Blossoms from the Dust:

A model for salvation

Dich wundert nicht des Sturmes Wucht, –
du hast ihn wachsen sehn; –
die Bäume flüchten. Ihre Flucht
schafft schreitende Alleen.
Da weißt du, der, vor dem sie fliehn,
ist der, zu dem du gehst,
und deine Sinne singen ihn,
wenn du am Fenster stehst.

Des Sommers Wochen standen still,
es stieg der Bäume Blut;
jetzt fühlst du, daß es fallen will
in den, der alles tut.
Du glaubtest schon erkannt die Kraft,
als du die Frucht erfaßt,
jetzt wird sie wieder rätselhaft,
und du bist wieder Gast.

Der Sommer war so wie dein Haus,
drin weißt du alles stehn –
jetzt mußt du in dein Herz hinaus
wie in die Ebene gehn.
Die große Einsamkeit beginnt,
die Tage werden taub,
aus deinen Sinnen nimmt der Wind
die Welt wie welkes Laub.

Durch ihre leeren Zweige sieht
der Himmel, den du hast;
sei Erde jetzt und Abendlied
und Land, darauf er paßt.
Demütig sei jetzt wie ein Ding,
zu Wirklichkeit gereift, –
daß Der, von dem die Kunde ging,
dich fühlt, wenn er dich greift.

You are not surprised at the force of the storm —
you have seen it growing.
The trees flee. Their flight
sets the boulevards streaming. And you know:
he whom they flee is the one
you move toward. All your senses
sing him, as you stand at the window.

The weeks stood still in summer.
The trees' blood rose. Now you feel
it wants to sink back
into the source of everything. You thought
you could trust that power
when you plucked the fruit:
now it becomes a riddle again
and you again a stranger.

Summer was like your house: you knew
where each thing stood.
Now you must go out into your heart
as onto a vast plain. Now
the immense loneliness begins.
The days go numb, the wind
sucks the world from your senses like
withered leaves.

Through the empty branches the sky remains.
It is what you have.
Be earth now, and evensong.
Be the ground lying under that sky.
Be modest now, like a thing
ripened until it is real,
so that he who began it all
can feel you when he reaches for you.

From *Das Stundenbuch* (*The Book of Hours*)
Rainer Maria Rilke[1]

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Rainer Maria Rilke's early poem, "Dich wundert nicht des Sturmes Wucht" (You are not surprised by the force of the storm) seems to present a story of decline, the progression from summer to winter as a model of death. This appears to occur through the loss of knowledge and stability, an Edenic metaphor framing summer as a time of hubris punished with incomprehension and death. But this story of decline is subverted in the last stanza, which at first glance represents death. Instead, when the storm ultimately hits and winter begins, the subject of the poem is rendered passive and vulnerable. Instead of the world collapsing as the subject expected, the subject is able to find a new sort of security and truth, merging with the battered trees. Instead of dying, the subject is able to "ripen into reality," a reversal of original sin, where, in shedding all pretensions to knowledge, the subject is able to become a fruit of modesty that is picked by God.

A short note on language: for the sake of convenience and clarity, I will refer to the addressee of the poem ("you") as the "subject." Arbitrarily the subject will always be referred to with feminine pronouns for consistency. I chose to base the English translations in this essay on those of Anita Barrows & Joanna Macy, as their work stays the closest of the three published translations[2] to the literal meaning of the text. While this obviously does not necessarily make the translation better, for the sake of close reading, which frequently relies on specific word use, I chose to sacrifice poetics in English to be able to portray my arguments. Throughout I have modified their translation to more closely fit with the German. All quotes are cited with line numbers from the collected poetry of Rilke (*Sämtliche Werke*).

To understand these different ways of looking at seasonal progression, one must first understand the structure of the poem. The poem is structurally consistent throughout, with uniform metrical patterns, syntax, and distribution of multisyllabic words. The poem's meter is a simple alternation between iambic tetrameter and trimeter without exception. This creates a natural structure of couplets.

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[1] Translation: Anita Barrows, and Joanna Macy. *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 1996

[2] The others being Annemarie S. Kidder and Susan Ranson (sources in bibliography).

Furthermore, these couplets are grouped phonically, into rhyming pairs (ABAB),[3] and syntactically, every stanza is divided in half by the creation of a new sentence.[4] In addition to being defined through syntax, these couplet-pairs are logically connected, with five out of eight having explicit connection words between the couplets ("now," "and," "so that"[5]). The four stanzas are therefore each divided in half twice. These divisions into couplets and half-stanzas will be crucial for understanding the argument of this essay. The poem portrays the seasons chiastically, going from fall to summer and back. This chiasmus is paired with a linear progression, where the poem begins with fall and ends with winter. This structure emphasizes the importance of autumn which ties together summer and winter, as the time of change. But as we will see later on, the real transformations occur not in fall but in winter.

Seasonal Progression as Linear

The poem, at first read, tells a story of a storm, a transformative event heralding autumn which itself exemplifies the change from summer to winter. This change is illustrated not only in the prominent image of a tree losing its leaves as the seasons change, but also through the more subtle motifs of knowledge versus incomprehension and movement versus standing. These changes are portrayed as linear, traveling along an axis between two dichotomies. As summer turns into fall and then winter, the healthy tree (10) flees (3), loses its leaves (24), and is left with empty branches (25). Similarly, the subject's belief in her own power (13) and knowledge (18) in summer lead to puzzlement (15), deafness (22), loss of perception (23-24) and emptied senses (25). The second and third stanzas present an *ABAB* structure, couplets alternating between past and present tense, summer and fall.[6] These couplet

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3 Rilke's rhyming shows his ability with words: in almost all of the lines, the rhyme is not confined to only the last syllable, matching sounds between lines on syllables leading up to the rhyme. Of the sixteen rhymes, six have an assonant and six have almost assonant penultimate vowels, while some also have matching consonants. Two rhymes stand out, with not only extra repeated consonants, but three or four rhyming vowels: "Wochen standen still" / "es fallen will" (9/11) and "werden taub" / "welkes Laub" (22/24).

4 The only additional sentence break is in l. 3, but does not fall in between couplets, preserving the pair pattern.

5 "Jetzt," (11, 15, 19), "und," (7), "daß" (31).

6 This pattern is broken in the second half of the third stanza, which I will discuss later.

pairs present the end of summer as a time of Manichaean decline: standing and rising to falling (9-12), faith to puzzlement (13-16),[7] and standing inside to traveling out (17-20). The two main oppositions here are between standing versus movement and knowledge leading to incomprehension.

Throughout the poem, movement is contrasted with standing. The verbs stehen (standing) and gehen (going) appear each three times, twice directly rhymed,[8] paired as the cruxes of contrasting couplets. These verbs take on specific meanings. Standing represents security: standing facing the storm (7); time standing still in summer as trees pump lifeblood, strong and upright (9-10); and the objects standing in the subject's house (18). Gehen is used to describe lateral movement: approaching the storm (6), traveling out onto a plain (20), and news leaving its source (31). There is certainly a dichotomy here between stillness and movement. But this movement presupposes some of the security that defines the standing: to travel laterally, to go (gehen literally means to travel by foot) requires being able to stand up. But what is lost with the movement, it seems, is knowledge: in summer, "you know where each thing stood" (18).[9] Standing allows comprehension. But knowledge and movement are also related to a larger motif, that of the end of summer as the fall from Eden.

The summer is portrayed as the Garden of Eden, with growing trees (10) and fruit whose picking shows a truth (14). Autumn is metaphorically framed as the consequence of original sin: When the subject grasps the fruit (14), she becomes a "guest" (16) and is exiled into the open plain (20). This is a punishment for hubris, "you believed you knew that power" (14).[10] The summer is a time in which the subject thinks she is in control, where she knows how things work and has the power to be an actor. The changes following this, that the power "becomes puzzling" and you "a guest" (15-16),[11] seem to not follow the story in Genesis. Instead of gaining knowledge, that knowledge is lost. But as I will show below, this loss of knowledge is only here supposed by the subject, and not actually believed.

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7 And as I will argue later, exile from the Garden of Eden.

8 In two different forms: singular 2nd person in (6, 8) and infinitive (18, 20).

9 "drin weißt du alles stehn—"

10 "Du glaubtest schon erkannt die Kraft"

11 "jetzt wird sie wieder rätselhaft, / und du bist wieder Gast." This sie seems to refer to the power and not the fruit because

In Genesis, the original sin led not only to exile but mortality. The last stanza appears to portray death. The subject's horizontal orientation under the sky[12] and empty senses (25) are deathlike. The subject is exhorted to "be earth", (*"sei Erde,"* 27) as Adam was cursed: "Denn du bist Erde und sollst zu Erde werden" ("For you are earth and to earth you will return" Genesis 3:19, transl. Luther). "Evensong" (27) could be seen as a sign of the end, possibly a lament. Finally, God grasping the subject in the last line could be seen as the moment of death. This way of understanding the seasonal progression, from Eden to exile and death, fails to take into account that the dichotomies set up in the first three stanzas do not actually continue into the fourth stanza.

Breaking of Dichotomies

In the last stanza, the dichotomies established in the earlier stanzas are broken and transcended. There is no movement or standing as in the other stanzas. Instead the schema of the earlier stanzas, in which the subject views the world from a standing perspective and moves laterally is upended. The stanza begins with the line "Through their empty branches looks / the heaven that you have" (25-26).[13] This description sets up a spatial relationship. With the empty branches of her senses screening the sky, the subject is portrayed as below, looking upwards. The subject's relationship to sky and trees, which previously occurred on horizontal plane are shifted perpendicular. Not only is the subject portrayed in vertical relationship to the other actors in the last stanza, the subject is told to be the lowest possible place in this schema: the subject is enjoined to be "earth" (27) and "ground fitting under that sky" (28),[14] "under" emphasizing the vertical relation. Yet this change is not just a breaking of dichotomy but also a return. This lying is still, parallel to the stillness of summer. But instead of the secure stillness of summer one is emptied, "modest" (*"Demütig,"* 29).

Reading the movement motif as chiastic allows us to see the other motifs similarly. The injunction in the last stanza to be a "thing / ripened until it is real" (29-30)[15] can be read as a return to a knowledge, not of knowing, but of being real. This ripening can also be seen as a return in the tree motif, the

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[12] See below for an explication of this.

[13] "Durch ihre leeren Zweige sieht / der Himmel, den du hast;"

[14] "Land, darauf er paßt."

[15] "Ding, / zu Wirklichkeit gereift, –"

blossoming of a new spring within the subject. Before we can understand what these new changes mean, we have to understand what brings them about.

The turning point that breaks these dichotomies is the coming of winter, which occurs as the subject merges with the trees in the third stanza . The first half of the third stanza follows the alternating structure of summer (in the past tense) and fall (in the present) like the second stanza, but then the pattern is broken. The second half of the stanza shifts forward, from fall to winter. Summer is presented in the past tense (9-10, 13-14, 17-18). The fall, in the second couplets of these first three couplet-pairs, is described as a transitional time: two couplets use modal verbs to create a sense of possibility: "wants to sink" (*"fallen will,"* 11-22) and "must go" (*"mußt...gehn,"* 19-20). One uses the verb "werden," to become (15). The penultimate couplet in the third stanza presents fall with similar techniques, using the words "begins" (*"beginnt,"* 21) and "werden" as well (22). The second couplet of this last pair (23-24), in contrast, uses a direct verb as in the first and fourth stanzas, "nimmt" ("takes"). In this last couplet-pair, the poem actually shifts to winter.

The relationship of the subject to the trees changes throughout the poem from one of distance to contrast to union. One must first recognize that the tree imagery represents the seasonal changes. Descriptions of summer are substantiated with images of the life-blood of trees (10) and ripe fruit (14), while in fall the trees "flee" from the storm (3), reflecting the chaos and movement of fall, and the winter is heralded with withered leaves (24) and empty branches (25). In the summer the trees are something that the subject treats as object, distanced with the double use of "it"/"es" (10, 11), seen as a means, grasping the fruit an instrument to power (13-14). When this falls apart in fall, the fruit becoming "puzzling" and the subject kicked out of the Garden and unable to treat the trees as object, as she is a "guest" (15-16), the trees become foils to the subject, who "move[s] toward" the one they "flee" (5-6).[16] They are placed as equals, agents like the subject, but the subject "know[s]" (5) that the trees are fleeing, failing to stand up to the storm.

[16] "Da weißt du, der, vor dem sie fliehn, / ist der, zu dem du gehst,"

When the storm finally reaches the subject, she is affected as if she was a tree: "the wind sucks from your senses / the world like withered leaves" (23-24).[17] The subject's senses[18] are then described as part of a tree: "Through their empty branches the sky / remains" (25-26).[19] Unlike the simile in the couplet before, this metaphor is direct, the subject is the tree. This union reaches its zenith in the penultimate couplet, in which the subject is enjoined to be "like a thing / ripened until it is real" (29-30).[20] While this returns to the language of simile, the subject becomes wholly botanical, as opposed to just a part of her.

This merging of subject and tree does not occur unannounced. Just before, the subject is presented with an injunction: "Now you must go out into your heart / as onto a vast plain" (19-20).[21] The journey into the heart is portrayed as a metaphor of travel into nature. This can be read as telling the subject to see nature as a valid avenue of self exploration. One can read the following part of the poem as the result of this adjuration. Immediately after this couplet the subject's reverie of memories and neat dichotomies between summer and fall is transcended as winter begins, breaking the patterns of the six couplets before.

Poem as Perspective Shift from Fall to Winter

So far we have understood the poem as outlining certain changes, occurring to the subject and in her perception. We saw how the first three stanzas outline an image of autumn as a transformation that progresses linearly, from secure stillness to chaos, and knowledge to incomprehension. But we also saw how this linear framework breaks down in the last stanza. There is a larger shift at play here, from a belief in the ability to understand the world and act to a stance of humility and passivity.

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[17] "aus deinen Sinnen nimmt der Wind / die Welt wie welkes Laub."

[18] The most logical antecedent: the leaves ripped from the senses in lines 23-24 leave empty branches in 25.

[19] "Durch ihre leeren Zweige sieht / der Himmel, den du hast;"

[20] "wie ein Ding, / zu Wirklichkeit gereift"

[21] "jetzt mußt du in dein Herz hinaus / wie in die Ebene gehn."

This is can be seen by considering the first stanza. When read with the knowledge of how the dichotomies are broken in the fourth stanza, one sees that this stanza, which seems to present a subject changed by fall, actually preserves the perspective of the summer. The poem opens: "You are not surprised at the force of the storm / you have seen it growing" (1-2).[22] The subject has not lost or given up the knowledge of summer, which involved understanding "how everything stands" (20).[23] This opening is surprising: as a reader, we have not seen the storm growing. But as one reads through the poem, one understands that this growth is outlined in stanzas two and three, in descriptions of the end of summer. These stanzas are not just narrative leaps backwards but portrayals of the subject's perspective. The thrice repeated "now" connecting these couplets stands out: now is the perspective of the first stanza, and this perspective is not that of the actual outbreak of these changes, but merely the hints and beginning of winter, as seen in the discussion above of tense in these stanzas. Yet the subject's certainty, the reader's perspective reading through the poem, in which one does seem to see the storm grow, falls apart when the storm actually hits and these linear frameworks of change are upended.

The second and third stanzas portray summer as a time of standing, as opposed to the movement of fall. But the first stanza has the subject standing (8). The incongruity between the last two couplets in the first stanza, changing without warning from moving to standing, clarifies that the subject is not actually doing what she thinks she is. While she "knows" that she is going towards God, she is actually "stand[ing] at the window" (8). The belief in her own power to control the world, lost at the end of summer (13-15), comes out here, even though she doesn't recognize it.

That the first stanza is still a reflection of summer perspectives is most clearly seen when it is compared to the last stanza. Instead of seeing ("*sehn,*" 2) and her "senses sing[ing]" the storm ("S*inne singen,*" 7), the subject is enjoined to be "evensong" (27), the object not the actor, and is seen by heaven ("*sieht / der Himmel,*" 25) through the branches of her empty senses ("S*innen,*" 23). The subject is not the active worshipper, praising God, or perceptive watcher, but the song and object of observation. The subject is only able to become the song when her senses have been emptied. In the first stanza, the subject actively seeks God, but in the last stanza, the subject becomes merely an object, and only that, according to the poem, can lead to being found by God.

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[22] "Dich wundert nicht des Sturmes Wucht, – / du hast ihn wachsen sehn; –"

[23] "drin weißt du alles stehn –"

First we must understand who God is in this poem, and how the subject's relationship to God changes throughout. The last stanza ends with an enigmatic statement of the poem's goal:

daß Der, von dem die Kunde ging,	*so that He, from whom the tidings went*
dich fühlt, wenn er dich greift.	*can feel you when he reaches for you.* (31-32)

What does this mean? This last couplet is very similar to a couplet in the first stanza with another unannounced male pronoun:

Da weißt du, der, vor dem sie fliehn,	*And you know: he whom they flee*
ist der, zu dem du gehst,	*is the one you move toward,* (5-6)

These couplets are unique and parallel: almost entirely monosyllabic (the only couplets with no or only one multisyllabic words respectively), each with seven syllables alliterated on "d," parallel lines split into short and long sections, and first lines echoing each other ("der, vor dem sie fliehn" and "Der, von dem die Kunde ging"). This first couplet refers to the storm,[24] but the syntactic separation of the stanza's halves enables this article to be seen as a new, independent pronoun defined by its relative clause. The similarity to the last couplet suggest that it can be read in some way as God. This suggests that the storm in the first stanza is what the subject sees as God. The subject seeks the storm and sings it, two actions of service (6-7).

These couplets sketch out two approaches to God: one, where we turn away from the world to actively travel towards God, and another, where we are the subject of God's action. In the first couplet, the trees flee the storm/God while the subject advances. The second couplet flips both of these parts. There is also a movement away from God, but instead of the negative action of flight from a source of fear, there is the dissemination of gospel (the word "Kunde," translated in its archaic sense as tidings, news,[25] seems

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[24] The m-dash at the end of the second line connects the storm's force (1) to the tree's flight (3), so that one can easily read "he whom they flee" (5) as the storm.

[25] Duden-Wissensnetz deutsche Sprache, *ad loc.* Accessed through Mac OSX Dictionary, January 4, 2019. To read "Kunde" in the modern sense as "clientele" makes little sense.

plausibly read as gospel). Then instead of the subject approaching God, she is passive and God "grasps" her.

This passivity is a direct result of the onset of winter: the subject's senses, reduced to a tree with empty branches (25), are unable to perceive. The subject is enjoined to be inanimate "earth" (27) and "land" (28), and finally a "thing"/"Ding" (29). No actions are ascribed to the subject, whose only verbs are passively "hav[ing]" the heaven (26), and being told to "be"/"sei" (27, 29). Only the last article is capitalized. If we were meant to read all of these three articles as clearly about God, they would all be similarly capitalized. Instead, this capitalizations seems to suggest that this last image of God is more true. But what is this last image of God?

The last stanza ends with a puzzling injunction about the subject's relationship to God (29-32):

Be modest now, like a thing	*Demütig sei jetzt wie ein Ding,*
ripened until it is real,	*zu Wirklichkeit gereift, –*
so that He, from whom the tidings went	*daß Der, von dem die Kunde ging,*
can feel you when he reaches for you.	*dich fühlt, wenn er dich greift.*

There is an injunction and posited result, linked causally with "so that" ("daß"). These two couplets are rhymed more closely than other pairs, ending with almost the same word: "gereift," ripened, and "greift," grasped. This echoes the summer, "when you grasped the fruit" (14).[26] The end is not just a reversal of the seeking in autumn, but of the Edenic fall which brought the end of summer. We become the fruit that God picks. The subject promises no knowledge to God; instead she is emptied of the world and all certainty. The modesty that is required is not just a loss of knowledge. It is the state of letting go of the yearning to understand and belief in one's own abilities. This poem seems to present a story of decline, the Fall of Man, dying as a small, deaf "thing." While the poem does present the consequences of hubris, it also offers a path to salvation. To reach God, one cannot seek God.

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[26] "als du die Frucht erfaßt." The word used to describe grasping in summer is different, "erfaßt." That verb is both more violent, with a meaning closer to seizing, but also can mean to grasp in the sense of understanding. This stanza replaces understanding with feeling.
Oxford German Dictionary, *ad loc.* Accessed through Mac OSX Dictionary, January 6, 2019

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