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"Dieu qui est entre les langues": Rilke's Bilingual Poetics

Rilke lived between languages. Born in Prague in 1875, where a minority besides the Czech-speaking majority spoke German,¹ he moved to Germany in 1896 but made Paris the center of his life in 1902.² For much of the second part of his life, interrupted by the First World War and frequent travels, French was the language of his immediate surroundings and many of his correspondences, while German remained almost exclusively the language of his poetry (with some experiments in Russian, French, and Italian).³ After moving to Valais in 1921, he could still separate the language of his quotidian life – the French mostly spoken in and around Sierre beside a Swiss dialect particularly difficult to understand⁴ – and his poetic idiom, a literary German, for a few years. Yet, in the winter of 1923/24, encouraged by Baladine Klossowska, Rilke started writing poetry in French and, thus, as he wrote to Antoinette Bonstetten, the French language began to intrude on the terrain it was supposed to protect:

J'ai pensé, de cette façon, de dégager l'autre langue [l'allemand] de presque tout emploi qui n'est pas d'art et d'en faire la pure matière de mon travail verbal. J'ai réussi pendant quelque temps –, puis, tout d'un coup, cet hiver, le français commençait à empiéter sur le terrain qu'il devait protéger. Un peu malgré moi j'ai fini par remplir tout un cahier de "vers" français qui ne sont pas (vous le devinez) bien avouables.⁵

[I thought, in this way, to remove the other language [German] from virtually all use save for art and to make of it the pure matter of my verbal employ. I managed for quite some time, then suddenly, this winter, French began to encroach on the very terrain it was meant to protect.

1 Rilke learned Czech at the German school he attended in Prague and was well-acquainted with the city's Czech literary scene, yet the Czech language never seems to have played as big a role in his life as it did in Kafka's. Cf. Bernard Dieterle, "Das Übersetzerische Werk," in *Rilke-Handbuch*, ed. Manfred Engel, Dorothea Lauterbach (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2013), 454–479, here 460. On Kafka's languages, cf. Marek Nekula, *Franz Kafka and His Prague Contexts* (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2016).

2 For details about Rilke's life, Schnack's *Chronik* is still the most extensive and reliable source: Ingeborg Schnack, *Rainer Maria Rilke: Chronik seines Lebens und seines Werkes, 1875–1926* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1996).

3 For his early poems in Russian, see Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke* (= SW), ed. Ernst Zinn, 6 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1955–1966), 2:749, and 4:947–971. For two fragments in Italian, of which the first belongs to his drafts "Aus dem Nachlaß des Grafen C. W." ("From the Remains of Count C.W."), see Rilke, SW 2:810; references to this edition will be cited hereafter as SW, followed by volume and page numbers.

4 The Château de Muzot, in which Rilke resided, lies only a few hundred meters away from the Raspille, the stream that marks the language shift between French to the west (where Sierre and Muzot are) and German to the east.

5 Rainer Maria Rilke to Antoinette de Bonstetten, 12 April 1924, in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Lettres autour d'un jardin* (Paris: La Délirante, 1977), 22.

A little in spite of myself, I ended up filling an entire notebook with French "verse," works which you understand are not wholly irreproachable.]⁶

This threat that the language Rilke was surrounded by might enter the realm of his poetic production was countered, however, by his insight that German, like any language, had its limits, and there were certain possibilities that only a word in another language, such as French, could offer. When attempting to translate Baudelaire's poem "L'Invitation au voyage" ("Invitation to the Voyage"), Rilke seems to have concluded that the differences between the languages – what Benjamin termed "die Art des Meinens"⁷ ("the way of meaning it")⁸ at around the same time, in the foreword to his Baudelaire translations – were too great to write a German version: "Nos expressions sont trop différentes par leur valeur vocale: pour rendre 'calme' il nous manque une parole (un mot) avec un *a* au milieu, notre '*u*' dans '*Ruh*' n'est pas assez large ni assez tranquille" ("Our expressions differ too much in their vocal values: to render '*calme*' we lack a word with an *a* in the middle, the *u* in our '*Ruh*' is neither long nor serene enough"),⁹ he writes to Klossowska on 12 March 1921, and he continues to elaborate the phonic details, the soundscape,¹⁰ of Baudelaire's poem. For Rilke, it is not so much at the semantic level but at a sonic level that languages seem to be incommensurable and thus untranslatable.¹¹ It is not surprising, then, that Rilke – in the linguistic crisis between his native German and his chosen French, which he at first described in martial terms – claimed that only a knowledge of *all* languages would suffice to "say everything":

6 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters around a Garden*, trans. William Stone (New York: Seagull Books, 2024), 20.

7 Walter Benjamin, "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers," *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. IV/1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972), 9–21: 14.

8 Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, ed. Marcus Bullock, Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge/MA, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 253–263: 257. Benjamin began translating the *Tableaux Parisiens* in 1914 and published them in 1923.

9 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Lettres françaises à Merline 1919–1922* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), 109; Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to Merline (1919–1922)*, trans. Jesse Browner (New York: Paragon, 1989), 89.

10 On this term, cf. Michael Auer, "Lyrical Soundscapes: Klopstock und die deutschsprachige Romantik," *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 143.4 (2004): 501–27.

11 At the same time, Rilke, of course, continued his translations as an impossible but also necessary and unavoidable task when reading and writing in several languages. In his notebook no. 38, which precedes the notebook in which he started drafting poems in French, he drafted a translation of Baudelaire's poem "Les Plaintes d'un Icare" ("The Laments of an Icarus"). Although the translation will later be published in *Inselschiff* 2.4 (1921): 165–66, the complex writing process in the notebook shows how much Rilke struggled with it. For further details on the writing and printing process of this translation, cf. Laura Marie Pohlmann, *Das Quellenrepertorium als Archivpublikation: Zur Überlieferungsgeschichte der Werke Rilkes* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2023), 418–19. On the tonality and use of sounds in Baudelaire's poem and Rilke's and George's translation of it, see Urs Engeler's remarks in *Poesie und Wiederholung* (Hildesheim: Universitätsverlag Hildesheim, 2022), 109–117.

Hélas, pour dire *tout*, il faudrait savoir *toutes* les langues. Je me rappelle, par exemple, qu'une des premières raisons de me passer une poésie française fut l'absence de tout équivalent à ce délicieux mot: Verger ...¹²

[Unfortunately, to say all, one must know all languages. I recollect that one of the first reasons for forming a poem in French was the absence of any equivalent to the delectable word: *Verger* ...]¹³

Rilke's crisis of writing after he had finished the *Duino Elegies* and *The Sonnets to Orpheus* was twofold: he wanted to have German as his only and protected poetic language, while he also needed other languages to write what he was not able to write in German or, more specifically, in the "Rilkische," the "Rilkean," as Manfred Engel called it:¹⁴ the poetic idiom that Rilke had developed and refined for well over twenty years. Even writing in French would not be enough to that end: "im Grund müßte man alle Sprachen schreiben" – "one would have to write in all languages" – he remarked in a letter to Marie von Mutius on 15 January 1918.¹⁵

While working on *The Sonnets to Orpheus* in early 1922 – which, in turn, contain effects and idioms from his Valéry translation¹⁶ – Rilke remarked on a few words in French for which it seemed difficult to find an equivalent in German. Indeed, the idea of the linguistic equivalence of two words could not be more un-Rilkean. While "Rilkisch" is an idiom that tends to highlight certain semantic aspects of a word and resemantizes it within the poem – the readers cannot know what it means without reading the poem, or the cycle of poems, which becomes, as it were, its own dictionary – Rilke also follows the traces and effects of the words themselves, without superimposing an entirely new meaning upon them. *The Sonnets to Orpheus* and all subsequent works articulate sonic and literal aspects of language.

In a letter to Wunderly-Volkart from 18 February 1922, in a correspondence which itself meanders between German and French, Rilke notes down a few words in French that will later be the nucleus for a whole book, which, at the time, he had not even thought of starting to write and would only begin one and a half years later. These French words are, as Rilke writes, "schmerzliche Stellen," "painful places" that make him feel a lack in his poetic language, German:

¹² Rilke, *Lettres autour d'un jardin*, 22

¹³ Rilke, *Letters around a Garden*, 20.

¹⁴ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Kommentierte Ausgabe in vier Bänden, Supplementband: Gedichte in französischer Sprache*, ed. Manfred Engel and Dorothea Lauterbach, trans. Rätus Luck (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 2003), 396. This edition will be cited hereafter as *KA Supp.*, followed by page numbers.

¹⁵ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe in zwei Bänden*, ed. Horst Nalewski (Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig: Insel, 1991), 656–657.

¹⁶ See Christoph König, "O komm und geh": *Skeptische Lektüren der 'Sonette an Orpheus' von Rilke* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2014).

'Offrande' und 'verger' und das Wort 'absence', in dem großen *positiven* Sinn, in dem Valéry es geprägt hat, – *das* waren so die schmerzlichen Stellen, die mir manchmal während der Arbeit wünschenswerth gemacht hätten, die avantagen der einzelnen Sprachen alle in *einer* zu fassen und *dann* zu schreiben: *dann* zu schreiben!!¹⁷

["Offrande" and "vergers" and the word "absence," in the great *positive* sense in which Valéry coined it, – those were the painful places that sometimes made me wish, while working, that I could have combined the advantages of the individual languages in *one* and *then* write: *then* write!!]

Rilke singles out three words, the first of which, "offrande," a (votive) offering, will later develop into a draft¹⁸ and a double poem that he began in French and then wrote in German.¹⁹ The second, "verger," an orchard of the kind found in Valais near Sierre where Rilke lived, became the title and central word of his last volume of verse published during his lifetime, *Vergers*. The third, "absence," was formed by the writer whose poetic language seemed to spill over into his own use of words in his verse from the early 1920s to his death: Paul Valéry. Only two years later, one of Rilke's motivations for becoming a French poet would be that Valéry could not read German,²⁰ and Valéry saw to it that Rilke was able to publish his French verse in his revue *Commerce* and subsequently in the Éditions of Gallimard's distinguished *Nouvelle Revue Française* in 1926.²¹ Yet the "painful places" in language were not just these three words that were missing in German, but the more fundamental idea that a poet should write in *all* languages or in one language as if it were all languages. The *geminatio*, "and then write: then write!!," that follows this idea seems almost independent from any specific object of writing. Instead, it advocates for the advantage of having an all-encompassing language at one's disposal. With such a language, one needs only to *write*. It is important to note that Rilke does not use the German word for "advantage," *Vorteil*, but the *French* word, *avantage*. However, he does not directly employ the French word but a Germanized version that uses a German article and ending: "*die* avantagen." Such an expression is impossible to translate because it presents itself as a translational process, an utterance (*parole*) in motion between the languages. It moves from German into French and halfway back into German. The interferences of transpositions between the languages become the locus of Rilke's work in the last years of his life. He does not aim to create one overarching poetic language – a language before Babel, as it were – that could encompass the totality of sensual experience and

¹⁷ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe an Nanny Wunderly-Volkart*, ed. Rätus Luck, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1977), 1:676.

¹⁸ Rainer Maria Rilke, "L'Offrande fanée," in *SW* 2:701.

¹⁹ Rainer Maria Rilke, "Ex voto" and "Que veux-tu que je mets sous ton image," in *SW* 2:143, 792.

²⁰ Cf. Rilke, *KA Supp.*, 391.

²¹ Rainer Maria Rilke | *Vergers* | suivi des | Quatrains Valaisans | avec un portrait de l'auteur par | Baladine | gravé sur bois par | G. Aubert | Éditions | de la Nouvelle Revue Française | Paris, 3 rue de Grenelle 1926.

thus the world ("Welt"), as the narrator claims for great Arabic poetry in Rilke's narrative essay "Urgeräusch."²² Rather, the ideal poetic language would combine all languages and the sounds of all languages: an echolalia that not only repeats but analyzes words in repeated series of *geminations*.²³

The *avantage* of one word, in particular, seemed to Rilke too great to miss and impossible to integrate into a monolingual German idiom: *verger*. While *verger* can be translated as "orchard" or, in German, "Obstgarten," its specific qualities for Rilke lie not only in the peculiar form of a *verger* in Valais, where it is something between a garden, a larger orchard, and uncultivated nature, with no fixed place in the geographical order, moving between nature and culture and the beautiful and practical.²⁴ Like Baudelaire's vowels, it is also the order of sounds and letters that opens for Rilke the possibility of writing a cycle of poems dedicated to this word and, in turn, named "Verger," and then publishing his last book, in French, under the title "Vergers." The first of the seven poems that form the "Verger"-cycle reads:

Peut-être que si j'ai osé t'écrire,
langue prêtée, c'était pour employer
ce nom rustique dont l'unique empire
me tourmentait depuis toujours: Verger.

Pauvre poète qui doit élire
pour dire tout ce que ce nom comprend,
un à peu près trop vague qui chavire,
ou pire: la clôture qui défend.

Verger: ô privilège d'une lyre
de pouvoir te nommer simplement;
nom sans pareil qui les abeilles attire,
nom qui respire et attend ...

Nom clair qui cache le printemps antique,
tout aussi plein que transparent,
et qui dans ses syllabes symétriques
redouble tout et devient abondant.²⁵

[If I dared to write you, borrowed
tongue, perhaps it was to use
this rustic name whose rare kingdom
always has tormented me: Orchard.

Poor poet, who must select
to say all that your name implies,
a vague approximate capsized,
or worse: a fence that protects.

Orchard: oh lyre's privilege
to be able just to name you simply;
unequaled name attracting bees,
name that waits and breathes ...

Bright name hiding antique spring,
As much transparent as it's full,
Which in its symmetry of syllables
Becomes abundant by redoubling all.]²⁶

The poem presents a tentative reflection – starting with a "Peut-être," "Maybe" – of the writer's bold move to write in French. Shortly after writing the poem,²⁷ Rilke sent a copy to Valéry, which led to the publication of *Vergers* in 1926. The question as to whether he dares to write in French, a language only "borrowed" – "si j'ai osé t'écrire, langue prêtée" – and his letters to Klossowska, Valéry, and others are closely related. Valéry responds, "Délicieux 'Verger.' J'ai du moins votre poème français entre les mains et l'étrange grâce qui est la sienne me donne une impression directe et inestimable de votre poésie pure et profonde."²⁸ The first formulation, "Délicieux 'Verger,'" cannot only be read to refer to the "delicate 'Orchard'" of Rilke's verse but, like in the poem itself, the French word "*verger*," which is (perhaps more than the orchards in Valais) the poem's subject. This poem hardly says anything about the cultivated nature that constitutes a *verger*, even if the following poems of the cycle will discuss some aspects of the *verger Valaisan*. Rather, it focuses on linguistic qualities, "ses syllabes symétriques / redouble tout et devient abondant" ("its symmetric syllables / redouble everything and become abundant"). The poem scrutinizes the word and divides it into two elements, *ver* and *ger*, which form a literal repetition (*er* – *er*) while indicating two different but closely related "e" sounds.²⁹ It is not so much the orchard which becomes "abundant" ("abondant") but language: the *ver* that sounds like *vers* ("verse") and Latin *ver* ("spring," thus the line indicating that the word *verger* contains the "antique spring"), "Nom clair [i.e., *verger*] qui cache le printemps antique [i.e., *ver*]"). The same sound will open the following poem in the cycle, "Vers."³⁰ Yet this "Vers" does not mean "verse" but "toward": a movement of "heavy desires" ("désires pesants"). Thus, the sound *ver*, contained in *verger*, encompasses a locus between nature and culture, the *verse* of the poem, and the "movement toward": the *vers* of desire. Yet it is by no means limited to these meanings but becomes "abondant," through the repetition of a limited number of sounds. It is precisely the reduction of the soundscape that makes

26 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Orchards: A Sequence of French Poems*, trans. Alfred Poulin, Jr. (Port Townsend: Graywolf Press, 1982), 45.

27 Zinn comments that it was written around 1 March 1924 (see Rilke, *SW* 2:929), but we should assume a slightly earlier date of composition, as Rilke sent a fair copy to Valéry on 22 February 1924.

28 Schnack, *Chronik*, 908.

29 Engeler shows in his analysis of the "e"-sound in Rilke's Baudelaire translation how the last strophe of "Die Klagen eines Ikarus" brings closed and open "e's" together (Engeler, *Poesie und Wiederholung*, 117).

30 Rilke, *SW* 2:532.

22 Rilke, *SW* 6:1085–93.

23 For a critical history of the concept of echolalia, see Daniel Heller-Roazen's *Echolalias: On the Forgetting of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

24 Cf. Rilke, *KA Supp.*, 456–58.

25 Rilke, *SW* 2:531–532.

it abundant. The sounds in Rilke's poems move from *echolalia* to *palilalia*: the verse repeats given words and then composes the word order in such a way that the repetition of the sounds is projected onto the propositional sequence. In the poem at hand, sequences such as "prêtée, c'était," "nom [...] dont," "élire / pour dire," "nom comprend," and "chavire, / ou pire"³¹ move the soundscape, which has been an integral part of all poetry from Homer onward,³² to an extreme. At times, *Vergers* seems to unite the means of verse and elements of sound poetry that were developed a few years earlier, taking further impulses of French poetry found in the works of Tristan Tzara and Hugo Ball.³³

In his French poems, Rilke follows the structure of language, particularly the sounds and letters of individual words. Thus, he writes to Valéry that the lines of the poem "Peut-être que si j'ai osé t'écire" were "dictated" to him: "quelques vers (?) qui m'étaient dictés."³⁴ The *vers*, the verses, are "dictated" by the *ver-ger*, the "verse-orchard." The passive voice in Rilke's formulation does not refer to an otherworldly origin of the poem, however, but to a passive potentiality that engages with the force of language and its individual form in singular and, in Rilke's view, untranslatable words. The sounds in Rilke's French poems often seem on the brink of taking over "meaning," while they transform how the signifying process operates. Rilke's later verse in French does not start with a topic or *topos*, or the sensual experience of the world, but with the sensual experience of language that the poems reenact and analyze.

This form of passive creativity relies on an intervention in what Rilke sees as a circular flow of language. In *Vergers*, he singles out the fountain as an analogy of the principal structure of the lyric. The cycle "Verger," which lies at the structural and poetic center of the volume *Vergers*, defines the fountain, in turn, as the center of the *verger*. At the heart of the "orchard," there is a "fountain":

Mais à ton centre, la calme fontaine,
presque dormant en son ancien rond,
de ce contraste parle à peine,
tant en elle il se confond.³⁵

[But in your center, the calm fountain,
almost sleeping in her ancient round,
barely mentions contradictions,
since in her they're so well blended.]³⁶

If the *verger* is a means of poetic production *in* and *of* language, then it comprises the fountain, which, in turn, presents its cyclical structure. Articulating the fountain, the verse articulates the circular coming forth of language.

In the sequence of *Vergers*, the fountain has already been introduced as the poetic subject of poem 26, "La Fontaine":

Je ne veux qu'une seule leçon, c'est la tienne,
fontaine, qui en toi-même retombes, –
celle des eaux risquées auxquelles incombe
ce céleste retour vers la vie terrienne.

Autant que ton multiple murmure
rien ne saurait me servir d'exemple;³⁷

[I want just one lesson, and it's yours,
fountain falling back into yourself –
that of risked waters on which depends
this celestial return towards earthly life.

Nothing will serve as example
as much as your multiple murmur:]³⁸

The "one lesson" ("seule leçon") of the fountain that circles around itself and thus replicates the hydrological cycle includes another *vers*: another verse that is presented as a circular movement toward ("vers") itself: "ce céleste retour *vers* la vie terrienne" ("this celestial return *towards* earthly life"). It might seem that the poem presents its hydrology – writing about the cyclical nature of water in a form of language that is itself cyclical in its *vers*, in its movement "toward" itself – as a description of its poesis. However, the structural analogy between water and language requires an intervention: precisely interrupting its cyclical movement, which constitutes poetic language. *Vers* is not circular but rather partakes in the circularity of language by an interruption or discontinuity. In the poem "Eau qui se presse," which precedes "La Fontaine" in the sequence of *Vergers*, the cycle of "running water," which is "drunk by the forgetful earth," is characterized by a short moment of hesitation in the hand of the speaker who addresses the water ("Eau qui se presse, qui court –, eau oublieuse / que la distraite terre boit, / hésite un petit instant dans ma main creuse, / souviens-toi!"³⁹). The gesture of the hand and the language of the poem in its address constitute the lyric by *interrupting* the cycle. At the same time, this intervention is the premise of memory. A pure cycle would be without the faculty of remembrance by virtue of its self-identity. Rilke's lyric, however, has at its core the imperative to remember: "souviens-toi!"⁴⁰

37 Rilke, *SW* 2:530.

38 Rilke, *Orchards*, 41.

39 Rilke, *SW* 2:524. The phrase "souviens-toi" ("remember") can be understood as a fragmentary echo – or memory – of Baudelaire's poem "Horloge" ("The Clock"). Both poems partake in a cyclical structure that reflects the clockwork or course of the water, respectively. The repeated "Souviens-toi!" is also the place where *Les Fleurs du mal* becomes multilingual, transforming the reflection of time and remembrance into a scene of translation: "Remember! Souviens-toi, prodigue! Esto memor!" Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 81.

40 Rilke, *SW* 2:524.

31 Rilke, *SW* 2:531–532.

32 See Hermann Josef Krapp, *Die akustischen Phänomene in der Ilias* (Munich: Mikrokopie, 1965).

33 Cf. Tobias Wilke, *Sound Writing: Experimental Modernism and the Poetics of Articulation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2022).

34 Schnack, *Chronik*, 902.

35 Rilke, *SW* 2:533.

36 Rilke, *Orchards*, 47.

By contrast, the fountain not only presents but embodies a hydrological cycle that interrupts, or pauses, itself. For Rilke, "La Fontaine" – and the "Verger" around it – is the most radical possibility of poetic language: one that interrupts itself and requires, as it were, only a passive recording: writing a *dictée*, as Rilke explains to Valéry, like a student in a French lycée. The "example" ("exemple") of the fountain lies in its capability to interrupt itself, as it were: to hesitate for a moment before falling. The fountain becomes the "only lesson" for the *poète-élève*, the poet-student, by presenting a comprehensive water cycle that demonstrates the moment of caesura itself, in that the jet of water produces a moment of standstill before it falls. Therefore, it makes the intervention of the hand, as in the poem "Eau qui se presse," seem to be unnecessary. The voice that the poem articulates recognizes specific qualities that it can take as a model: the jet of water moves through numerous modulations and is, therefore, like language, capable of infinite nuances. The speaker thus becomes a veritable "pupil," an "élève,"⁴¹ of the fountain.⁴² Moreover, the "murmur" ("murmure")⁴³ of the water is itself a kind of "song" ("chant"),⁴⁴ which, however, produces a moment of "silence."⁴⁵ This silence, in turn, establishes a connection to the poem because it is, yet again, a form of interruption.⁴⁶ Only where the cyclical movement of the water, or song, contains this interruption is the fountain constituted and, with it, Rilke's poem. The last stanza reads:

Mais ce qui plus que ton chant vers toi me décide
c'est cet instant de silence en délire
lorsqu'à la nuit, à travers ton élan liquide
passe ton propre retour qu'un souffle retire.⁴⁷

[But what's more convincing than your singing
is that instant of ecstatic silence when
at night, drawn back by a breath, your own
return passes through your liquid leaping.]⁴⁸

41 Rilke, SW 2:530.

42 Böschstein draws attention to the homophony of *élève* ('student') und *s'élever* ('to rise') as well as *émuler* ('to emulate') und *murmure* ('murmur') in "La Fontaine." The pedagogical scene, too, follows from the sounds of language. The premise of learning from the fountain – its possibility in the poem – springs forth from language. Bernhard Böschstein, "Rainer Maria Rilkes französische Gedichte," *Rilke – ein europäischer Dichter aus Prag*, ed. Peter Demetz, Joachim W. Storck, and Hans Dieter Zimmermann (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1998), 191–200, here 196. He generally notes the "übermäßige Aufmerksamkeit auf Klangverhältnisse, die Rilke als einen Manipulator einer ihm fremden Sprache walten läßt" (Böschstein, "Rainer Maria Rilkes französische Gedichte," 198).

43 Rilke, SW 2:530.

44 Rilke, SW 2:530.

45 Rilke, SW 2:530.

46 On sound and the gesture of silence in Rilke, see also my remarks in "Rilke's 'Gehör': Hearing and the Structure of Silence in *The Book of Hours*, 'Primal Sound,' and *The Sonnets to Orpheus*," in *Rilke's Poetry and Phenomenology's Horizons*, ed. Brad Harmon and Alexander Sorenson (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, forthcoming).

47 Rilke, SW 2:530.

48 Rilke, *Orchards*, 41.

The "instant of silence" ("cet instant de silence") is the moment that decidedly draws the poem's speaker – or writer – toward the fountain ("ce qui [...] vers toi me décide"). Yet again, the movement "toward" that initiates the learning process finds its articulation in the "vers": the *ver-ger* which is a leaning-in or turning-toward: the *vertere* of *vers*.

The "pure matière de mon travail verbal,"⁴⁹ the pure matter of Rilke's later work, is, however, by no means only sonic. While water as the "material" of verse, as it were, is famously reflected in Pindar's poetological opening of Olympian 1 (ἄριστον μὲν ὕδωρ, "Best is water"),⁵⁰ the echoes of translation⁵¹ between Rilke's verse and Greek poetry, and Pindar in particular, center around the *verger* itself. While Rilke was able to read Latin and Greek to a certain extent,⁵² it seems likely, as Dehrmann convincingly argued for *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, that he worked with French translations of the classics.⁵³

There is one passage in particular that seems suited to the autumnal landscape of the *Vergers*: Pindar's fragment 153.⁵⁴ It assembles the key elements of the *verger*: the fruit-trees of the orchard, the autumnal light, and, not least of all, Dionysus:⁵⁵

Plut. *Is. Osir.* 35.365A ὅτι δ' οὐ μόνον τοῦ οἴνου Διόνυσον ἀλλὰ καὶ πάσης ὑγρᾶς φύσεως Ἕλληνες ἡγοῦνται κύριον καὶ ἀρχηγόν, ἀρκεῖ Πίνδαρος μάρτυς εἶναι λέγων·
δενδρέων δὲ νομὸν Διώνυσος πολυγαθῆς αὐξάνοι, ἀγνὸν φέγγος ὁπώρας

[Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris*. "That the Greeks consider Dionysus to be lord and master not only of wine but of all liquid nature, Pindar is a sufficient witness when he says": may Dionysus, bringer of joy, foster the grove of trees, the holy light at summer's end]⁵⁶

49 Rilke, *Lettres autour d'un jardin*, 22.

50 Pindar, *Olympian Odes, Pythian Odes*, ed. and trans. William H. Race (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 46–47.

51 The formulation is Rainer Nägele's; see Rainer Nägele, *Echoes of Translation: Reading between Texts* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

52 On Rilke's Greek, see Ernst Zinn, "Rainer Maria Rilke und die Antike," in *Antike und Abendland*, ed. Bruno Snell, vol. 3 (Hamburg: Schröder, 1948), 201–250.

53 For Ovid, the evidence is ample; see Mark-Georg Dehrmann, "Rilkes Ovid: Zu den Quellen der 'Sonette an Orpheus,'" in *Über 'Die Sonette an Orpheus' von Rilke: Lektüren*, ed. Christoph König and Kai Bremer (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2016), 312–324.

54 Por mentions the fragment in his discussion of Rilke's poem "Herbsttag," but without going into its relevance for the *Vergers*. See Peter Por, "Rilkes 'Herbsttag': Die Aneignung der Tradition (Pindar, D'Annunzio, Symbolismus) zum 'Kunstwerk,'" in *Rilke heute: Der Ort des Dichters in der Moderne*, ed. Vera Hauschild (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 140–159.

55 The presence of Dionysus in the *Verger* is almost explicit, even though he is never named, in the extensive description of the vineyards and grapes related to Eros, particularly in the cycle of poems called "Éros" (Rilke, SW 2:525–527). See Bernhard Böschstein, "Antike Gottheiten in den französischen Gedichten Rilkes," in *Rilke heute: Der Ort des Dichters in der Moderne*, ed. Vera Hauschild (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 214–235.

56 Pindar, *Nemean Odes, Isthmian Odes, Fragments*, ed. and trans.

The common French translation for the $\delta\epsilon\nu\delta\rho\acute{\epsilon}\omega\nu\ \delta\epsilon\ \nu\omicron\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$ is *verger*. Indeed, in 1923 – precisely when Rilke started working on *Vergers* – Pindar's Isthmian odes and fragments were published for the first time as the fourth volume of the edition that appeared with *Les Belles Lettres* in Paris. This 1923 standard edition renders fr. 153 as: "Puisse, Dionysos, auteur de tant de joies, faire pousser les *vergers*; Dionysos, pure lumière de l'automne" ("May Dionysus, source of so much joy, make the *orchards* grow; Dionysus, pure light of autumn").⁵⁷ The word *verger*, from which Rilke developed his poetics in the French language, may have found its way to him from two sides: on the one hand, from its quotidian use in Valais, and on the other, as a translation of $\delta\epsilon\nu\delta\rho\acute{\epsilon}\omega\nu\ \delta\epsilon\ \nu\omicron\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$, of Pindar's orchard. If the *ver-ger* contains in itself – in Rilke's analytical poetry – the *vers* ("verse"), the same may be said of Pindar's orchard if we look at the Greek formulation. $\nu\omicron\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$ is a regular term for "herbage" or "pasture land" in Homer and Pindar.⁵⁸ At the same time, in a Rilkean reading oriented toward the soundscape rather than the landscape, $\nu\omicron\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$ sounds like $\nu\acute{o}\mu\omicron\varsigma$, with which it is also closely etymologically related.⁵⁹ $\nu\acute{o}\mu\omicron\varsigma$, beside its meaning as "law" or "custom," is also, already in Pindar, the word for the lyrical soundscape: the melody or tune.⁶⁰ To be sure, Pindar's fragment does not conflate these terms. Rather, they are part of a continual poetic echo in Rilke's linguistic cosmos, in which the orchard becomes a tune. The words move toward, *vers*, one another in the verse of the *Vergers*.

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⁵⁷ Pindar, *Tome IV: Isthmiques, Fragments*, ed. and trans. Aimé Puech (1923; repr., Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1961), 214; my emphasis.

⁵⁸ See " $\nu\omicron\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$," in William J. Slater, *Lexicon to Pindar* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1969), 353; and " $\nu\omicron\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$," in Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, with a Revised Supplement (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1180.

⁵⁹ According to Liddell, Scott, and Jones, both are derived from $\nu\acute{\epsilon}\mu\omega$ (see " $\nu\acute{o}\mu\omicron\varsigma$ " and " $\nu\omicron\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$," in *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1180).

⁶⁰ See " $\nu\acute{o}\mu\omicron\varsigma$," in *Lexicon to Pindar*, 353.

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