"Des Dastehns großer Anfangsbuchstab": Standing and Being in Rilke's Fifth Elegy

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The fifth of Rilke’s Duineser Elegien begins with a question about the struggling acrobats featured there: “Wer aber sind sie, sag mir, die Fahren-den, diese ein wenig Flüchtigern noch als wir selbst . . . .” In answer, the poet focuses on the transition from falling to rising, that brief moment in which the acrobats stand there, creating “des Dastehns großer Anfangsbuchstab.” Who are they then? Beings who stand there.

A quick survey of the Elegies reveals that this is no isolated metaphor. The Fourth Elegy uses standing to depict childhood’s ontological surety, the hours in which children were “mit Dauern dem vergnügt und standen da / im Zwischenräume zwischen Welt und Spielzeug . . . .” The Seventh Elegy directly relates standing to being:


And the Ninth Elegy suggests that by poetically transforming things of the earth, the poet sets up an equivalence of sorts between himself and the angel, for then the angel “wird staunender stehn; wie du standest / bei dem Seiler in Rom . . . .” These are but a few of the references to standing, artistry, and being found in the ten Elegies. This essay will construct a context in which standing (especially as present in the Fifth Elegy) can be seen as a complex figure expressing attempted and achieved being.
Rilke was not the first to see connections between standing and the artistic/linguistic activities through which we are human. Early in his *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784), Herder concludes that an upright posture distinguishes humanity from lower forms of existence: “Die Gestalt des Menschen ist aufrecht; er ist hierin einzig auf der Erde . . . der Mensch ist *anthropos*, ein über sich, ein weit um sich schauendes Geschöpf” (Drittes Buch, VI, 1). Everything we are, he continues, we owe ultimately to that standing posture: “Der aufrechte Gang des Menschen . . . ist die Organisation zum ganzen Beruf seiner Gattung . . .” (Drittes Buch, VI, 2). Because standing is such a complicated, difficult task (“kein todter Körper kann aufrecht stehen, und nur durch eine zahlose Menge angestrengter Thätigkeiten wird unser künstlicher Stand und Gang möglich” [Drittes Buch, VI, 1]), it teaches us as infants to be creatures of art: “Mit dem aufgerichteten Gange wurde der Mensch ein Kunstgeschöpf; denn durch ihn, die erste und schwerste Kunst, die ein Mensch lernet, wird er eingeweiht, alle zu lernen und gleichsam eine lebendige Kunst zu werden” (Viertes Buch, III). And finally, an upright posture enables speech: “Aber den Menschen baute die Natur zur Sprache; auch zu ihr ist er aufgerichtet und an eine emporstrebende Säule seine Brust gewölbt . . . nur im aufrechten Gange [findet] wahre menschliche Sprache Statt” (Viertes Buch, III). For Herder, then, standing makes humanity possible: it allows consciousness, it is itself an art and endows artistic ability, and it enables speech.

Herder’s ideas on standing are a philosophical/historical/anthropological attempt to distinguish humanity from animals and from God. Rilke too is concerned with gradations in being, with hierarchies ranging from the least-conscious creatures to the perfectly conscious angels. But where Herder sees a causal connection between standing and its artistic/linguistic fruits, Rilke’s use of standing is as metaphorical as his use of gnats and angels. Without Herder’s (or Humboldt’s, or someone else’s) anthropology, however, Rilke’s art would have been poorer by a very productive metaphor.

The Figure as *Stelle*

At the heart of Rilke’s attempt to be or to create being in an increasingly alienated world (a world in which cultural entropy relentlessly levels what has been brought to stand) is his concept of the figure. In a letter to Leopold von Schlözer (21. Januar 1929) Rilke speculated about declining civilizations: “Ja, solche Epochen mag es schon gegeben haben, voller Untergänge, aber waren sie ähnlich ohne Gestalt? Ohne eine Figur, die das alles um sich zusammenzöge und von sich hinausspannte: so bilden sich Spannungen und Gegenspannungen ohne zentrale Stelle, die sie erst zu Konstellationen machte, zu Ordnungen . . . .” Rilke’s poetry is an attempt to create such a *Gestalt*, such a *Figur*, such a *Stelle*; and the figure often involves images of standing.
Beda Allemann's discussion of several of Rilke's important figures (including the thrown ball, the dance, the landing dove, constellations of stars, etc.) argues that each figure is a *Stelle* at which "Weltinnenraum sich verwirklicht." "Wahrhaftes Dasein," he writes, "ist nur in den Figuren . . . wie . . . dichterischer Geist im Kunstwerk sie ordnet" (8). Further: "es wird . . . die Figur als eine Stelle begriffen, wo der höhere Zeitbegriff plötzlich präsent ist" (34). The thrown ball, for example, balanced at its apex, becomes such a *Stelle*:

In diesem entscheidenden Augenblick ist alles in ihm versammelt, der Wurf, der ihn in die Höhe getragen, und zugleich auch schon der ganze Fall. Diese höhere Gleichzeitigkeit von Steigen und Fallen erscheint im Werk Rilkes schon früh und immer wieder als geheimnisvolle Metapher für die Grundstruktur des Daseins. In diesem Augenblick der Versammlung kann der Ball eine ganz neue Dimension eröffnen, "eine neue Stelle zeigen," es ist die Stelle, an der die Figur im prägnanten Sinne aufgeht . . . . (60)

Allemann's discussion of this revelatory *Stelle*, this dimension-opening figure, is directly related to standing, for many of the figures he discusses involve standing, standing like the ball at a point between rising and falling, or standing between fleeting time and a fullness of time. Compare, for example, the description of Rodin's sculpture Allemann quotes: "in den stehenden [Göttern] war eine Gebärde, die wie eine Fontäne aus dem Steine stieg und wieder in denselben zurückfiel . . ." (Allemann, 48); or a similar quotation concerning the power of Egyptian stars: "der Aufstieg und Niedergang unzähliger Sterne, der Sternbilder großes Dastehen . . ." (Allemann, 225); or another on standing of works of art: "das Verhaltene / in den Bildern oder der Statuen ewiges Dastehn" (Allemann, 257). Although Allemann never thematizes standing, it becomes apparent simply through the lines he quotes that in Rilke's poetry the poetically created *Stellen*, those places of *Umschlag*, are often related to standing. In the case of the Fifth Elegy, that connection between standing and figurative *Stellen* proves especially informative.

"Stehen" and "Stelle": An Etymology

"Ich will das Wörterbuch der Gebrüder Grimm lesen . . . ." This modest proposal stands third in a list of six educational goals Rilke set down in a long letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé (13 May 1904). Sixteen years later, in a letter to Nanny Wunderly-Volkart (4 February 1920), he expressed a related wish, to penetrate to the "core of language": "so geht es einem oft, daß man mit dem äußerlichen Benehmen der Sprache uneins ist und ihr Innerstes meint, oder eine innerste Sprache, ohne Endungen, womöglich, eine Sprache aus Wort-Kernen, eine Sprache, die nicht gepflückt ist,
oben, auf Stengeln, sondern im Sprach-Samen erfaßt . . . .” Rilke’s known fascination with etymology has been used by several interpreters in support of their readings of Rilke. Both Allemann and Jacob Steiner discuss Rilke’s “etymological play”; and Geoffrey Hartman has pointed out that Rilke’s work involves the creation of “a new idiom which would neglect the anthropomorphic for the physical basis of language. The commonplace sense of words is neglected for their seeming origin as signs signifying weight, direction, and invisibly-oriented gesture.”

In 1922 Rilke commented on such a linguistic transformation through poetry:


In the Duineser Elegien, as elsewhere, Rilke works to effect this sort of transformation, in part by stripping words down to their root meanings, to the original gestures from which they grew. By emphasizing etymological relationships, by bringing words together into familial clusters, he reverses what he sees as an historical trend away from original metaphor toward the deracinated abstraction of contemporary speech.

But why should a word as “originally” meant have some deeper, more lasting meaning than the word as used today? In a system like Herder’s, wild, youthful, or natural languages are supposedly infinitely more expressive than civilized languages, in part because they more fully approximate a “mother language” in which a wide range of emotions found perfect expression. Civilized languages, in this view, retain only fragments of the original tones “in ihren Interjektionen, in den Wurzeln ihrer Nominum und Verborum.” Conditioned, perhaps, by such assumptions, philosophers from Plato to Heidegger routinely rely on etymologies to make their points; and readers commonly assume that a true etymology is truly revelatory. Rilke’s etymological thinking, while based in part on Herder’s sort of natural, originary bias, has another dimension; for the “history” a word undergoes in the poem is privileged as well. As lines from a late poem (“Für Nike, Weihnachten 1923”) point out, both the “divine” origin of language and the poetic speaking of the word are equal parts of a circle:

Oh, ich weiß, ich begreife
Wesen und Wandel der Namen;
in dem Innern der Reife
ruht der ursprüngliche Samen,
nur unendlich vermehrt.
Daß es ein Göttliches binde,
hebt sich das Wort zur Beschworung,
aber, statt daß es schwinde,
steht es im Glühn der Erhöhung
singend und unversehrt.  

The etymological seed still exists in the changing name, but now multiplied. The word *stands* between an unchanging “Göttliches” and the ever-changing human, and draws its power from both sources.

Before interpreting standing images in the Elegies with reference to etymological relationships, some methodological considerations are in order. Michael Riffaterre has suggested that “for . . . a matrix-producing word to become a generator something must call it to the reader’s attention as exceptional and 'loaded.’” The word “stehen” is clearly “loaded” in the line of the Fifth Elegy in which acrobats form “des Dastehens großer Anfangsbuchstab.” Additional passages in the Elegies containing the word “stehen” enhance that exceptionality, as does Rilke’s use of standing elsewhere in his work. The word “Stelle” likewise stands out in its own contexts, as do the words “Gestaltung,” “Buchstabe,” and other related words to be discussed here. These individual contexts are then brought together in certain critical passages to form “das große Verhältnis, die Konstellation” of which Rilke speaks.

The word “Stelle,” for example, appears in suggestive proximity to the word “stehen”—both spatial and semantic proximity—near the end of the Fourth Elegy:

Und waren doch, in unserem Alleingehn,
mit Dauerndem vergnügt und *standen da*
im Zwischenräume zwischen Welt und Spielzeug,
an einer Stelle, die seit Anbeginn
gegründet war für einen reinen Vorgang.
Wer zeigt ein Kind, so wie es *steht*? Wer *stellt*
es ins Gestirn und gibt das Maß des *Abstands*
ihm in die Hand? (IV:71-78, emphasis added)

That “standen,” “Stelle,” “steht,” “stellt,” and “Abstand” alliterate may be the most important initial reason to group them. Roman Jakobson has remarked that “in poetry, any conspicuous similarity in sound is evaluated in respect to similarity and/or dissimilarity in meaning.” This gives rise to annominatio (or paronomasia), a figure in which the reader is led to make etymological connections between more or less related words. In this case, the words “stehen” and “Stelle” are “more” related, for they share an etymological root; and this familial tie adds a second, stronger incentive to link the words semantically. Third, both *stehen* and *Stelle* are here used to evoke childhood being, and this common relationship to being provides a compelling final reason to view these alliteratively and etymologically related words as a thematic constellation.
ABBOTT: Rilke's Fifth Elegy

Besides this initial example from the Fourth Elegy, there are other specific contextual groupings which will be noted as the discussion progresses (for example, the lines in the Seventh Elegy linking standing columns, "Städte," "Stunde," "Gestalt," and "Stehen" in a discussion of being). And the separate groups, when taken together, form an Elegy-wide context in which standing things (cathedrals, columns, etc.) and words stemming from the *sta- root (which "stehen" and "Stelle" share) beg to be seen as working together in an extended figure.14

The first stanza of the Fifth Elegy deals with artistic creation, standing, and being. As noted earlier, it begins with the question about who the acrobats are, and continues with a description of them in terms of where and how they stand. Standing momentarily between descent and ascent, their fleeting lives have substance. They exist, however tenuously, because they create something substantial, because their standing forms the initial, capital letter of the word "Dastehn."

The standing figure these acrobats create exists on a thinning carpet, at a point of transition, at that still point between descent and ascent (closely related to the fountain and ball which balance momentarily between rising and falling). Their achievement, the fruit of their creation, is hardly there ("kaum dort") and is only the "first letter" of fully achieved Dastehehn. Nevertheless, working under the burden of partial consciousness, the acrobats have taken a first step towards the mastery exhibited by Greek artists in the Second Elegy:

Erstaunte euch nicht auf attische Stelen die Vorsicht menschlicher Geste? war nicht Liebe und Abschied so leicht auf die Schultern gelegt, als wär es aus anderem Stoffe gemacht als bei uns? Gedenkt euch der Hände, wie sie drucklos beruhen, obwohl in den Torsen die Kraft steht. (II:66-70)

"Liebe und Abschied": in this oxymoron, the lovers gesture with extreme care, their hands rest without pressure. They touch lovingly, and Abschied is part of the gesture. These are not just lovers, however, they are lovers depicted in works of art, specifically in standing Stelen (in its root sense, "Stele" means standing block or slab and stems from the root *sta-). The sculptors have created standing monuments which portray a powerful state of being. Similarly, the acrobats of the Fifth Elegy have themselves created, "kaum dort, / aufrecht, da und gezeigt: des Dastehehn großer Anfangsbuchstab . . . ."

Like the Stelen, the letter "D" is a standing figure. The saltimbanques of Picasso's painting which helped inspire this Elegy are standing so as to form a capital "D." And the acrobats of the Elegy, standing on the thinning carpet, likewise form the first, capital letter of the word "Dastehehn." The letter is explicitly described as "aufrecht." And, as a Buchstabe, the letter
“D” is linked etymologically to standing, for the one root “Stab,” originally designating the perpendicular (or standing) main stroke of the Germanic rune, is a member of the *sta- family. The Buchstabe also relates the acrobats’ struggle to stand and to be to the poet’s writing of the Elegies. Like the acrobats’ towers and the Greek statues, the letters written by the poet are standing monuments, and as such become the literal Stelen/Stellen at which, through which being is achieved.

A passage from the Seventh Elegy underscores this identification of artistic creation with bringing to stand. The world described there is losing its meaning, its substance, its form (Gestalt). And even those things that still stand (“überstehen”) are lost because people fail to build them within. But even as the amnesic destruction continues, the poet remembers certain Gestalten (etymologically, things that have been brought to stand) and remembers how things stood. “Showing” these standing things to the angel, he saves the things by making them stand again:

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This passage is an apotheosis of the standing gesture. In the midst of annihilating fate the Gestalt once “stood . . . it stood . . . it stood” and the poet promises to make it stand again, upright, in the angel’s gaze. There follows a list of standing figures created by artists (“Säulen, Pylone, der Sphinx”), and the description of the cathedral shows it striving (“das strebende Stemmen”—the latter word meaning originally “to bring to stand”) out of the Stadt (or standing place). “Gestalt,” “Stemmen,” “Stadt,” and the grammatical variations of “stehen” all stem from the root *sta-, and their standing is enhanced by the word “aufrecht” and the upright, standing figures of pillars, pylons, and cathedral. These lines barrage the reader with a gesture, a Gestalt, which was, in better times, “wie seiend,” a metaphor for being. The existential problem is a lack of appropriate figuration. The answer lies in renewed figuration, in remembered or conserved figures, in the Gestalt and in the bringing to stand of Gestaltung, in the creation of central Stellen and constellations.

This account bears a certain resemblance to the opening passage of the Fifth Elegy. In both cases artists seek being (“Wer aber sind sie”/“wie seiend”) in the midst of alienation and flux. Both passages indicate achieved
being with uprightness and the standing gesture: "aufrecht"/"aufrecht," "Dastehn"/"stand," "stands"/"stand es"). And where the Seventh Elegy culminates in *Gestalten* — standing pillars and the upthrusting cathedral — the Fifth Elegy has the beginning, standing, capital letter of the word "Dastehn.

But like all the other standing gestures and places, the capital "D" is a point of transition. The achieved being must be immediately left behind; and so the acrobats jump up again and again, and the Fifth Elegy continues, past the *Stampfer, Stempel,* and *Stemmer* (all related to "stehen"), to a description of another standing figure, the human pyramid from which the young acrobat falls a hundred times a day, the "Baum der gemeinsam / erbauten Bewegung (der, rascher als Wasser, in wenig / Minuten Lenz, Sommer und Herbst hat)." The motion is rapid, entire seasons of the pyramid are measured in minutes, a time-frame well suited to acrobats called "die Fahrenden" in the Elegy's opening line. But these fleeting minutes contrast starkly with the hours in which the children of the Fourth Elegy live their lives:

O Stunden in der Kindheit,
da hinter den Figuren mehr als nur
Vergangenes war und vor uns nicht die Zukunft . . . .
Wir . . . waren doch, in unserem Alleingehen,
mit Dauerndem verzögert und standen da
im Zwischenraume zwischen Welt und Spielzeug,
an einer Stelle, die seit Anbeginn
gegründet war für einen reinen Vorgang. (IV:65-75)

As the stanza indicates, children stand in a privileged place and in special time, for which Rilke chose the related words "Stelle" and "Stunde."

"Stelle" is a derivative of "stehen" and once had the meaning "standing-place" (and in fact, in the sixteenth century took the place of the word "stal" which went on to mean exclusively a standing place for animals). Grimms describes "Stunde" as a "feststehender zeitpunkt," a point of time standing fast. Thus both the place and time of childhood existence are marked by standing. A second description of children, this one of girls who died young (Seventh Elegy), reinforces the Fourth Elegy's images of standing:

Denn eine Stunde war jeder, vielleicht nicht
ganz eine Stunde, ein mit den Maßen der Zeit kaum
Meßliches zwischen zwei Weilen—, da sie ein Dasein

To stand is to be. Children stand longer and more securely than the acrobats, for their time is measured in "Stunden" as opposed to the acrobats' minutes. Nevertheless, the acrobats still achieve momentary being through their strenuous attempts to stand. But then, as always, there is a fall (for the children too, as the final stanza of the Fourth Elegy describes, and they must try again.
The Fifth Elegy continues past the vase and the Aufschrift (or standing inscription) the angel is to set up, on the tenth stanza, a most remarkable point of transition:

Und plötzlich in diesem mühsamen Nirgends, plötzlich
die unsagliche Stelle, wo sich das reine Zuwenig
unbegreiflich verwandelt—, umspringt
in jenes leere Zuviel.
Wo die vielstellige Rechnung
zahlenlos aufgeht. (V:81-86)

Steiner points out that this stanza describes the acrobats' transition from a state of feeling and artistic imperfection to a state of perfect artistic ability that lacks feeling and has become mechanical. In addition, the Stelle between the two states serves as a locus of being, and the stanza has an interesting place in both a broad structure and a specific context.

It is no accident that the still point of transition between "das reine Zuwenig" and "jenes leere Zuviel" is "die unsagliche Stelle," for as seen above, related *sta- words act in precisely this transitional sense. The poet states that the Stelle is ineffable ("unsaglich"), and then does everything in his power to depict it, to create it, to say it. In his poetry he creates figures. And in this language "beyond" language, in "diesem mühsamen Nirgends," the "unsagliche Stelle" suddenly appears out of "das reine Zuwenig," disappearing just as suddenly into "jenes leere Zuviel." The word "Stelle" not only describes a place, but in describing, is that place. Being is achieved as the word is written. And once written, it must fade. For a moment however, a structural device intensifies the Stelle created in these six lines.

423 lines precede the tenth stanza and 423 lines follow, leaving this six-line stanza which describes a moment and a place of sudden, unfathomable transformation as the exact center of the combined ten Elegies. The dash near the center of this central stanza is "die unsagliche Stelle," the very point of transition between "das reine Zuwenig" and "jenes leere Zuviel." The dash (itself a sign of ineffability) is a balance point, and the tenth stanza is the point around which the other 846 lines balance.

In the stanzas preceding and following this central stanza, the words for place set up a telling progression. The ninth strophe begins with the question "Wo, o wo ist der Ort—ich trag ihn im Herzen—" and continues with a description of the world of the unskilled acrobats. The "unsagliche Stelle" of the tenth strophe follows, and then the first lines of the eleventh strophe: "Plätze, o Platz in Paris, unendlicher Schauplatz, wo die Modistin, Madame Lamort..." The ninth strophe, with its feeling, unskilled animals and acrobats, depicts a world before the transformation of the tenth, and the empty artistry of death in the eleventh strophe represents a world after the transformation. In the central, tenth strophe, "das reine Zuwenig" of the ninth strophe "umspringt in jenes leere Zuviel" of the eleventh. In the
seeming synonyms signifying "place" in the three strophes—"Ort," "Stelle," "Platz"—there is an etymological pattern supporting this reading. The word "Ort" comes from the root *uzda-, which meant "schneide, spitze." When compared with "Ort," "Platz" has an exactly opposite meaning, for "Platz" is from the Greek "plateia," meaning "breiter weg." Thus the place of "das reine Zuwenig" is an Ort—narrow, constricted, pointed; and that of "das leere Zuviel" is a Platz—by nature broad. The place of transition between Ort and Platz is the Stelle (that standing place of places) of the tenth strophe.

After the lessons of the Fifth Elegy, the poet learns and relearns the lessons of standing and of bringing to stand (Gestaltung). The lines of the Seventh Elegy in which a Gestalt once stood among us and in which the poet decides to show standing things to the angel are a good example; and in the Ninth Elegy, the poet determines to say the things of this world to the angel, to make them stand, to make even the angel stand:

Drum zeig
ihm das Einfache, das, von Geschlecht zu Geschlechtern
gestaltet,
alas ein Unsriges lebt, neben der Hand und im Blick.
Sag ihm die Dinge. Er wird staunender stehn; wie du
standest
bei dem Seiler im Rom, oder beim Topfer am Nil.
(IX:54-58)

The poet stood (achieved heightened being) while watching artisans at work; and now, he himself (an artisan, a poet), recreates the creations of generations and in so doing causes the angel to "staunender stehn." "Staunen" too is from the standing family, so the angel will doubly stand.

By now the poet has become so proficient that under his hands even "das klagende Leid" can be given productive form ("Gestalt"), as he will prove amply in the Tenth Elegy. He realizes, finally, what his task is, what the earth wants of us: "Erde, ist es nicht dies, was du willst: unsich-
bär / in uns erstehn?" To come to stand within us. And as he accomplishes this mundane task, paradoxically, "Überzähliges Dasein / entspringt mir im Herzen."

The Tenth Elegy, standing outside the Elegies balanced around the Fifth Elegy and manifesting a narrative style different from the others, after reinforcing the figure of standing, introduces a new metaphor related by opposition to that of standing. Near the beginning, a young, newly dead man enters the city of suffering; and in the word "Leidstadt" pain and standing place are conjoined as the Ninth Elegy suggested and as the opening stanza here promises: "Schmerzen," the poet declares,
Wandering through this new Stelle, the young man experiences the world of the dead. In the end the older Kluge brings him to the Talschlucht:

wo es schimmert im Mondschein:
die Quelle der Freude. In Ehrfurcht
nennt sie sie, sagt: — Bei den Menschen
ist sie ein tragender Strom. —

_stehn_ am Fuß des Gebirgs.
Und da umarmt sie ihn, weinend.

Einsam steigt er dahin, in die Berge des Ur-Leids.
Und nicht einmal sein Schritt klingt aus dem tonlosen Los.

(X:96-105)

With grammatical suddenness they stand there, stand there between the spring which becomes a _Strom_ and the “Berge des Ur-Leids.” There, on the brink of pure silence, the young man once again finds his standing place, his “Streifen Fruchtlands / zwischen Strom und Gestein” (II:75-76).

A culmination of many passages centered around the word “stehen,” this final standing is especially powerful as it reemphasizes the moment of standing as a transition between Liebe and Abschied, between Strom and Gestein. Everything the poet (or here the young man) has learned about standing and being is relived in this standing embrace.

Examination of the metrical patterns of these three short stanzas reveals traces of the elegiac distich Rilke often employs in the Elegies. “Doch der Tote muß fort, und schweigend bringt ihn die ältere” is a perfect hexameter, and the next four lines, taken as pairs, can likewise be seen as two hexameters (if not as perfect as the first). After these hexameters, the lines “ist sie ein tragender Strom. — / Stehn am Fuß des Gebirgs” beg to be read together as a pentameter. Thematically, the word “Stehn” represents, as already seen, a still place between “Strom und Gestein,” between motion and motionlessness, between joy and sorrow, between love and departure. The pentameter’s break in the flow of the preceding hexameters underscores this thematic pattern. The caesura (literally a “still place”) between the words “Strom” and “Stehn” is one more _Stelle_ in the Elegies’ “vielstellige Rechnung.” And this metrical break receives reinforcement from stehn's missing subject, from the period, from the dash, and finally from the break between stanzas. The dash at the center of the Elegies, “wo sich das reine Zuwenig / unbegreiflich verwandelt —, umspringt / in jenes leere Zuviel,” has become a dash, period, stanzaic break, and metrical caesura. The “Streifen Fruchtlands” has expanded.
But expanded or not, the *Stelle* remains a place between, and the young man, having left the embrace of the *Klage*, continues alone (in an almost perfect elegiac distich). His continuing, as the reader has come to expect by now, is a rising, a climbing: “Einsam steigt er dahin, in die Berge des Ur-Leids.”

On many levels the Elegies describe a battle against entropy (and are themselves such a battle), one characterized by bringing to stand, standing, and remaining standing in many variations—acrobatics, climbing, ordering, creating towers and cathedrals and standing letters, causing the earth to arise within, etc. Surprisingly, however, at the end of this magnificent struggle to stand, the final lines invoke an opposing metaphor:

> Aber erweckten sie uns, die unendlich Toten, ein Gleichnis, siehe, sie zeigten vielleicht auf die Kätzchen der leeren Hasel, die hängenden, oder meinten den Regen, der fällt auf dunkles Erdreich im Frühjahr.

> Und wir, die an steigendes Glück denken, empfanden die Rührung, die uns beinah bestürzt, wenn ein Glückliches fällt. (X:106-13)

The “aber” is the first signal of turnabout, of an antithetical form of existence, of what amounts to a metaphorical state of grace. The hanging/falling metaphor is the exact opposite of the rising/standing figure active elsewhere in the Elegies; and it makes sense as a final metaphor, as the final message from the “unendlich Toten,” precisely because of the standing metaphor which has preceded. The figure’s refreshing power lies in the paradox of capitulation after unrelenting, heroic, poetic, meaning-bestowing struggle. The rain falls only after rising (“dieser Aufstieg Gottes aus dem atmenden Herzen, davon sich der Himmel bedeckt, und sein Niederfall als Regen”), and “ein Glückliches fällt” only if it has been raised.

In the 1924 poem “Schwerkraft,” Rilke writes again of gravity, standing, and falling:

> Mitte, wie du aus allen dich ziehst, auch noch aus Fliegender dich wiedergewinnst, Mitte, du Stärkste.

> Stehender: wie ein Trank den Durst durchstürzt ihn die Schwerkraft.

> Doch aus dem Schlafenden fällt, wie aus lagernder Wolke, reicher Regen der Schwere.

The standing being, by virtue of its defiant standing, is shot through with gravity; the tension between having come to stand and the leveling power
of gravity is intense. However (and this "Doch" exactly parallels the "aber" of the Elegies' last lines), gravity falls like rain from the limp sleeping one. In life, standing (or bringing to stand) is an heroic, poetic action. To stand is to be. And in death lies another sort of being — the ultimate victory over gravity which comes as a kind of grace.

Afterword

Early in his *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, written twelve years after Rilke published the Elegies, Martin Heidegger focuses on a Greek view of language, hoping, he writes, to better understand what the Greeks meant when they said "to be." The words "ptosis" (*casus*) and "enklisis" (*declinatio*) interest him especially: "Die Namen ptosis und enklisis bedeuten Fallen, Kippen und Sich-neigen. Darin liegt ein Ab-weichen vom Aufrecht- und Geradestehen. Dieses aber, das in sich hoch gerichtete Da-stehen, zum Stand kommen und im *Stand* bleiben, verstehen die Griechen als Sein."20

As this quotation indicates, the being which is a standing—there is not purely static, it involves both an active coming to stand and an active remaining in that stance (a characteristic Rilke made much of as well). That the words for *casus* and *declinatio* relate to leaning and falling, Heidegger concludes, presupposes


The linguistic coming to stand and remaining in that stance are, as Heidegger sees it, products of discussion, struggle, and even battle, battle done by poets, thinkers, and political leaders. If the battle is disengaged, being is not only no longer produced, but also lost: "Das Vollendete ist nicht mehr das in Grenzen Geschlagene (d.h. in seine Gestalt Gestellte), sondern nur noch das Fertige, als solches für jedermann Verfügbar, das Vorhandene, darin keine Welt mehr weltet . . ." (48).

Heidegger’s discussion of standing and being relates closely to the images of standing in Rilke’s Elegies. First and foremost, both men view being as a creative bringing to stand and a remaining in that stance. Like Rilke’s acrobats and poet, Heidegger’s poets and thinkers wage linguistic battle to create and retain being. Second, both Rilke and Heidegger (and the Greeks
as well, if Heidegger is correct), view letters (Buchstaben, grammata) as standing entities which give being to necessarily fleeting spoken language, to what language speaks, and to the otherwise alienated speaker. And finally, the positive ongoing Vollendung which Heidegger calls “das in Grenzen Geschlagene (d.h. in seine Gestalt Gestellte)” finds a poetic counterpart in Rilke’s active Gestaltung, in the poet’s bringing Buchstaben, etymologically related words, and other figures to stand, in the Sisyphian ordering which the Elegies are:

Wir ordnens. Es zerfällt.
Wir ordnens wieder und zerfallen selbst.

Notes

1 I owe thanks to Bettina Brand, Antonina Filonov Gove, Hans Schulz, Charles Scott, John Smith, and Theodore Ziolkowski for their significant contributions to this work.
3 The same point (that standing is central to many of Rilke’s figures) could be made with reference to cases of Umschlag and Verwandlung cited by Judith Ryan in her Umschlag und Verwandlung (München: Winkler, 1972).
5 "Zweifellos kannte Rilke, der viel in Wörterbüchern ‘weidete,’ die indogermanische Ausgangsform, in der ‘Wissen’ nichts anderes als ‘Gesehen-Haben’ bedeutet” (Allemann, 289; see also 38); “Stamper und Stempel sind etymologisch miteinander verwandt; und da bekannt ist, daß Rilke das Deutsche Wörterbuch der Brüder Grimm gern konsultierte, darf man vermuten, daß er diesen Sachverhalt gekannt hat” Jacob Steiner, Rilkes Duineser Elegien [Bern: Francke, “1969], p. 108).
7 An Grafin Sizzo, 17.3.1922; quoted by Allemann, p. 246.
8 See the first few pages of Herder’s essay “Ueber den Ursprung der Sprache.”
9 Rainer Maria Rilke, Sämtliche Werke (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel, 1956), II, 256.
11 We will refer to a few of these in the course of the discussion.
13 See Grimm’s Wörterbuch, entries for “stehen” and “Stelle.” Other etymological references also to Grims.
14 Kenneth Burke writes about the influence of this word family as introduction to a chapter on the “Paradox of Substance”: “There is a set of words comprising what we might call the Stance family, for they all derive from a concept of place, or placement. In the Indo-Germanic languages the root for this family is sta, to stand (Sanscrit, stha). And out of it there has developed this essential family, comprising such members as: consist, constancy, constitution, contrast, destiny, ecstasy, existence, hypostatize, obstacle, stage, state, status, statute, stead, subsist, and system. In German, an important member of the Stance family is stellen,
to place, a root that figures in Vorstellung, a philosopher's and psychologist's word for representation, conception, idea, image.

"Surely, one could build a whole philosophic universe by tracking down the ramifications of this one root. It would be 'implemented' too, for it would have stables, staffs, staves, stalls, stamens, stamina, stanchions, stanzas, steeds, stools, and studs. It would be a quite regional world, in which our Southern Agrarians might take their stand.

"Unquestionably, the most prominent philosophic member of this family is 'substance.'" (A Grammar of Motives [1945; rpt. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1969], p. 21).

It can even be argued that the Fifth Elegy itself is a point of transition. Thematically, the acrobats' struggle for balance singles out the Fifth Elegy as the Elegy about balance. Also, the Fourth and Sixth, the Third and Seventh, the Second and Eighth, and the First and Ninth Elegies complement each other, balancing in pairs around the central Fifth Elegy, leaving the Tenth Elegy as a narrative culmination. This is an interpretive point too large to be made well here. But in my reading of the Elegies I find the following correlations: 1/9—problem/resolution. 2/8—man vs. angels, perfect inwardness/man vs. animals, perfect outwardness. 3/7—descent, the past/ascent, the perfect future. 4/6—man vs. puppets and children, outwardness/man vs. heroes, inwardness. 5—balance point. See also Elaine E. Boney, "Structural Patterns in Rilke's Duineser Elegien," Modern Austrian Literature, 15 (1982), 71-79.

The last two lines of the tenth strophe ("Wo die vielstellige Rechnung / zahlenlos aufgeht," are a second attempt to describe "die unsagliche Stelle," this time as the point between a finite number with a great many digits and the numberless infinity beyond it. A second reading of these lines, based again on etymology, reveals the following: the verb "rechnen" meant originally "zur sammlung, ordnung . . . bringen," exactly the process of the Elegies (cf. the passage in the Eighth Elegy: "Uns überfüllts. Wir ordnens. Es zerfällt. / Wir ordnens wieder und zerfallen selbst." The Elegies are a Rechnung, and the "vielstellige Rechnung" becomes the Elegies with their many Stellen, each standing word an attempt to order chaos, to portray the unportrayable, to say the unsayable. Here at the center of the Elegies, "die vielstellige Rechnung" balances for a moment between too little and too much, and then dissolves into the infinite.

Rilke to Ilse Jahr, 22. Februar 1903, quoted in Steiner, p. 289.

Rilke, Sämtliche Werke, II, 179.

Martin Heidegger, Einführung in die Metaphysik (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1953), p. 46.