

# Being an Animal on 9/11: Reinterpreting Rainer Maria Rilke's "The Panther" and "The Eighth Elegy"

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*"I am ashamed of almost always tending toward a gesture of shame when appearing naked before what one calls an animal, a cat, for example, a seeing animal naked down to its hair..."*

Jacques Derrida.

## I

Recalling the individualized past through the prism of collectively witnessed cataclysms might compensate us for the constant reduction in the density of our existences. In the United States, the production of such recuperative accounts is often triggered by the 9/11 anniversary. Among New York City-based friends, stories about the 'morning of,' September 11, 2001 are recounted with a vehemence in contrast to the banality of the account: "I was getting out of the subway when--", or "I was in my office having coffee and looking out the window when--". This 9/11 anniversary storytelling ritual reflects a particularly human requirement that being (existence) occasionally be invigorated by a dialectal focused on catastrophe, as if the intensity of daily existence has for too long been leveled by routine, and by recorded history itself, by what Marcel Proust calls "voluntary memory" and what Virginia Woolf names the "cotton wool" of biography.

Highly individualized recollections about the morning of September 11, 2001 recapture being alive as ontological depth and precarious contingency. This is also the aspiration of the isolated speaker in German poet Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duineser Elegien/Duino Elegies* (1912/22), in plaintive, allusive verses crying out about fugitive qualities of being. The *Elegies* were completed at the foot of the Swiss Alps between two world wars.

When it is my turn to report my particular memories of the overwhelming morning hours of September 11, 2001, I presume my story too trivial to share since I was isolated about thirty miles north of the World Trade Center, in the exclusive company of my two cats. However, as a native New Yorker, I feel obligated to speak of it. I remember the macho accents of communal ownership and boasting, in the mid-1970s, about the city possessing "the biggest building in the world" when the "Twin Towers" were almost completed. The sky-scraping towers, at first controversial artifacts of postwar urban

planning and late modernist architectural style, became, like the American Interstate highway system and commercial Boeing 747s, emblematic triumphs over prior limits on space and dimensionality. The Twin Towers were American expansions that literally defied the ground of being. On a grade school trip from The Bronx to Manhattan, around 1977, I was taken to the roof of one of the new towers. Up there I was unable to either comprehend or to make sense of the distorted scale and not too subtle political functions which the vertiginous heights (as well as the worldly name) of the two buildings signified.

By the morning of September 11, 2001, like millions of other New Yorkers, I had lived with those two boxy behemoths most of my life, and found them familiar and useful for navigating south and west from parameters of lower Manhattan. Tuesdays were my day off from teaching. My partner at the time was in the habit of watching morning TV. Though she was not there with me, I had the television on as if she were. (Martha Stewart's homemaking show was on, if I recall the morning correctly.) The parade of advertisements and infotainment were incongruous with the otherwise unobtrusive hours following a peaceful night's sleep. Narratives of puritanical earnestness and commercially driven busyness that engulf the weekday in a constant, low-key alarm had yet to overtake a subconscious animal-like wakefulness in which I was immersed.

This level of disclosure is usually as far as I go in recounting my *morning of 9/11* story. Other 9/11 stories involve friends having viewed the attack live before a family dinner in Europe, or watching it on a set in a crowded pub in Australia, or accounts of crossing Brooklyn Bridge with coworkers, glancing back in horror at a smoke-shrouded skyline. Even that day, I heard harrowing stories by witnesses whose lives were in proximate danger. My father, on leaving his office in the Federal Office Building blocks from the World Trade Center, saw victims plunging to their deaths from the smoke-filled gashes in the north tower. A friend told of watching people dive into the harbor near the Staten Island Ferry terminal to escape the torrential downpour of glass and debris. A friend of a friend worked with colleagues on the 80-something floor of the south tower. Those coworkers were fatefully told by building management that the fire in the opposite tower was not cause to evacuate their own offices. Ignoring the orders to stay, this person, already more than halfway down the tower's stairwell, felt the explosion many stories above as the tower lurched back and forth, a paroxysm that turned out to have been the impact of the second hijacked airliner puncturing the building and exploding into and through the offices, and into officemates, far upstairs.

I was off duty from my midtown Manhattan workplace, safely alone with two animals in a suburb. My cats cried to me for morning food. I was resisting that task. And I was about to feed them and get on with the day when CBS News interrupted its normal broadcast to display a live image of a smoldering gash at the top of one of the Twin Towers. Still I nearly switched the set off. Animals paced and needed to be fed: the cats called at me to pay attention to the *present*. Seated in front of the television, I was already preoccupied by a freshly mediated past, and antagonized by the expectation of some televised resolution. I was no longer present to an immediate, surrounding existence. I was confounded before a screen, warding off death from afar, displaced from the real by the imaginary--the *what-was* and the *what-will-be* determined by a single

office building on fire many miles from where I was living. Minutes later, as my cats cried and rubbed against my legs, onscreen, live, a huge, silent explosion flared in the neighboring tower. "Can we run that again, Sam, in slow motion for our own eyes for the eyes of our viewers at home?" A few phone calls I placed did not go through. Neighbors knocked on my door. For a few minutes I viewed the faraway spectacle from my own roof, the New York City skyline with its two smoking chimneys. Leaving my rooftop, I came back inside my apartment where the cats were pacing, more irked, more hungry, oblivious to the unfolding anthropological plotline, their only connection to these human commotions visible in an occasional twitch and flick of their ears as first responders' sirens, even in lower Westchester County, began to scream and head south to New York City. I stared at the screen. "Our keeper is gawking at something on a box of light," the cats might have deduced, had they use for such a metaphysical purpose as human language, "he's absent from *here*." Not long after news of the suicide attack on the Pentagon and each of the towers collapsed, and as broadcast reports predicted 6,000 to 10,000 dead, I shared my despair by telephone and ensured that family and friends were safe.

Then I got around to feeding the cats. In doing so, my existence turned away from the specular jurisdiction of a screen. I opened one can and a half of *9 Lives* cat food. The animals had almost forgotten to expect feeding. Stepping up to get their dishes off the floor, surrounded by their excited, responsive cries, their long waving tails and upwardly gazing eyes, and then crouching down to their level to put the dishes of food on the floor, running my hand over their fur as they lowered their small heads and ate, a cascading sense of sudden consolation, companionship and authentic co-existence disconnected my consciousness from the unfolding hysteria on television and flooded me with a peacefulness that brought me to the verge of tears. Lingering at ground-level to watch the animals eat, I felt guilty for not standing up and attending once again to the human spectacle represented by the televised images. Yet I knew that by this act of feeding animals, that I was turning from the human need to know and to transcend death and somehow returned to an unknowing *being*, as it fundamentally is, to my singular creature-life instead of the intermediated realities of culture. I was present among four-legged brutes who do not resort to intra-species homicide, or even to committing suicide. I had thoughts that seemed childlike yet curiously accurate: animals do not build skyscrapers or pray to Gods or organize so-called "defense" departments. Cats do not invade countries or hijack jumbo jets and, more ludicrously, crash planes into buildings in order to kill other cats.

Later that day, after visiting family and absorbing the arbitrated, ever evolving media storylines -- about box cutters and Florida flight schools and Vice President Dick Cheney in a bunker and a meta-narrative about How This Changes Everything -- I returned to my cats curled on chair cushions sleeping peacefully in fetal positions. Their docile figures and their very breathing--fur rising and falling--called to mind its human antithesis in a paranoiac scene near my street that day--one Westchester police car guarding a local train station, as if the officer were expecting a squad of terrorists to hop

off the 5:38 pm train to Scarsdale, New York. I had fed the cats so late that morning that they were not yet hungry by evening and hence they had slept past the dinner hour.

## II

The memory of feeding my cats on 9/11 over these many intervening years, and most poignantly whenever when I re-read the English translations of poet Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. Throughout the *Elegies*, the incompleteness of human awareness about the world is contrasted with the absoluteness of angels' being.

However Rilke's "Eighth Elegy" is about the unrestricted openness of animals to the condition of being and the necessity of restoring a vitalizing human courage in relation to being and to death. "The Eighth Elegy" positions animals as more intensely in tune with being and nonbeing than are humans and it represents the culmination of Rilke's attempt to join a wakefulness about being alive with the physical condition of sense-experience and existing, an effort that parallels similarly recuperative projects in modern Western philosophers like Schopenhauer and Bergson. Rilke's poem seeks to undo the mere conceptualization of human experience and to recoup the maximum possible human receptivity to the material world through a poetics that would enact that openness for the reader. Writing of the overall intent for the *Elegies*, critic and Rilke translator William Gass notes:

Our [human] receptivity is determined by the extent and quality of our sensory equipment, by our ability to integrate separate signals into a single coherent experiential "message" and by the width and generosity we are ready to allow ourselves...Not only do we miss things because our receivers are too narrow in focus, but we use sensory cues to tell us what we have in our consciousness; we typecast those clues immediately, conceptualize them, interpret them and respond, not to experience, which we allow to disappear but to concepts, ideas and theories. (138).

In the "Eighth Elegy," the poem's speaker articulates the differences in the qualities of being that separate humanity from animals. "Animals, Rilke felt, unencumbered by concepts, could look openly out at the world and were more at ease--at one with it--than man" (Gass 139).

In Rilke's earlier, parallel expression of this ontological superiority of animals over humans, "Der Panther"/"The Panther" (1905) the speaker studies a caged wildcat in a Paris zoo. In watching the animal's eye, the human presence notes about the cat how "an image will indart,/down through the limbs' intensive stillness flutter,/and end its being in the heart" (Rilke, 34). The cat is not conditioned toward a reflective distancing of what it sees or an orientation of what it sees into a narrative. In charting this spontaneous continuum in the cat's perception and its pure intake of whatever it sees--the poem describes the animal as an optic, neural gateway and its somatic absorption of the stimuli. By dramatizing the beast's ability to see beyond the encumbrance caused by the cage's bars, the poem implicitly contrasts human seeing (the zoo's visitor) and animal seeing

and suggests that the latter retains a wide ranging intensity toward the outward field that the narrowly focused, intellectualizing human has lost. The cat's moment of apprehension is a non-rational magnification of its being ("image...in the heart"). In the human sphere, sight is merely a sensory mechanism that comes as an effect of, or after the fact of, existence. The primary philosophical conclusion of "The Panther" then is that an animal's awareness of death is interwoven into its non-intellectual consciousness of being alive and the cat's demeanor is an electrifying standard that represents a form of natural audacity toward what is.

Furthermore "The Panther," proves what Rilke scholar Jutta Ittner describes as the fact that "we [humans] never see what is before our eyes because we are trapped within our own ideas about the world" (28). Human ideas about perceived events remain purely mental images and therefore become obstacles to extracting substantive meaning from reality. Unlike the panther's radical availability to the world of outward phenomena, in the human sphere experience undergoes a "confinement" in "consciousness" (Ittner 28). Such mentally-focused, inwardly driven dispositions of the real are the result of humanity's cognitive habits, mindsets reinforced by cultural practices like organized religion, formal education, news media, etc. These circumventions of the real are invested in postponement, separation and distancing and conversely divest experience of the immediacy, intimacy and engagement integral to being alive to the world in any meaningful sense of the word.

Rilke's "The Panther" manifests the nearly mystical "privileged moment" of "total" being-ness, a "task to recapture the sense of wholeness of life which had been destroyed by the externalization of the idea of death" (Jephcott 232). The human has no such access to such a totality in experience because it is compromised by an anxious knowledge of its own mortality. In human conceptions of death, death is exiled from consciousness, scripted as a spectacle (one might call death an abstract "news" event) that happens not to us as mortal animals but to other unfortunate people about whom we read or see on the news. The media's construct of geographically removed "breaking news" stories reinforce the illusion that death is far outside of our fate and therefore beyond our particular human realm. The reinforcement of an illusory exemption from death (i.e., "unexpected death is what happens to other people") is perhaps the chief, if hidden, cultural function of the "if it bleeds it leads" dictate of contemporary news.

The Rilkean determination to inhabit the animal's "Open" of total being--death as well as livingness--in an elegiac language attuned to this reality, confronts the incomplete nature of human existence. The poem critiques human beings as bystander's attending to objects that validate a false distance between inside and outside, much like the cage's bars which the zoo visitor in "The Panther" notices but which the panther inside the cage instinctively sees through. The poem's irony is acute: humans are imprisoned in defensive concepts about existence rather than living wide-open within the real field of existence represented by the instincts of the caged cat.

Building on the philosophical study of animals in "The Panther," Rilke's Eighth Elegy" further articulates how human beings desperately require a renewed awareness of

existence. This desired sentience is paradoxically a form of unknowing. The poem looks to animals to find for human beings such a de-intellectualized cognizance of their placement in the universe. Rilke's speaker seeks out a heightened state of complete openness that corresponds closely to how animals experience reality from one animated moment to the next. Yet the obstacles to such a charged directness develop from humanity's self-consciousness about its portentous separateness from the world. "Always facing Creation," Rilke writes in the poem, "we perceive there/only a mirroring of the free and open/dimmed by our breath" (Rilke 87). Ordinary consciousness is conditioned by retrospection and prospecting. These are mental reserves that project the presently real into imaginary categories (past, future) and thus impose upon experience a remoteness from the constant now-ness of being. This strictly temporal estrangement precludes human immersion in the timeless present-ness of being. "For this is Destiny: being opposite,/and nothing else, and always opposite" (Rilke 87).

In response to this privation, Rilke's discourse repositions human's sensory powers, such as seeing or hearing or touching, as untapped potentialities in which the fugitive fullness of being ("Everything") is recoverable. "Rilke's attentive readers [of the elegies] have the opportunity to explore and appreciate this mode of delicate being provided they relinquish their desire to grasp dominant concepts, and let them gently recede into the background." The reader of the *Elegies* collaborates with the poem's speaker to excavate being as, "a register of allusion rather than acquisition of knowledge" (Castlevedere 142-143).

### III

Humans are beleaguered by anticipation and memory, during both day-to-day travails and during a geopolitical nightmare such as 9/11, and this hypostasis is abetted by digital tools for further mediation. In this distancing, one abstractly hypothesizes one's place in the world through dubiously constructed histories that are in theory one's own even though they are mere *ideologies* (in the literal sense of the word) rather than relevant conditions in contiguous settings. Historical and theoretical conceptualizations of being--be they post 9/11 American foreign policy or the conspiracies of al-Qaeda-- surely have real-life consequences for targeted populations, but in their televised vulgarizations these complex realities far more generally reinforce the vacuity of "breaking news," and, in turn, induce negative affective states in millions of alienated viewers, namely existential dread and political impotence. This estrangement from being did not happen at any moment to my cats before, during or after the unfolding of September 11, 2001. Thinking back to that inexplicable spell of disoriented hours in front of the television as the 9/11 attacks unfolded, I find profound personal correspondences with what Rilke philosophically describes in his poetics--the need for what critic Castlevedere calls the eighth elegy's "humble unknowing" of perceived realities, as gradually and painstakingly revealed by the speaker.

The distanced viewing of a "real-time" catastrophic, paramilitary attack on the United States highlighted the disparity between my cats' experience of time and being

and human deformations of being and time. The radical displacement of human consciousness through television and the Internet (the globalized scale) that morning stood in relief to my ever-present animals and their poised, assertive prowling within a space (the world) from which they could *not ever* dissociate themselves. The animal sustains that pre-reflective state of being before consciousness turns to itself as an object and bifurcates the living entity (subject) from the world (of things). Like the general effect of Western metaphysics, watching the 9/11 attacks prevented my immediate sense of being *in* the world. The deprivation occurred on two levels. In the specter of annihilation, my inner sense of mortality was (as Rilke's elegies imply that we humans do routinely) projected *outward*, on to other people who were, in cold fact, dying before my passive eyes. The televised spectacle of death confirms a divide between being and nonbeing that compromises the former (being) and provides no clarity about the latter (nonbeing).

In the "Eighth Elegy," Rilke names the animal's consciousness as superior to that of humans because the animal's being is typified by an innate alertness to corporeal existence so complete that it takes in death without separating to from aliveness. That animal existence is an undefended responsiveness (engagement) instead of a sealed-off reflectiveness (intellection). The animal is always in a present receptiveness to the "outside" and that responsiveness is unwaveringly visible and somatically based. The animal has no mental resource for creating temporal and static rearrangements of being like those constructed by human retrospection or human propection--the clock and the calendar are meaningless in the animal kingdom. The creature is not marked by an alienated self-analysis that marks off human beings as onlookers, clock-watchers, of their own being here. Comparing humanity to animals, Rilke's poem critiques human beings as half-alive subjects focused on an indefinite future that we keep on failing to envision even as we strain after it in a cycle of futility:

But its [animal] own being  
is infinite, inapprehensible,  
unintrospective , pure, like its outgazing.  
And where we see Future, it sees everything,  
and itself in Everything, for ever healed (Rilke 87).

In its invocation of the animal's radical availability to its surroundings, the "Eighth Elegy" remains morally optimistic about how the consummated animal situation might "heal" humanity of its existential dread if only human beings can forget about time and recover such present-ness for themselves. By following the animal-exemplar, humanity might regain a mode of being as openness to what-is, no matter that the universe promises us extinction, a death that is intrinsic to and not "other than" the sphere of being. Rilke wants to restore an instinctual if forgotten, innate human fearlessness noticeable in the fellow animal's inability to conceive of itself anywhere but here.

But human beings pursue and re-present their placement in the world as a specter of life as elsewhere. Compounding this predicament, humanity turns from circumstance to attend to remote spectacles that are signifiers of that same divorced condition. The

expectation of "breaking news," both inwardly, through unremitting rumination, and outwardly, through the compulsive following of newsfeeds, maintains consciousness in a painful oscillation between expectation and regret. This reinforces a presumed antagonism toward an object-world or universe that treats us like a guest. In such a damaged state, the self is trained only toward the known and denies the unknown (death) while the animal "knows" of nothing but partakes of death as inseparable from being:

What is outside we know the brute's [animal] face  
alone; for while a child's quite small we take it  
and turn it round and force it to look backwards  
at what conformation, not that openness  
that is so deep within the brute's vision. Free from death (86).

Later in the "Eighth Elegy," Rilke compares the animal to a child who somehow stays in the womb forever. The analogy does not mean that the animal is like a fetus that has not been born into the world. Rather, the poem indicates that the living animal's unqualified participation in the phenomenal world is as unchanging and as reciprocally instantaneous as the fetus' relation to the enclosing womb.

The uninhibited gaze and the instinctual pacing of my two cats around my apartment on the morning of September 11, 2001 revealed a "boundless unfathomable" capacity which is signaled, as Rilke's poem notes, by the animal's unsealed gazing out and its unrestrained ambulation within its given space. For the animal there is no area comparable to the humanly invented metaphysical divide between *self* and *world*, *us* and *not-us*. The animal is--without qualification, and without a prophylactic screen.

What consoled me about the otherwise banal act of feeding cats on September 11, 2001 is that the animals were not capable of being drawn into "breaking news" out of lower Manhattan; it was not *their* cataclysm and it was not *their* structures crumbling.

Human beings often describe those who maim or rape or kill fellow human beings as "acting like animals." I thought of that absurdity as I fed my cats that morning. As the fire sirens blasted by on the street below my kitchen window and a military helicopter flew over the Cross County Parkway in Westchester County, and as my cats ate their food, that flawed cliché about civilization's inherent barbarism--"humans acting like animals"--struck me as a hypocritical libel against the creature-world. Rilke reverses that derogation and holds a mirror up to human beings:

And we: spectators, always, everywhere,  
looking at, never out of, everything!  
It fills us. We arrange it. It collapses.  
We re-arrange it, and collapse ourselves (Rilke 88).



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