving disposition that is about relating to the other. In the lyric we’ve examined, motifs of love and eroticism have emphasized a shared ethos and the shift towards understanding the collectively generative potential that desire plays in human relationality. In the poetry from Rilke that we have examined in this study, we do not find a strictly erotic (in the sexual sense) presentation of images; however, the concept of love and desire maintain a notable role in the minimalist ethics we find in his thing poems: an exercise in the love of things. Lasker-Schüler’s poetry transforms personalist erotic desire into a collective disposition, gesturing towards the potential of collective gathering modelled upon the intimate and vulnerable relation of an erotic pair. Vulnerability, here understood, is a form of freedom, an intended form of relationality. Trakl relatedly mobilizes erotic language as a force to break down binaries (e.g., “Ein Geschlecht”), but ultimately presents a more conservative and monogamous understanding of erotic drives, framing them as a potential danger to establishing a collective. In Celan, eroticism is also problematized; for example, the issue of fertility is introduced to call collective futurity into question. Still, erotic drives (even in the case of plants) play a significant role in orienting the subject in Celan’s middle phase of collectivity. Love’s moral component within modernist poetry is therefore quite limited, and instead takes on a role of shaping the relation of subjects to others (things or humans). It is a key insight of this study that eroticism, in turn, can also serve as a model for communal organization, a model of overcoming individual drives in favor of intimacy and vulnerability (rather than exclusive monogamy) as the significant orienteers of desire.
Another motif in this study has been the formal invocation of liturgy. In both Trakl and Celan, allusions to liturgical form communicate collective potentiality. Trakl’s vision of an eschatological community emerging from the apocalyptic downfall of western culture employs *epiclesis*, a prayer of invocation that brings together the disparate members of the collective in unity: “ein Geschlecht.” Celan’s engagement with liturgical form constitutes a community in the poetic act, orienting the individual reader to relate to a collective “we.” This inverse liturgical element in his poetry is less oriented toward a moment of unity, as in Trakl, and is more employed as a method of mediation of disparate groups. Rilke’s liturgical allusions, however, function quite differently, although Rilke and Celan use remarkably similar intertexts in their liturgical poetry (i.e., the liturgy of the hours). In the case of Rilke, liturgy is invoked as a mode of cultivating an authority that does not belong to himself, nor to any individual person. Although he eventually abandons liturgical imagery in his later poetry, the *Stundenbuch* operates as a post-secular translation of liturgy as an orientation of the participant (or reader). Liturgy not only unites, guides, and forms subjects, but also plays a significant role in religious practice that we rarely find invoked in the poetry we have examined: worship. The persistence of liturgical form—in its different modernist manifestations—combined with its displacement from conceptions of worship points toward the post-secular component of lyric with which this study has concerned itself: a mode of relating that does not exclude the secular nor the religious subject, but instead looks to religious thinking and traditions as a wealth of rhetorical strategies for preparing and constituting communities.
Although inversion has been a staple of poetic form since at least the introduction of the sonnet, in a religious context, formal inversion has played a significant role in the analysis of the present study. We find inversion’s importance not only in poetic form, but also in the formal structure of ideas that this dissertation has explored. Here, we are to understand inversion as a dialectical relationship of the new image to that which it references; similar to how a photographic negative contains the form of the positive image, but the content appears different (c.f., Adorno’s understanding of inversion from the Rilke chapter). In a manner similar to how the final couplet in a sonnet often reverses the poetic trajectory that has been set up by the preceding metaphors, Trakl’s inversion is part of a poetic process, a reversal of negativity through the practice of kenosis. Lasker-Schüler inverts mystical dispositions (e.g., a retreat into the self, a preparation for the divine) into erotic preparations for communal being. Rilke’s portrayal of angelic vision is less a functional inversion, and more an abstract, formal inversion: a thought experiment in inverting our assumptions and attempting to develop new perspectives. Celan inverts the relation between creature and creator, employing an inverted liturgical form to bind a community together. This immanent, formal inversion provides a critical glance on the present state of the world (like Rilke), but also constitutes the form of an alternative collective, a “we” without a common identity. In many ways, inversion highlights the key form of how post-secular thinking operates. Inversion maintains the rough contour of religious form, but does not secularize it, does not relegate it to the realm of the private. Instead, inverted religious form opens itself to the entire public, not discriminating based upon confession, but drawing people together in collective, poetic praxis.
The influence of religion in modernist poetic and political experiments ultimately represents a much larger phenomenon than I am able to examine in this dissertation. As briefly mentioned in the introduction, a more comprehensive study would include works of other poets, such as Stefan George, Georg Heym, Emmy Hennings, Berthold Brecht, Ruth Schaumann, Nelly Sachs, Ingeborg Bachmann, and others. It remains the task of a future study to examine the work of other modernist poets and to lay bare the overwhelming conjunctions between sustained poetic engagement with religious discourses within German modernism and the emancipatory politics latent in the poetry from this period. As seen in the constant interpolation of philosophical and literary-critical discourses, such a study need not limit itself to poetic texts, but could also include authors such as Walter Benjamin, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Tillich, Romano Guardini, and Theodor Adorno, showing the overwhelming post-secular Zeitgeist within German modernist thinking.

Principles of association, forms of organization, and subjective dispositions translated to a vision of society conceal within themselves promises of a right order of human relations which cannot be governed through positive law. The works of Lasker-Schüler, Trakl, Rilke, and Celan—as well as countless others of their contemporaries—translate the religious into the realm of the profane in ways that promise different potentials for human relationality. Lyric poetry’s capacity to model human subjectivity proves to be a vital resource for political imagination. What we find in religious poetry within the modernist movement(s), is a particularly potent expression of this imagination: movements toward gender parity, associations with the outcast, more unmediated forms of democracy, and resistance to totalitarianism.
The post-secular implementation of religious imagery in modernist poetry also serves as a thought experiment to reflect upon the latent possibility of religion to contribute to the goals of secular, democratic societies. In an age of political polarization, turmoil following the COVID-19 pandemic, and the threat of global annihilation in the face of climate change, we currently feel the urgent need for strategies to mediate subjects with vastly different metaphysical convictions. Serving as a model of using religion as a force for mediation (rather than polarization), our poets immanently mobilize religious imagery in a manner that does not rely upon the metaphysics revealed in sacred texts, but that also does not entirely remove the role that devotion could play in understanding such imagery. Religious institutions long served western humanity in the cultural need for mediation, providing not just aesthetic spaces of gathering, but also central connectivity and purpose. Charles Taylor remarks on the secular age, describing it as the emergence of the loss of transcendence, the loss of a cosmos, the loss of a world “in which spiritual forces impinged on porous agents, in which the social was grounded in the sacred and secular time in higher times, a society moreover in which the play of structure and anti-structure was held in equilibrium.”385 This sense of a cosmos was, however, also bound to a particular tradition, to a particular hierarchy, to a particular power structure. Our poets—not returning to religious morality as Taylor suggests—do engage in a renewed interest in religion as an expression of binding profound interiority to communal life. Their poetry acts as a mode of revealing religious traditions as rich sources of knowledge and collective practices. Jürgen Habermas remarks that “[die] Auseinandersetzung [einer selbstkritischen und lernbereiten Vernunft mit der Gegenwart religiöser Überzeugungen] kann das Bewußtsein der postsäkularen

Gesellschaft für das Unabgegoltene in den religiösen Menschheitsüberlieferungen schärfen.”

In many ways, we find such an interplay in modernist poetry. Religious force is freed from its tether to historical power structures, released into imagining the possibilities of human relationality. In short, this poetry reveals the proto-political force of religious traditions and practices which stand in contradiction to the robust and rigid power hierarchies of theocratic societies.

Today, poetry is once again on the rise. An article from USA today wrote in 2021 that “Poetry is having a moment.” Poets such as Rupi Kaur have joined the best-seller lists along with "tell-all" confessions from politicos, seeking to make a quick profit at the expense of exposing politicians secrets. But much like the poetry examined in this dissertation, the political valence of her lyric lies latent beneath the surface. We would not think of Kaur as a political poet, and yet her vulnerable verse imagines a proto-political disposition of acceptance, tolerance, and understanding for the other. Her poetry explores the unknown traumas of a normally presenting subject in a self-proclaimed therapeutic manner. Personal, intimate, and exposed, her lyric achieves a universal significance in the imaginative, revolutionary space for which it prepares its reader. Just as I have shown that twentieth century poetry can serve as a model of political organization that incorporates devoutly religious as well as secularized, modern subjects

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386 Habermas, Ein Bewußtsein von dem, was fehlt, 29.


into expansive conceptions of communal order, it would be wise to also examine our
contemporary poets for their insights and proto-political utopias.
ERKENNTNIS

Schwere steigt aus allen Erden auf
Und wir ersticken im Bleidunst,
Jedoch die Sehnsucht reckt sich
Und speit wie eine Feuersbrunst.
Es tönt aus allen wilden Flüssen
Das Urgeschrei, Evas Lied.
Wir reißen uns die Hüllen ab,
Vom Schall der Vorwelt hingerissen,
Ich nackt! Du nackt!

Wilder, Eva, bekenne schweifender,
Deine Sehnsucht war die Schlange,
Ihre Stimme wand sich über deine Lippe,
Und biß in den Saum deiner Wange.

Wilder, Eva, bekenne reißender,
Den Tag, den du Gott abrangst,
Da du zu früh das Licht sahst
Und in den blinden Kelch der Scham sankst.

Riesengroß
Steigt aus deinem Schoß
Zuerst wie Erfüllung zagend,
Dann sich ungestümw raffend,
Sich selbst schaffend
Gott-Seele.....

Und sie wächst
Über die Welt hinaus,
Ihren Anfang verlierend,
Über alle Zeit hinaus,
Und zurück um dein Tausendherz
Ende überragend...

Singe, Eva, dein banges Lied einsam,
Einsamer, tropfenschwer wie dein Herz schlägt,
Löse die düstere Tränenschnur,
Die sich um den Nacken der Welt legt.

Wie das Mondlicht wandele dein Antlitz...
Du bist schön...
Singe, singe, horch, den Rauscheton,
Spielt die Nacht auf deinem Goldhaar schon:

"Ich trank atmende Süße
Vom schillernden Aste
Aus holden Dunkeldolden.
Ich fürchte mich nun
Vor meinem wachenden Blick -
Verstecke mich, Du -
Denn meine wilde Pein
Wird Scham,
Verstecke mich, Du,
Tief in das Auge der Nacht,
Daß mein Tag Nachtdunkel trage.
Dieses taube Getöse, das mich umwirrt!
Meine Angst rollt die Erdstufen herauf,
Düsterher, zu mir zurück, nachthin,
Kaum rastet eine Spanne zwischen uns.
Brich mir das glühende Eden von der Schulter!
Mit seinen kühlen Armen spielten wir,
Durch seine hellen Wolkenreife sprangen unsere Jubel.
Nun schnellen meine Zehe wie irre Pfeile über die Erde,
Und meine Sehnsucht kriecht in jähen Bogen mir voran."

Eva, kehre um vor der letzten Hecke noch!
Wirf nicht Schatten mit dir,
Blühe aus, Verführerin.

Eva du heiße Lauscherin,
O, du schaumweiße Traube,
Flüchte um vor der Spitze deiner schmalsten Wimper noch!
(Lasker-Schüler, Else, Werke Und Briefe: Kritische Ausgabe, Vol. 1.1, 81-83.)

* Perhaps most pertinent for this argument is the incorporation of this poem into Ich und Ich:

Faust: (verbirgt seinen Kopf erschüttert in Mephistos Händen:)
– Ich finde mich nicht wieder
In der fremden ewigen Seligkeit –
Mir ist ich lieg von mir weltenweit –
Zwischen erster Nacht der Urangst.
Ich wollte ein Schmerzen rege sich –
Und stürze mich grausam nieder!
Und riss mich je an mich!
Und es lege eine Schöpferlust –
Mich wieder in meine Heimat
Unter der Mutterbrust.
Mephisto: Deine Mutterheimat ist seleleer, …. 
Es blühen dort keine Rosen im warmen Odem mehr.
Faust: Möchte eine Herzallerliebste haben …. 
Mephisto: Und mich in ihrem Fleisch vergraben.

(Lasker-Schüler. Werke Und Briefe: Kritische Ausgabe. Vol 2. 224.)

**DIE BLAUE NACHT…**

Die blaue Nacht ist sanft auf unsren Stirnen aufgegangen.
Leise berühren sich unsre verwesten Hände
Süße Braut!

Bleich ward unser Antlitz, mondene Perlen
Verschmolzen in grünem Weihergrund.
Versteinerte schauen wir unsre Sterne.

O Schmerzliches! Schuldige wandeln im Garten
In wilder Umarmung die Schatten,
Daß in gewaltigem Zorn Baum und Tier über sie sank.

Sanfte Harmonien, da wir in kristallnen Wogen
Fahren durch die stille Nacht
Ein rosiger Engel aus den Gräbern der Liebenden tritt.
(Trakl, “Die Blaue Nacht…,” Sämtliche Werke Und Briefwechsel, Vol 3, 244.)

**PIETA**

So seh ich, Jesus, deine Füße wieder,
die damals eines Jünglings Füße waren,
da ich sie bang entkleidete und wusch;
wie standen sie verwirrt in meinen Haaren
und wie ein weißes Wild im Dornenbusch.

So seh ich deine niegeliebten Glieder
zum erstenmal in dieser Liebesnacht.
Wir legten uns noch nie zusammen nieder,
und nun wird nur bewundert und gewacht.

Doch, siehe, deine Hände sind zerrissen :-
Geliebter, nicht von mir, von meinen Bissen.
Dein Herz steht offen und man kann hinein:
das hätte dürfen nur mein Eingang sein.
Nun bist du müde, und dein müder Mund
hat keine Lust zu meinem wehen Munde -.
O Jesus, Jesus, wann war unsre Stunde?
Wie gehn wir beide wunderlich zugrund.”
(Rilke, *Die Gedichte*, 440).

\textit{v} \textit{TENEBRAE}

Nah sind wir, Herr,
nahe und greifbar.

Gegriffen schon, Herr,
ineinander verkrallt, als wär
der Leib eines jeden von uns
dein Leib, Herr.

Bete, Herr,
bete zu uns,
wer sind nah.

Windschief gingen wir hin,
gingen wir hin, uns zu bücken
nach Mulde und Maar.

Zur Tränke gingen wir, Herr.

Es war Blut, es war,
was du vergossen, Herr.

Es glänzte.

Es warf uns dein Bild in die Augen, Herr.
Augen und Mund stehn so offen und leer, Herr.
Wir haben getrunken, Herr.
Das Blut und das Bild, das im Blut war, Herr.

Bete, Herr.
Wir sind nah.
(Celan, *Gesammelte Werke: Band 1*, 163.)

\textit{vi} \textit{RADIX, MATRIX}

Wie man zum Stein spricht, wie
du,
mir vom Abgrund her, von
einer Heimat her Ver-
schwisterte, Zu-
geschleuderte, du,
du mir vorzeiten,
du mir im Nichts einer Nacht,
du in der Aber-Nacht Be-
gegnete, du
Aber-Du -:

Damals, da ich nicht da war,
damals, da du
den Acker abschrittst, allen:

Wer,
er war, jenes
Geschlecht, jenes gemordete, jenes
schwarz in den Himmel stehende;
Rute und Hode –?

(Wurzel.
Wurzel Abrahams. Wurzel Jesse. Niemandes
Wurzel – o
unser.)

Ja,
wie man zum Stein spricht, wie
du
mit meinen Händen dorthin
und ins Nichts greifst, so
ist, was hier ist:

auch dieser
Fruchtboden klafft,
dieses
Hinab
ist die eine der wild-
blühenden Kronen.
(Celan, Gesammelte Werke: Band 1, 239.)

vi… RAUSCHT DER BRUNNEN

Ihr gebet-, ihr lästerungs-, ihr
gebetscharfen Messer
meines Schweigens.

Ihr meine mit mir ver-krüppelnden Worte, ihr meine geraden.

Und du:
du, du, du
mein täglich wahr- und wahrer-geschundenes Später
der Rosen -:

Wieviel, o wieviel
Welt. Wieviel
Wege.

Krücke du, Schwinge. Wir --

Wir werden das Kinderlied singen, das,
hörst du, das
mit den Men, mit den Schen, mit den Menschen, ja das
mit dem Gestrüpp und mit
dem Augenpaar, das dort bereitlag als
Träne-und-
Träne.
(Celan, “… Rauscht der Brunnen,” Gesammelte Werke: Band 1, 237.)

viii VERBRACHT ins
Gelände
mit der untrüglichen Spur:

Gras, auseinandergeschrieben. Die Steine, weiß,
mit den Schatten der Halme:
Lies nicht mehr – schau!
Schau nicht mehr – geh!

Geh, deine Stunde
hat keine Schwestern, du bist –
bist zuhause. Ein Rad, langsam,
rollt aus sich selber, die Speichen
klettern,
klettern auf schwärzlichem Feld, die Nacht
braucht keine Sterne, nirgends
fragt es nach dir.

*

Nirgends
fragt es nach dir –

Der Ort, wo sie lagen, er hat
einen Namen – er hat
keinen. Sie lagen nicht dort. Etwas
lag zwischen ihnen. Sie
sahn nicht hindurch.

Sahn nicht, nein,
redeten von
Worten. Keines
erwachte, der
Schlaf
kam über sie.

*

Kam, kam. Nirgends
fragt es –

Ich bins, ich,
ich lag zwischen euch, ich war
offen, war
hörbar, ich tickte euch zu, euer Atem
gehorchte, ich
bin es noch immer, ihr
schlaf ja.

*

Bin es noch immer –

Jahre.
Jahre, Jahre, ein Finger
tastet hinab und hinan, tastet
umher:
Nahtstellen, fühlbar, hier
klafft es weit auseinander, hier
wuchs es wieder zusammen - wer
dekte es zu?

*

Deckte es
zu – wer?

Kam, kam.
Kam ein Wort, kam,
kam durch die Nacht,
wollt leuchten, wollt leuchten.

Asche.
Asche, Asche.
Nacht.
Nacht-und-Nacht. – Zum
Aug geh, zum feuchten.

*

Zum
Aug geh,
zum feuchten –

Orkane.
Orkane, von je,
Partikelgestöber, das andre,
du
weißts ja, wir
lasens im Buche, war
Meinung.

War, war
Meinung. Wie
faßten wir uns
an – an mit
diesen
Händen?
Es stand auch geschrieben, daß.
Wo? Wir
taten ein Schweigen darüber,
giftgestillt, groß,
ein
grünes
Schweigen, ein Kelchblatt, es
hing ein Gedanke an Pflanzliches dran –
grün, ja
hing, ja
unter hämischem
Himmel.

An, ja,
Pflanzliches.

Ja.
Orkane, Partikelgestöber, es blieb
Zeit, blieb,
es beim Stein zu versuchen – er
war gastlich, er
fiel nicht ins Wort. Wie
gut wir es hatten:

Körnig,
körnig und faserig. Stengelig,
dicht;
traubig und strahlig; nierig,
plattig und
klumpig; locker, ver-
ästelt –; er, es
fiel nicht ins Wort, es
sprach,
sprach gerne zu trockenen Augen, eh es sie schloß.

Sprach, sprach.
War, war.

Wir
ließen nicht locker, standen
inmitten, ein
Porenbau, und
es kam.

Kam auf uns zu, kam
hindurch, fickte
unsichtbar, fickte
an der letzten Membran,
und
die Welt, ein Tausendkristall,
schoß an, schoß an.

*

Schoß an, schoß an.

Nächte, entmischt. Kreise,
grün oder blau, rote
Quadrate: die
Welt setzt ihr Innerstes ein
im Spiel mit den neuen
Stunden. – Kreise,
rot oder schwarz, helle
Quadrate, kein
Flugschatten,
kein
Meßtisch, keine
Rauchseele steigt und spielt mit.

*

Steigt und
spielt mit -

In der Eulenflucht, beim
versteinerten Aussatz,
bei
unsern geflohenen Händen, in
der jüngsten Verwerfung,
überm
Kugelfang an
der verschütteten Mauer:

sichtbar, aufs
neue: die
Rillen, die

Chöre, damals, die
Psalmen. Ho, ho-
sianna.

Also
stehen noch Tempel. Ein
Stern
hat wohl noch Licht.
Nichts,
nichts ist verloren.

Ho-
sianna.

In der Eulenflucht, hier,
die Gespräche, taggrau,
der Grundwasserpuren.

* 

(— taggrau,
der Grundwasserpuren —

Verbracht
ins Gelände
mit
der untrüglichen
Spur:

Gras.
Gras,
auseinandergeschrieben.)
(Celan, “Verbracht,” Gesammelte Werke: Band 1, 197–204.)

ix NACHTLICH GESCHÜRJT
die Lippen der Blumen,
gekreuzt und verschränkt
die Schäfte der Fichten,
ergraut das Moos, erschüttert der Stein,
erwacht zum unendlichen Fluge
die Dohlen über dem Gletscher:

dies ist die Gegend, wo
rasten, die wir ereilt:

sie werden die Stunde nicht nennen,
dir Flocken nicht zählen,
den Wassern nicht folgen ans Wehr.

Sie stehen getrennt in der Welt,
ein jeglicher bei seiner Nacht,
ein jeglicher bei seinem Tode,
unwirsch, barhaupt, bereift
von Nahem und Fernem.

Sie tragen die Schuld ab, die ihren Ursprung beseelte,
sie tragen sie ab an ein Wort,
das zu Unrecht besteht, wie der Sommer.

Ein Wort - du weisst:
eine Leiche.

Lass uns sie waschen,
lass uns sie kämen,
lass uns ihr Aug
himmelwärts wenden.
(Celan, Gesammelte Werke: Band 1, 125.)

* PORT BOU – DEUTSCH?
Pfeil die Tarnkappe weg, den Stahlhelm.

Linksnibelungen,
Rechtsnibelungen:
gerheinigt, gereinigt,
Abraum.

Benjamin
neint euch, für immer,
er jasagt.

Solcherlei Ewe, auch
als B-Bauhaus:
nein.

Kein Zu-Spät,
ein geheimes
Öffnen.
(Celan, "Die Gedichte, 519.")


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