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## The Unity of Horror and Bliss: Rilke on Death, Grief, and God

### Abstract:

This study employs Dennis Klass' (1997) continuing bonds theory to analyze Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "My Life is Not This Precipitous Hour". It attempts to display the poem as a sublimation of Rilke's belief that life must not be stunted in favour of a preoccupation with isolation following bereavement. Klass suggests that while full recovery is not always possible, moving on, as is widely believed, is not necessary for a normal life post-loss. In fact, recovery is equally possible if one chooses not to move on and instead, integrates the deceased into their present and future lives in a healthy and compatible way. This view of mourning directly contradicted pre-established ideas, suggesting that recovery entails a complete removal of the deceased from the living's lives. Using this theorization of grief as the locus, an in-depth analysis of the aforementioned poem has been done. Rilke's letters of condolence to several of his friends have also been incorporated so as to align his ideas with loss and recovery theories of the late twentieth century.

**Keywords:** death, bereavement, continuing bonds theory, isolation recovery.

### Introduction

The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke was a rock for many of his friends, offering unwavering support and comfort in times of dire need. His letters, kept and cherished by the recipients as "talismans, the way one may keep love letters for a lifetime"<sup>1</sup>, exhibit his core beliefs: submission to God, as well as the reality of death. In order to experience God, and therefore life fully, one must not "embellish or displace death into another life"<sup>2</sup>, rather view death as an integral part of life, placing both into a totalized whole that is God.

This study then, utilizes one of Rilke's poems, "My Life is not This Precipitous Hour", from his *Book of Hours*, to extrapolate his point of view on death and coping with loss. Incorporated for further detail, are his letters, compiled into a helpful volume by Ulrich Baer and titled *The Dark Interval*. Other than Dennis Klass, the theoretical framework includes Sigmund Freud and Erich Lindemann. Using the evolution of grief patterns in psychology, as a lens, and their implications from the beginning to late twentieth century, the research employs Rilke's poem as his prescription for coping with loss. The theory of continuing bonds continues to be debated upon, given the volatile nature of bereavement patterns, which varies with certain factors, including circumstances, intensity of closeness, expectedness of the loss, etc.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, the research is confined to Klass' studies and does not delve further into twenty-first century headway made by his contemporaries.

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<sup>1</sup> Ulrich Baer, *The Dark Interval* (Modern Library, 2018), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Annemarie Kidder, *Letters on God and Letters to a Young Woman* (Northwestern University Press, 2012), 10.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret S. Stroebe, Georgios Abakoumkin, Wolfgang Stroebe, Henk Schut, "Continuing Bonds in Adjustment to Bereavement", *Personal Relationships* (Journal of International

Joan Didion, upon the death of her husband writes of grief as an unforeseen thing that “comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life”<sup>4</sup>. She talks of somatic duress, recalling Lindemann’s Cocoanut Grove report and the desire, the absolute need for solitude. “I needed to be alone,” she writes, “so that he could come back”<sup>5</sup>. The idea of death as a laminated reality, far away from life, where one can go and return from, is evident here. It is also what, as she soon realizes, is impeding her recovery. She is focusing too much on the chances of reversibility of death, and not spending enough time on accepting the bare bones reality of it.

Didion’s account exemplifies the dilemma of every person in mourning: how to make peace with death while grieving in a linear, formulaic way? Formulaic here is meant to stand for a generalized reaction to loss, a well-defined process of getting over a tragedy and beginning life anew. The life one has lived, writes Didion, changes very fast; “you sit down to dinner and life as you know it, ends”<sup>6</sup>. This ending and moving on with a new life, are both concepts familiar to us through various psychological studies. For Rilke however, moving on was neither possible nor useful. Staying with one’s pain and not withdrawing from it, remained his oeuvre<sup>7</sup>.

Acceptance and continuation are two things that Rilke absolutely stresses. The dead loved one continues to exist in one’s memories and conduct<sup>8</sup>, hence it is important to continue the things that the deceased has left incomplete. To wade through the terrible sea of pain and understand its depth is what is required. It does not mean however, that suffering is constructive. Even so, presses Rilke, one must remember that suffering will be “quietly taken down once it is no longer needed”<sup>9</sup>. One might say it is a necessary evil.

The poem under scrutiny in this study is the embodiment of Rilke’s passionate stipulations on the discordantly harmonious notes of life and death. They meet in the middle, in a dark interval, and make a sweet song. Taken from *The Book of Hours*, a collection written between 1903 and 1905, the poems contain “the gem of [Rilke’s] mature convictions” and address a God that seems “the creator of mankind”<sup>10</sup>. Deutsch’s translation effectively captures Rilke’s attempt at combining the dark and the light, and finding a middle ground to tread. Functioning as “a vessel for divine and creative conflict”, the poems “tap into the instinctive ideas which have long since surfaced from our collective unconscious”<sup>11</sup>. Rilke tries, and succeeds, in delivering a message that emphasizes a larger whole, giving credence to the Jungian ideas of collective unconscious, and asserting that a linear pattern of mourning can be discarded in favour of a dialogic relationship with the past.

## Literature Review

In order to give context to Klass’ theory, one must begin with Sigmund Freud. In his 1914 essay, *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud lays down what would soon become the “grief work hypothesis”. He describes the process of mourning as linear, with an emphasis on moving on as the only route to a stable life. He emphasized the absence created by the death of a loved one, an event that demands that “all libido [to] be withdrawn from its attachments to that object”<sup>12</sup>. His main focus remains the liberation of the ego in the essay, and to do so, he insists, the bereaved

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Association for Relationship Research, vol. 19, no.2, 2012), 2. doi:10.1111/j.1475-6811.2011.01352.x

<sup>4</sup> Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (Vintage International, 2007), 17.

<sup>5</sup> Didion, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Didion, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Ulrich Baer, *The Dark Interval* (Modern Library, 2018), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Baer, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Ulrich Baer, *The Poet’s Guide to Life* (Modern Library, 2005), 66.

<sup>10</sup> Babette Deutsch, “Introduction”, *Poems from the Book of Hours* (New Directions, 1941), iv.

<sup>11</sup> Helen Bridge, “Rainer Maria Rilke: The Book of Hours”, *Translation and Literature* (Edinburgh University Press, vol.18, no. 2, 2009), 261.

<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* (The Hogarth Press, vol. 14), 244.

must sever all ties from the deceased. He further states that holding on to the memory of a loved one is a constant shock to the libido because there is nothing to invest these feeling in. The expectancy that arises from a played back memory is met with concrete reality; the object no longer exists<sup>13</sup>. In doing so, the ego gives itself “the inducement of continuing to live”<sup>14</sup>.

This essay became the basis for grief theorization in the following half of the century. With the World Wars ravaging most of Europe and the death toll mounting, unresolved trauma, pertaining to loss of loved ones, began to manifest itself in a majority of the population. Erich Lindemann, a prominent advocate of mental health in the wake of World War II, presented his own take on grief resolution. He based his ideas on Freud’s hypothesis, and wrote a report on the Cocoanut Grove disaster in the prohibition era. His findings detailed five kinds of symptoms in patients experiencing acute grief: “somatic distress, preoccupation with the image of the deceased, guilt, hostile reactions and loss of patterns of conduct”<sup>15</sup>.

For Lindemann, grief took on a form of pathology, a disease that had to be cured using one direct solution, what he articulated as “. . . emancipation from the bondage to the deceased, readjustment to the environment in which the deceased is missing, and the formation of new relationships”<sup>16</sup>.

Lindemann gave equal weight to the severance of bonds as well as delayed mourning, insisting that “distorted reactions” to grief, including postponement in favour of responsibility, exacerbated the process, and created a deeper emotional lack over a period of time<sup>17</sup>. Following Lindemann, psychiatric circles continued to believe in the severance approach to full recovery. It was not until 1996, following the publishing of Dennis Klass’s *Continuing Bonds*, that the general consensus was challenged.

*Continuing Bonds* rejected the notion of a generalized cure for healthy resumption of post-loss life and stated that prior models of grieving, with a focus on detachment, “denied the reality of how many people grieve”<sup>18</sup>. Klass believed that there was a misconception regarding methods of bereavement that began with a “misinterpretation” of Freud’s hypothesis. He stated that Freud never talked about grief as we know it, rather he was referring to metapsychology and “the child’s decathecting from, and then internalizing, the parent in the Oedipus drama”<sup>19</sup>. In other words, Freud focused on the male child’s feelings of loss after realizing his father’s share in the mother’s love. Klass also contested Lindemann’s findings, asserting that Lindemann’s “uncritical” acceptance of Freud’s work “codified the misreading of Freud’s essay”<sup>20</sup>.

In the 1980s, many reports came forward with the results that many healthy, well-adjusted individuals thrived despite not severing their bonds with the dead. In other words, it was possible to live with the dead, so to speak. This idea is present in many cultures already. The entire African American identity rests upon the ancestral heritage of the African peoples. Tribal memory works in much the same way. Among the Aztecs, the line between the living and the dead was “so blurred that living people conversed and partied with the dead”<sup>21</sup>. Similarly, people

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<sup>13</sup> Freud, 255.

<sup>14</sup> Freud, 257.

<sup>15</sup> Erich Lindemann, “Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief”, (*The American Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 101, no. 2, 1944), 142.

<sup>16</sup> Lindemann, 143.

<sup>17</sup> Lindemann, 145.

<sup>18</sup> Bill Webster, “Continuing Bonds”. (*Grief Journey*, 2014), [griefjourney.com/startjourney/for-professionals-and-caregivers/articles-for-professionals-and-caregivers/continuing-bonds/](http://griefjourney.com/startjourney/for-professionals-and-caregivers/articles-for-professionals-and-caregivers/continuing-bonds/).

<sup>19</sup> Dennis Klass, “The Sociology of Continuing Bonds”, *Handbook of the Sociology of Death, Grief and Bereavement* (Routledge, 2017), 2.

<sup>20</sup> Klass, 3.

<sup>21</sup> G. W. Conrad and A. A. Demarest, *Religion and Empire* (Cambridge, 2005), 152.

of the Iban of the Oceania-Indonesia region firmly believed that the dead could influence the living<sup>22</sup>. Tony Walter talks about the re-integration of the dead person back into life through a stark burial and a prayer of acknowledgement, affirming the dead as a continuing member of the family, in spirit<sup>23</sup>.

Klass builds upon this idea, stating that after death, the roles are changed but “the dead can still be significant members of families and communities”<sup>24</sup>. He asserted that the pattern of grieving is largely based on a socially prescribed criteria, meaning that grief is a “situated interpretive and communicative activity”<sup>25</sup>. Mourning “establish[es] the meaning of the deceased’s life and death as well as the post-mortem status of the bereaved within the broader community concerned with the loss”<sup>26</sup>. This continuing bond therefore, gives meaning to life and death on multiple levels.

It is this very collectivity and meaningfulness that Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) emphasizes in his works. Born in Prague in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Rilke is recognized as one of the most “lyrically intense” German language poets. His poetry features his preoccupation with finding meaning and “an acceptance of mortality that yields an expansion of being”<sup>27</sup>. Heavily opposed to the Judeo-Christian notion of an afterlife, Rilke believed in the non-linearity of time and the human species as part of one collective whole. In a letter to Witold Hulewicz, he speaks of “a great unity”, an amalgamation of life and death where time is not perceived the way we do now<sup>28</sup>.

With this view of a grand unified whole in mind, Rilke writes his poems. The much-debated “angel” figure in his poems, he describes in the aforementioned letter, is in fact not the average Christian angel. The angel is the entity in whom there is a perfect reconciliation of life and death, a “consummation” of the “transformation of the visible into the invisible”<sup>29</sup>. One must aspire then, in Rilke’s mind, to become this angel. The poem chosen for this study is taken from the *Book of Hours*, a poetic treatise on life, death and loss. The translation used is by Babette Deutsch, published in 1941. In it, Rilke preaches the same philosophy; there needs to be an awareness and acceptance of death at all times in life, in order to live life fully and happily. There is a certain process that he prescribes in order to accomplish this and that will be discussed in the later parts of this paper. The following are the areas that this research intends to explore: Rilke’s philosophy of life and coping with bereavement; his poetry and epistolary correspondence as direct glimpses into aforementioned philosophy, and parallels between Rilke’s outlook on death and theories of coping with loss (from Freud to Lindemann and Klass).

## Discussion and Analysis

The following is Babette Deutsch’s translation of the poem under scrutiny, side by side with Rilke’s original German text:

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<sup>22</sup> Lyle B. Steadman, Craig T. Palmer and Christopher F. Tilley, “The Universality of Ancestor Worship”, *Ethnology* (University of Pittsburgh, 1996, vol. 35, no. 1)

<sup>23</sup> Tony Walter, “A New Model of Grief”, *Mortality* (Routledge, vol. 1, no. 1, 1996), 9.

<sup>24</sup> Dennis Klass, “The Sociology of Continuing Bonds”, *Handbook of the Sociology of Death, Grief and Bereavement* (Routledge, 2017), 4.

<sup>25</sup> Robert A. Neimeyer, Dennis Klass and Michael Robert Dennis, “A Socio-constructionist Account of Grief”, *Death Studies* (Routledge, vol. 38, no. 8, 2014), 486.

<sup>26</sup> Neimeyer et al., 487.

<sup>27</sup> Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy, *A Year with Rilke* (Harper Collins, 2009), 6.

<sup>28</sup> Ulrich Baer, *The Dark Interval* (Modern Library 2018), 56.

<sup>29</sup> Baer, 57.

No, my life is not this precipitous hour  
through which you see me passing at a run.  
I stand before my background like a tree.  
Of all my many mouths I am but one,  
and that which soonest chooses to be dumb.

I am the rest between two notes  
which, struck together, sound discordantly,  
because death's note would claim a higher key.

But in the dark pause, trembling, the notes meet,  
harmonious.

And the song continues sweet.  
Mein Leben ist nicht diese steile Stunde,  
darin du mich so eilen siehst.  
Ich bin ein Baum vor meinem Hintergrunde,  
ich bin nur einer meiner vielen Munde  
und jener, welcher sich am frühesten schließt.

Ich bin die Ruhe zwischen zweien Tönen,  
die sich nur schlecht aneinander gewöhnen:  
denn der Ton Tod will sich erhöhen -

Aber im dunklen Intervall versöhnen  
sich beide zitternd.

Und das Lied bleibt schön<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Babette Deutsch, *Poems from the Book of Hours* (New Directions, 1941) 20-21.

The poem reflects Rilke's approach to life; it shows that he practices what he preaches. A firm believer in individual responsibility, he advises living in the here and now. Fast-paced and "precipitous", life for him, was more than simply going through the motions. As Ulrich Baer rightly suggests, Rilke means to live life fully, regardless of whether it is light or plunged into a "dark pause". Still and persevering, he stands before the racing time like a tree, and lets the reality of death resound with the raging noise of life. The "dark pause" may also be life itself, a limbo of sorts between the first note of birth and the last note of death. The latter is always louder. It ends and sometimes overtakes life. It is our responsibility however, to let this discordant song continue in its sweetness, one that "includes parting but ultimately contributes to life"<sup>31</sup>.

Such is the surface analysis of the poem, but it goes much deeper than that. This is where Klass' framework becomes startlingly relevant. In *Continuing Bonds*, he suggests that grief resolution can reach completion if it "involves a continuing bond that the survivor maintains with the deceased"<sup>32</sup>. Rilke, in numerous condolence letters, suggests the same. To Elisabeth von Schenk, he gives a gentle reminder of the deceased having left many things to "be continued by those who outlive him"<sup>33</sup>. To Sidonie von Borutin, he advises to "move", to "continue [her brother's] life inside of [hers] insofar as it was unfinished"<sup>34</sup>. To Claire Goll, he urges to "include death in life"<sup>35</sup>. His letters are not letters of condolence, rather an admonishment to "use pain [of witnessing death] to reconnect with life"<sup>36</sup>.

Given the above stance of the poet himself, the poem in question becomes more layered. It is not simply a call to come to terms with death and accept it as a necessary part of life. Rather, it is a guide, with the poet using himself as an example, to make death a necessary part of life, to not only remember it, but actively think of it. Only by doing so, can the song of life continue sweetly.

Klass' main objective in theorizing continuing bonds, was to refute the idea that cessation of bonds with the deceased was the only route to recovery. Quoting a number of studies, he states that a continuing bond has been deemed "as symptomatic of psychological problems"<sup>37</sup>. During a study sponsored by Harvard Medical School's Department of Psychiatry at Massachusetts in 1992, it was found that bereaved children preferred continuing relationships with dead parents, in an act termed "constructing the dead"<sup>38</sup>. It was noted that the construction "facilitated [the children's] coping with their grief"<sup>39</sup> as it was seen that this process was part of the child's ongoing cognitive process. In other words, "by reminiscing, children [were] demonstrating their beginning acceptance of loss"<sup>40</sup>.

Rilke's "dark pause" then takes a much more radical meaning. His methods of coping with loss come out to be ahead of their time. He is prescribing a meeting of the notes between the dark pause, a harmonious intermingling of life and death, with death as an active part of life. Loss must be endured head-on and not left to time to heal. Time, Rilke is of the opinion, "does not console", rather it "assigns people their proper place and creates an order"<sup>41</sup>. Instead, one must live in the moment and in that moment, must attempt to "transform" everything happening to oneself "into a new familiarity and friendliness with [death]"<sup>42</sup>. The process echoes Klass' "construction" of the dead in its emphasis upon the transformative and therefore, recovery aspect of death. Reminiscing keeps the dead

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<sup>31</sup> Ulrich Baer, *The Dark Interval* (Modern Library, 2018), 7

<sup>32</sup> Dennis Klass, *Continuing Bonds* (Taylor and Francis, 1999), 3.

<sup>33</sup> Ulrich Baer, *The Dark Interval* (Modern Library, 2018), 15.

<sup>34</sup> Baer, 17.

<sup>35</sup> Baer, 50.

<sup>36</sup> Baer, 10.

<sup>37</sup> Dennis Klass, *Continuing Bonds* (Taylor and Francis, 1999), 4.

<sup>38</sup> Klass, 73.

<sup>39</sup> Klass, 74.

<sup>40</sup> Klass, 109.

<sup>41</sup> Ulrich Baer, *The Dark Interval* (Modern Library, 2018), 43.

<sup>42</sup> Baer, 26.

alive, and death, a component of the waking life. Not only does that make bereavement easier, but it also aids in a healthy relationship with the deceased, which was previously at risk of being tainted with pain.

Rilke places great importance upon living through suffering, to the point that to a casual reader, he might appear unduly obsessed with it. However, he does admit that “suffering is not constructive”<sup>43</sup>. That being said, he firmly believes that suffering is taken away once it has made us into who we were meant to be. We have been tasked to learn to die on a daily basis, he says to Reinhold von Walter, but throughout this arduous task, the refusal of life does not do us any favours<sup>44</sup>. One must bite into the fruit of life and let its flavour spread within, despite engaging in a seemingly Sisyphean struggle.

Since life must be lived fully, Rilke is strictly against consolation or glossing over pain for momentary relief. He echoes Marie Leneru in his condemnation of those who have been consoled: they are forgetful and weak because “[their] pain is no longer acute”<sup>45</sup>. To explore loss is one of Rilke’s oeuvres. This acute pain is theorized by Klass and his colleagues as a “demand” that arises after the death of a loved one and manifests as distress<sup>46</sup>. As such, one hypothesis derived from the results of his study prompted Klass to believe that greater resolution of grief was identified in people who had restructured and revised their “internal working models” to “accommodate the fact of the death” in their lives post-loss.

Rilke’s acute pain and Klass’ demand can be placed in a larger historical perspective that is separate from the Judeo-Christian ideas of the rewarding of pain in the afterlife. In many religions, the dead are communicated with and kept alive in spirit because it keeps the pain of their loss fresh, and entails a life fully lived. Confucian tradition is heavily preoccupied with ancestor rituals, writes Peter Ching Yung Lee<sup>47</sup>. Similarly, Buddhism in Japan is called “funeral Buddhism”, because maintaining family bonds with the dead is of utmost importance<sup>48</sup>. Furthermore, Ghanaian philosopher William Emmanuel Abraham writes of his homeland that ancestor worship in Africa is not a rite of worship but “methods of communication”<sup>49</sup>. This context is necessary here because Rilke was vehemently opposed to what he called “the Christian ideas of a Beyond.”

He did believe in a God. However, this God was different from the Christian God with whom one engaged in a constant give and take. Rilke’s God is unaware of humanity and the importance it ascribes to life. Life, for Rilke’s God is a small interval of inconsequential nature. It is for this reason that God does not interfere with human calamities. One may assume that this intensifies the existential dread of which Sartre spoke of. On the contrary, Rilke believed that man lost touch with God during life, and in order to connect with him, memories of the deceased as well as a constant reminder of one’s own death, was necessary<sup>50</sup>. He despised modern religion for its sugarcoating of the fact that life was hard, God was unreachable, and death was an obstacle that needed to be cleared to enter eternal peace. “Death is not beyond our strength,” he says to Countess Sizzo-Noris-Cruoy, it has to be made peace with. One must not love death, rather, one must think it a friend, “who is never, ever misled by our actions and vacillations”<sup>51</sup>.

Rilke himself coped with grief this way, feeling the deceased “gathered” inside of him “in peculiar and surprising ways”<sup>52</sup>. The idea was to maintain a dialogic relationship with the memories of the dead, the past, as a way to reconcile life with death. If one, with the knowledge of his beliefs as arsenal, analyzes the poem line by line,

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<sup>43</sup> Ulrich Baer, *The Poet’s Guide* (Modern Library, 2005), 66.

<sup>44</sup> Ulrich Baer, *The Dark Interval* (Modern Library, 2018), 33.

<sup>45</sup> Baer, 43.

<sup>46</sup> Dennis Klass, *Continuing Bonds* (Taylor and Francis, 1999), 142.

<sup>47</sup> Peter Ching Yung Lee, “Understanding death, dying and religion”, *A Cross-cultural Look at Death, Dying and Religion* (Nelson-Hall, 1995), 174.

<sup>48</sup> Dennis Klass, “The Sociology of Continuing Bonds”, *Handbook of the Sociology of Death, Grief and Bereavement* (Routledge, 2017), 13.

<sup>49</sup> William Emmanuel Abraham, *The Mind of Africa* (University of Chicago Press, 1969), 63.

<sup>50</sup> Ulrich Baer, *The Dark Interval* (Modern Library, 2018), 32.

<sup>51</sup> Baer, 44.

<sup>52</sup> Baer, 43.

one can decipher a pithy, almost epigrammatic undertone in the words. Beginning with the first two verses that are as follows: “no, my life is not this precipitous hour / through which you see me passing at a run”. The illusion cast by the poet going through the motions is misleading: his life is not a steep slope, down which he is accelerating toward his eventual death. Death, is not eventual, nor is it something to be confronted with gritted teeth when the time comes.

As he asserts that “I stand before my background like a tree”: he is sure-footed, grounded like a tree. Within him, there is this desire to branch out, to reach out to the past, his “background”. He reaches backward in time and keeps the past alive. There is a quietude about him, a kind of peace that comes as a result of making peace with what was once inconceivable: “Of my many mouths I am but one, / and that which soonest chooses to be dumb”. The many mouths belong to people who still rage against the inevitability of death. They scream and blame whatever higher power they most believe in. They adamantly and foolishly want to “recognize His hand in those places where it has always been withheld”<sup>53</sup>. As a result, they lose faith and let their once loving bond with the deceased be marred by anger at God and unresolved pain. The poet, however, is a mouth that has realized the grander scheme of things.

He has reconciled the darkness of death with the light of life and now greets death as a friend: “I am the rest between two notes /which, struck together, sound discordantly, /because death’s note would claim a higher key. But he is not of the opinion that one should love death obsessively and morbidly. In fact, love for death must come naturally as a result of loving life “generously and without calculating”<sup>54</sup>. At this moment, he is in a state of pause between two extremes, two notes as far apart as a major and minor key. Birth and death may both be notes of a divine music, but it cannot be denied that they sound discordant when played together. Death, with its mystery incites a conditioned response of fear within men and therefore, will always sound louder, more overpowering, more ominous.

And there it is, the heart of Rilke’s song: “But in the dark pause, trembling, the notes meet, harmonious. /And the song continues sweet”. Life, the dark pause between birth and death, is the only place where this melody can be harmonized. One is farthest from God in life, but this distance enables one to seek out a more tangible connection with the Divine that is rooted in the here and the now. Through loss that plagues us in life, we can reconnect with God, the entity that constitutes the Whole, encompassing life, death and everything in between. To Countess Scherwin, he writes:

By way of loss, by way of such vast and immeasurable experiences of loss, we are quite powerfully introduced into the whole. Death is only a relentless way of making us familiar and even intimate with the side of our existence that is turned away from us.<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusion

The only way forward then, is not forcibly severing all ties with what was once living and breathing. Klass astutely notes that extending over one’s lifetime, there is a sequence of “new losses and realization of said losses”<sup>56</sup>. The process of bereavement following such losses is not linear; it can never be so. Complete resolution is never possible. One can never completely be devoid of all fear and hatred of death. However, it can be achieved to its maximum potential with a continuing bond. Let the past affect your present in a way that does not let you retreat into hermitism. Let it be a part of your life, a reassuring scent suspended in the air around you. One must not freeze

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<sup>53</sup> Ulrich Baer, *The Dark Interval* (Modern Library, 2018), 31.

<sup>54</sup> Baer, 44.

<sup>55</sup> Ulrich Baer, *The Dark Interval* (Modern Library, 2018), 36.

<sup>56</sup> Dennis Klass, *Continuing Bonds* (Taylor and Francis, 1999), 51.



in place. One must wade through life and death and “be intimately be at home with both,”<sup>57</sup> because as soon as life is reaffirmed by the acceptance of the horror of death, one arrives at the true potential of one’s existence.

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<sup>57</sup> Baer, 17.

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