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ENGL 371

6 Oct. 2023

"Ein Tanz von Kraft um eine Mitte":

Power, Passivity, and Circularity in *Der Panther*

Of all the poems in Rainer Maria Rilke's *New Poems*, *Der Panther* is one of the most studied and celebrated. According to its epigraph, *Der Panther* takes inspiration from a visit to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, where Rilke would have seen caged animals like the one he describes in the poem. The poem belongs to the genre of the Dinggedicht (literally *thing-poem*, my translation, as hereafter), a type of poetry which describes a physical object or creature while imbuing it with symbolic meaning (H. Garland & M. Garland). In three skillfully woven quatrains, Rilke paints a picture of a weary panther, dazed by the tedium of its surroundings, that paces around its enclosure with restless, purposeless energy. Through masterful choices of poetic elements ranging from sound to syntax to structure, *Der Panther* vividly explores the paradoxical unification of power and passivity in the existence of the panther while presenting the image of the circle as a symbol of the monotony and futility of the animal's life in captivity.

The first quatrain begins with neither preamble nor introduction: "Sein Blick ist vom Vorübergehn der Stäbe / so müd geworden, daß er nichts mehr hält" (*its gaze is, from passing over the bars, / so weary that it holds nothing any more*) (lines 1-2). Notably, the subject of this sentence is the panther's gaze, not the panther itself. The next couplet continues this focus with the dative construction "Ihm ist, als ob. . ." (*to it, it is as if. . .*), which similarly positions the animal as a passive rather than active recipient of sensory impressions (line 3). Although aspects and actions of the animal — its gaze in line 1, its tread in line 5, its will in line 8, and its eyelid in

line 9 — serve as grammatical subjects throughout the poem, Rilke never positions the panther itself as the direct agent of any action. This choice deprives the animal of its volition and agency, creating a sense of depersonalization and dissociation that reinforces the poem's depiction of the panther as closed off from the outside world.

According to the first stanza, the bars of the cage have filled the animal's field of vision so thoroughly that the outside world has disappeared from its senses. The term used to denote the bars, "Stäbe," occurs three times in this stanza, conveying the image of innumerable, interminable bars through sheer repetition. This effect is enhanced by the assonance of the phrase "Vorübergehn der Stäbe" (*passing over the bars*) and the internal rhyme of the phrase "Stäbe gäbe" (*there were bars*), both of which increase the sense of repetitive tedium. Furthermore, the stanza is filled with long, tense vowels such as the *ä* in "Stäbe" and diphthongs such as the *au* in "tausend" (*thousand*), as well as sonorant nasals and consonant clusters such as those in "hinter tausend Stäben" (*behind a thousand bars*) (lines 1-4). These sounds burden the tongue of the reader, impeding the pace of the stanza. Taken together, these repetitive phrases and slow sounds imbue the quatrain with an almost tactile sense of weary, dreary monotony.

The second stanza introduces the image of the panther pacing in circles inside its enclosure. Rilke likens the animal's movements to "ein Tanz von Kraft um eine Mitte, / in der betäubt ein großer Wille steht" (*a dance of power around a center / in which, numbed, a great will stands*) (lines 7-8). Just as the animal is trapped within the circle of bars, its will is trapped within the circularity of its movements. The very image of the circle — a shape closed in on itself that repeats endlessly without hope of variation or escape — carries connotations of confinement, monotony, and futility that instill empathy in the reader for the panther's plight. The adjective "allerkleinst[e]" (*smallest of all*), doubly intensified by the superlative inflection and

the collective prefix *aller-* (*of all*), further emphasizes the claustrophobic nature of the panther's pacing (line 6). Notably, this is the only stanza in the poem with a clear pause at the end of each line, signaled by a terminal comma (lines 5-8). As a result, the reader naturally falls into a pattern of stresses and pauses in this stanza that mimics the rhythmic, repetitive circling of the panther.

Furthermore, the image of the powerful dance about the still center juxtaposes the outer activity of the body with the inner passivity of the will. The dynamic simile of the dance, together with words and phrases such as "weic[h]" (*soft*), "geschmeidig star[k]" (*supple and strong*), "dreh[en]" (*to turn*), and "Kraft" (*power*), emphasizes the effortless energy and grace of the panther's movement. This effect is reinforced by the regularity of the meter and the heavy use of both alliteration and assonance in phrases like "[d]er weiche Gang geschmeidig starker Schritte" (*the soft tread of supple and strong footfalls*) and "im allerkleinsten Kreise" (*in the smallest of all circles*), which lend a sense of measured, ponderous power and weight to the verse (lines 5-7). In contrast, the combination of the adjective "betäubt" (*numbed*) with the static verb "steh[en]" (*to stand*) underscores the immobility and indifference of the panther's will, which stays still and silent in the center of the circle (line 8). Interestingly, the choice of the adjective "betäubt," which is related both etymologically and semantically to the word "taub" meaning *deaf* ("Betäuben"), suggests that the animal is not only blind but also deaf to its surroundings. The panther's eyes and ears continue to function, but its mind does not retain anything it sees or hears. Similarly, its body moves in circles, full of lively power, but its will remains motionlessly dead to the world.

Although the third stanza initially hints that the tedious cycle of the panther's existence may at last be broken, it ultimately reestablishes the status quo of the previous quatrains by reiterating the major themes established in the rest of the poem. As before, the panther itself is

never the grammatical subject; instead, only its eyelid is the agent of the action. This eyelid is referred to as "der Vorhang der Pupille" (*the curtain of the pupil*), a curiously inanimate metaphor that further depersonalizes the animal (line 9). With its theatrical associations, this image suggests that the panther is not a living being worthy of empathy but rather a stage displayed for spectators' amusement. Additionally, the juxtaposition of motion and immobility returns with the image of "der Glieder angespannte Stille" (*the tensed stillness of the limbs*) (line 11). The alliteration in this phrase evokes the rhythmic pacing of the panther while knitting the contradictory concepts of tension and stillness together.

Finally, the third stanza repeats the idea from the first stanza that the panther receives but does not retain sensory impressions. The first three lines give the reader some hope that an image from the outside world will finally penetrate the panther's stupor. Two dashes interrupt the flow of these three lines at key points, increasing the sense of tension and anticipation as the reader waits to discover what the effect of the image will be. But the final line reestablishes the status quo introduced in the first stanza by explaining that the image "hört im Herzen auf zu sein" (*ceases to be in the heart*) (lines 9-12). Notably, this final line is shorter than the rest of the poem by an entire foot. Like the image suddenly ceasing to exist in the heart of the panther, the line itself ends prematurely, denying the reader any closure. With their emphasis on the transience and superficiality of the panther's perceptions, the first and third quatrains thus bookend the poem, conveying a sense of immutability and futility. In the end, this last stanza retreads the same ground as the first, circling back to the beginning of the poem much like the panther pacing in its cage.

Not only the individual stanzas but also the overall structure of the poem itself enhances the poet's description of the circling panther. All three stanzas, with the sole exception of the last

line of the poem, share the same pattern of rhyme (ABAB) and meter (iambic pentameter), evoking the monotony of the panther's existence through the repetition of poetic form. At the same time, the alternation of both terminal rhymes and weak and strong line endings lends the poem a sense of smooth, rhythmic motion much like the animal's. Just as the panther circles around to the beginning from where it started, the fourth line of each stanza circles around to the first line with which it shares its pattern of stresses and the second line with which it shares its ending rhyme.

Furthermore, Rilke freely enjambs and rhymes lines within stanzas, increasing the smoothness and interconnectedness of each set of four lines. But he refrains from enjambling or rhyming across stanzas, isolating each quatrain as a self-contained unit. These structural aspects combine to suggest in the very form of the poem an echo of the pacing panther. Just as the animal's supple, strong motion is trapped within the circles that it traces, so too the fluid, energetic motion of the lines is confined within the circle formed by each quatrain. As a result of these creative choices, *Der Panther* thus ultimately resembles the panther it depicts in both its individual stanzas and its overall form. Rilke's masterful choices of sounds, words, punctuation, and structure in the poem combine to harness a tightly leashed poetic energy which moves gracefully and powerfully in controlled and repetitive circles, just like the powerful yet passive panther trapped inside its cage.

Works Cited

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