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The End of Loneliness: Guardini, Rilke, and the Communion of Saints

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Romano Guardini read Rilke's Duino Elegies *as a compelling eschatological vision for the modern world, but one that must be rejected. I argue that in Rilke's writing, Guardini detected the secular analogue to the substantial image at the end of the Christian eschatological imagination—that is, the communion of saints. Rilke's vision is coherent in that the end he perceives follows from the beginning he assumes; therefore, understanding Rilke's end requires his commentator to see all that precedes that end, beginning with Rilke's own beginning. In a time of increasing loneliness, Guardini's response to Rilke rings with renewed contemporary relevance to guard against the ultimate erasure of the human person.*

Keywords: Rainer Maria Rilke, Romano Guardini, Dante, saints, communion, death, personhood

Once on a plane I was reading the tenth of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* when I glanced over at the book the woman sitting next to me was holding. The book's message was printed in big, bold, block letters on the back cover: "No One Gets Out Alive."[1] I told her we were pretty much reading the same thing. The difference being her book was clearly a piece of fiction, while mine was not.

When Romano Guardini read the *Duino Elegies*, he was struck by the same conclusion: no one gets out alive. Even more, Guardini saw what Rilke himself said was the principal message of the *Elegies*: his doctrine of death, which is all-a-piece with his doctrine of love.[2] Guardini came back to Rilke's *Elegies*

[1] I later learned that this book was James Patterson, *Crazy House* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2019). I have not read this book.

[2] See Romano Guardini, *Rilke's Duino Elegies: An Interpretation*, trans. K. G. Knight (London: Darwen Finlayson, 1961), 302.

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again and again, confessing that he was preoccupied with them.[3] It was certainly the beauty of the poems that drew him—along with the stimulating challenge of interpreting the images the poet paints, but there was a more urgent and demanding task for Guardini in these poems. For him, "The question to be answered here is not whether Rilke's message commands respect, but whether his pronouncements are true in themselves: whether his impressive account of life and death, of humanity and personal relations really corresponds to the truth."[4] Why was the task of judging the truthfulness of these poems so urgent? Because from them Guardini discerned that Rilke was indeed the poet of the modern world who was unveiling that world's incomplete view of reality and who then, in response, painted a total vision of what life is all about in the end. "No one gets out alive," you could say, to which Guardini would respond as he did elsewhere: "The end determines all that precedes it."[5] In the *Duino Elegies*, Rilke journeys, in the end, to the loneliest loneliness, which, looking back, seems inevitable because of where his poetic vision began.

Guardini's serious treatment of Rilke's poetry was, on the one hand, set in the context of other philosophical and literary engagements to which he committed himself during and after the Second World War. On the other hand, his reading of Rilke was part of his broader effort as theologian, liturgist, and cultural commentator to dialogue critically with contemporary thought. Guardini's monograph on the *Duino Elegies* was not completed until 1953, but work on it began in 1941. Immediately prior to starting on Rilke,

[3] According to Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz, Guardini wondered if he had worked too hard on Rilke's poems and taken them too seriously (see Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz, *Romano Guardini: Konturen des Lebens und Spuren des Denkens* [Kevelaer: Topos Taschenbücher, 2017], 258). Meanwhile, Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that Guardini took Rilke seriously in the wrong way because he had "an exaggerated interest in the question of truth" which he applied, inappropriately, to Rilke as poet; see Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Rainer Maria Rilke's Interpretation of Existence: On the Book by Romano Guardini," in *Literature and Philosophy in Dialogue: Essays in German Literary Theory*, trans. Robert H. Paslick (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 141. Gadamer continues his point in the form of a rhetorical question: "Is it not precisely the privilege of the poet—a privilege denied to him by his interpreter—not to be obliged to have a complete philosophical and theological system, but rather to make statements, true in themselves, but the conceptual verification of which, in the sense of universal meaning, is no longer his concern?" (148).

[4] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Rainer Maria Rilke's Interpretation of Existence," 14; see also Lucia Mor, "'La parola di un uomo onesto significa ciò che dice' Romano Guardini Lettore Di Rilke," *L'analisi Linguistica e Letteraria* 26, no. 2 (2018): 52–53.

[5] Romano Guardini, *The Last Things: Concerning Death, Purification After Death, Resurrection, Judgment, and Eternity*, trans. Charlotte E. Forsyth and Grace B. Branham (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), 12.

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Guardini wrote a commentary on Hölderlin (1939), which was followed by work on Socrates (1944), bringing his engagement with all three figures within the years of the great war. As Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz argues, this work was in some measure aimed at giving existence a basic framework of order even in the face of the greatest destruction.[6] To engage specifically with Hölderlin and Rilke is an act of intentionally reckoning with major sources of the culture currently under duress in Guardini's historical moment. On Guardini's behalf, Helmut Kuhn explains the choice for these interlocutors by saying that "these poets belong to us and we to them. They stand with us under the same historical destiny. To shut ourselves off from communication with them is to shut ourselves off from converse with our contemporaries. Our part is not to shut our ear, but rather to hear aright." By Kuhn's judgment, Guardini ventures to bring together Christian fidelity with "fine circumspection."[7] This interpretation of Guardini's work pushes back against the common charge that he was antimodern, hopelessly nostalgic for bygone eras. Rather, as Gerl-Falkovitz concludes, the task Guardini set for himself was to help see the possibility of salvation in every age, including and especially his own.[8] His engagement with Rilke's *Duino Elegies* falls within such a task, from the poem's pensive beginning to its sorrowful end.

This article will intentionally move with Guardini between ends and beginnings. I will begin by tracing Guardini's reflections on what exactly the modern world is, which he sees as coming to an end. On this basis, I will turn to Guardini's reading of the *Duino Elegies* by focusing on Rilke's figure of the Angel, who dominates the poem; to his doctrine of love, which follows from the Angel; and to his Hero, who is the well-trained lover. The connection between the Angel, love, and the Hero prepares for Guardini's assessment of Rilke's presentation of the dead—a presentation that culminates in what I describe as a secular analogue to the Christian doctrine of the communion of saints. I will argue that this alternate vision of the end is the logical conclusion to Rilke's beginning, which has to do with a disavowal of the doctrine of creation. In the last section, then, we will return to Guardini, partly by way of his engagement with Dante, to encounter his counterproposal to the whole drama of human existence unto the finale of the communion of saints. To take Rilke's view seriously, as Guardini intends to do, means recognizing that view's fundamental assumptions and ultimate consequences. Rilke's subversion of the doctrine of creation and then of the communion of saints is the

[6] Gerl-Falkovitz, *Romano Guardini*, 236.

[7] Helmut Kuhn, "Romano Guardini: Christian Existence," *Philosophy Today* 4, no. 3 (1960): 164–65.

[8] Cited in Gerl-Falkovitz, *Romano Guardini*, 251.

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key that unlocks the door to the erasure of the human person. What is under dispute between Guardini and Rilke is not only humanity's final destiny, but indeed the meaning of the human person here and now.

Guardini, Modernity's End, and Reading Rilke

The modern world is the limitless world and that is what is coming to an end, so says Romano Guardini, especially in *The End of the Modern World*.[9] It is a world without poles and thus without structure or order or ultimate, definitive meaning. It is the world of progress for the sake of progress. As Guardini tells the tale, what came before the modern world was the world of the Middle Ages. This was a world with fixed poles and thus with structure and order and an ultimate, definitive meaning. It was a world founded upon the fact of Revelation.[10]

But before the world of the medieval man, there was the world of the man of classical antiquity. This, too, like the medieval world that came after it, was a limited world, a finite world. It was a world where everything was a part of the world, including the gods, and in which the primal force was fate. To live in such a world was to be unaware not only of the possibility of transcendence, but also of the possibility of freedom in any thick and final sense. Guardini presents the world of classical antiquity as at once a limited world and a closed world. Its ends were within itself because its beginnings were within itself, and vice versa. "It was a limited frame, a ball [or sphere]."[11]

The Middle Ages inherited from classical antiquity the fundamental conviction about the limitedness of the world, but something absolute pierced the certainty of the world's eternal enclosure. The world was no longer closed because, according to the then predominant Western worldview, the God who transcends the world was made known precisely by entering into the world. "The Revelation of Scripture," Guardini writes, "contradicted all such myth [of a closed world]: the world is created by a God Who does not have to create in order that He might be, nor does He need the elements of the world in order that He might create."[12] The doctrine of creation was

[9] Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, trans. Elinor Briefs (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1998).

[10] For more on the distinction Guardini makes between "medieval man" and "modern man," along with his conception of the poles and axes of human existence, see Kuhn, "Romano Guardini," esp. 161 and 166–69.

[11] See especially Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, 1–7 (quotation from p. 1); cf. C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 11.

[12] Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, 8.

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decisive but it did not arise from myth or philosophical speculation—it came from the deed of Revelation and the proclamation of that deed: "the Incarnation marked the piercing of time itself by eternity."[13] It is to this God so proclaimed that man became accountable because from this God came liberation from the closed world of cruel chance and blind power.

The poles of the medieval world were stable. Above the boundaries of this world was the Empyrean—the "place of God"—from which this same God "has crossed over and come into the world, into man's soul as Immanence"[14]—more intimate to me than I am to myself. Teresa of Avila later called this innermost part "another Heaven."[15] One point of fixed transcendence above; one point of constant immanence within. "Between these extreme points," Guardini concludes, "floated the whole world."[16] This was the world of Dante—whose *Divine Comedy* reached from underneath the depths of his heart all the way above the heavens toward what gives life to all that is.[17]

When Dante wrote of Homer's Ulysses in *Inferno* XXVI, he may not have known that he was drafting a herald of the modern world. Ulysses headed out into the open because he could; he wanted to.[18] When Dante looked back on that man of classical antiquity who trespassed against the firm boundaries of his closed world, what Dante really saw was an image of the world that was to come. "Within himself," Guardini writes, modern man "heard the call to venture over what seemed an endless earth, to make himself its master."[19] And so, he continues, "in an almost inverse proportion to the medieval attempt to place man at the heart of reality, the modern consciousness has tried to tear him from the center of the world. No longer standing everywhere

[13] Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, 19.

[14] Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, 12.

[15] Saint Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), VII.1:173.

[16] Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, 12.

[17] Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, 22.

[18] Dante accentuates how Ulysses persuades his companions, whom he calls "Brothers" (v. 112), to move beyond the given boundaries of their world by the sheer force of their will to "win experience" (v. 116). The true motivating force in this voyage according to Dante, however, is Ulysses's untutored desire, "burning to understand how this world works, and know of human vices, worth and valour" (vv. 97–99); see Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, ed. and trans. Robin Kirkpatrick (New York: Penguin, 2006), 231–33 [26.90–142]. One of the most stunning retellings of this canto occurs, paradoxically, as a protest to the suffocating world of "progress" that has wrapped itself around previously free human beings in Auschwitz, in Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*, trans. Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 1987), 115–21.

[19] Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, 33.

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under the eyes of a God Whose glance enclosed the universe, man became an autonomous creature."[20] This autonomous creature stands on his own, with an endless expanse before him. Without a God to glance upon him, the task of life is no longer a question of responsibility but of possibility: no longer "should" or even "must" but simply "can."[21] In the ever-increasing technological age, what modern man can do, he may do and often does. Looking up into the night sky, what modern man sees is no longer a cosmic order looking back at him, but rather more space, extending infinitely, in a universe that goes on and on without any transcendent pole. The reverse side of the feeling of unbound power and possibility is an overwhelming sense of homelessness.[22]

This is the world that—already by the 1950s—Guardini said was coming to an end. There is of course the technological dimension of this, with ecological implications, for which Guardini says, quite clearly, that we will either turn our technological mastery over nature into good or man himself will come to an end.[23] But there is also a religious crisis that emerges from the modern world, a crisis that forces a decision about what to do next. This religious crisis is part of—and perhaps the deepest part of—what is bringing the modern world to an end. Under the weight of unquestioned autonomy and amid the disorientation of endlessly open space, Guardini sees a new religious emotion welling up. This emotion, he writes, "wells up from a sense of the profound loneliness which man knows in the midst of all that is now summed up by the term 'the World'; man's emotion grows out of the

[20] Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, 46.

[21] To close one of his letters from Lake Como, Guardini writes, "The sphere in which we live is becoming more and more artificial, less and less human, more and more—I cannot help saying it—barbarian" (Romano Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como: Exploration in Technology and the Human Race*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994], 17).

[22] Guardini describes the distinctively modern person using other words in his commentary on the Book of Revelation, where he writes: "When we ask a man today what he considers life, the answer will always be more or less the same: Life is tension, flinging oneself towards a goal; it is creation and destruction and new creation.... For him [the modern man] life is linked to the flow of time. It is change, crossing over, the constantly new. Life resting in permanency and bordering on the eternal is beyond his comprehension"; Romano Guardini, *The Lord*, trans. Elinor Briefs (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2013), 573.

[23] Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, 56. The influence of Guardini on Pope Francis becomes most evident in positions such as this, and becomes foundational, for example, in the 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si' (On Care for Our Common Home)*, May 24, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

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realization that he approaches his ultimate decision, that he must face it with responsibility, with resolution and with bravery."[24] That ultimate decision is the decision about ourselves: "What am I, this human being?" That decision will require responsibility, resolution, and bravery. But responsibility to what or to whom? Resolution toward what? Bravery for what? Those are questions tucked into the broad question of what comes next. And that is where Romano Guardini read and critiqued Rainer Maria Rilke.[25]

Rilke did not hide from the moment of ultimate decision—the decision about what the human being really is and what is fundamentally true about the world. Rilke knows what the modern world is neglecting in its unyielding conformity to the waves of progress.[26] It is an orchestrated denial of the undeniable reality of death, which comes in many forms, including religious forms.

In one of his letters, Rilke blasts "Christian ideas of the Beyond … [and indeed] all modern religions for having handed to their believers consolations and glossings over of death, instead of administering to them the means of reconciling themselves to it and coming to an understanding with it."[27] In the face of the ultimate decision, one way to avoid responsibility, resolution, and bravery is to hide underneath uncritical romantic piety. Rilke refused to entertain the easy out that promises. Instead, he plunged into the ultimate decision about the human being and the world from the very first verse of the *Duino Elegies*. And Guardini listened attentively to what the poet of the modern world had to say.

The Angel, Love, and The Hero

In late January 1912, Rilke paced pensively along the cliffs of Duino castle, pondering a response to a troubling business inquiry, when suddenly

[24] Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, 57; see also Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, 77–96; cf. Gerl-Falkovitz, *Romano Guardini*, 249.

[25] Lucia Mor's recent study of Guardini's sustained engagement with Rilke's poetry helpfully presents Guardini's fascination and concern with Rilke as poet of the modern world in "'La parola di un uomo onesto significa ció che dice' Romano Guardini Lettore Di Rilke"; see also Robert Krieg, "Romano Guardini's Theology of the Human Person," *Theological Studies* 59 (1998): 468–71.

[26] Guardini calls this person "mass man," whom, he says, "has no desire for independence or originality in either the management or conduct of life" (Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, 60). Elsewhere, Guardini speaks of the "destruction caused by the masses," which may give rise to something else but at present brings only "devastation" (see Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, 63).

[27] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke, 1910–1926*, trans. Jane Bannard Greene and M. D. Herter Norton (New York: Norton, 1969), 316. See also the *Tenth Elegy*, where Rilke names the "ready-made consolations of the church."

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an urgent question pulsed through him: "Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angelic orders?" (*First Elegy*).[28] In the solitude of that windy afternoon, Rilke gave voice to the deepest existential question of human life: Is there a response to the cries of my heart, or am I truly alone? The following ten elegies, composed in creative outbursts over the course of a decade, give verse to the answer that he received through inspiration he later described as radically intense and even violent.[29]

The *Duino Elegies* begin with this question about the possibility of being heard and therefore of being addressed. This question would be sent up to the angelic orders. What an Angel is would determine the response to this fundamental question. The figure of the Angel therefore comes to dominate the *Duino Elegies*, so much so that the task Rilke seeks to accomplish is to view the world from within this figure.[30] The Angel is the one who sees all that is. The eyes of men, as Rilke describes, hasten to take in what appears in life but then close in the face of death.[31] For the Angel, however, life and death are one complete event. The Angel is tuned to the complete sphere of existence so absolutely that no particular point can distract it. So when Rilke considers crying out in anguish or suffering or a sense of loss to the angelic orders from the cliffs of Duino, the answer to his question is already decided in advance. Jacob Steiner goes so far as to propose that the "cry" in the poem's first line never actually comes forth, but rather is held within the silent sobbing directed to the untroubled being who will not hear.[32] The Angel will not hear this voice because the Angel perceives only the whole. "Above us and beyond us," Rilke writes in the *Fourth Elegy*, "the Angel plays."[33]

[28] *Wer, wenn ich schriee, hörte mich denn aus der Engel Ordnungen?*. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies & The Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), 2. Mitchell's volume provides side-by-side the German original and his English translation of Rilke's poem. When I have translated on my own, I include the original German text in the note, along with a citation of Mitchell's volume, as I have done here. When I rely on and employ Mitchell's translation, I merely cite his work without including the original German text.

[29] Guardini, *Rilke's Duino Elegies*, 11.

[30] Rilke discloses this intention in a letter written on October 27, 1915, to Ellen Delp (see Rilke, *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke, 1910–1926*, 145–46).

[31] See Rilke, *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke, 1910–1926*, 145–46.

[32] Jacob Steiner, *Rilkes Duineser Elegien* (Bern: Francke, 1989), 18; cf. Christoph Hollender, "The Angels in Rilke's Duino Elegies: Theological vs. Ontological Interpretations," *History of European Ideas* 20, no. 1–3 (January 1, 1995): 305; and Gadamer, "Rainer Maria Rilke's Interpretation of Existence," 143–44.

[33] *Über uns hinüber spielt dann der Engel.* Rilke, *Duino Elegies & The Sonnets to Orpheus*, 24.

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It is this angelic figure of undifferentiated and undisturbed wholeness that Rilke deems worthy of all praise. On this figure he lavishes his most elegant lines:

> Early successes, Creation's pampered favorites, / mountain-ranges, peaks growing red in the dawn / of all Beginning,—pollen of the flowering godhead, / joints of pure light, corridors, stairways, thrones, / space formed from essence, shields made of ecstasy, storms / of emotion whirled into rapture, and suddenly, alone, / *mirrors*: which scoop up the beauty that has streamed from their face / and gather it back, into themselves, entire (*Second Elegy*).[34]

Although the first section of nature images relates to the correspondence between object and subject in the being of the Angel and the later section of architecture images relates to the angelic order in its august majesty, the final section alone bears the extra emphasis on its singular image: *mirrors*. The Angel is the figure of the whole and the Angel plays only upon the whole—before its gaze, the human being who seeks for permanence and stability in the strip of land given for the living is being swept up in the return to the unity of being.[35] In short, the life of man is being absorbed.

The *Duino Elegies* comprises a dialogue in this sense only: the lonely poet ponders crying out to the angelic orders from which he cannot be addressed. Inevitably, the response to the opening question of the *First Elegy* regarding who in the angelic order hears the one who cries out is, definitively, *no one*. The particular finds no audience within the angelic orders because the particular is an illusion that is passing away.[36] In the human's approaching death, this process of becoming absorbed into the whole of being is even now in motion, whether the human recognizes it or not (though, as with modern man, likely not).

This Angel is not a Christian angel, who reads the face of God and mediates the divine presence.[37] The order of Christian angels is arranged

[34] Rilke, *Duino Elegies & The Sonnets to Orpheus*, 11, emphasis in original.

[35] Rilke calls the land of the living the "strip of fruitful land between river and rock" (*Second Elegy*, 14): *Streifen Fruchtlands zwischen Strom und Gestein*.

[36] In the poem "To the Angel" in 1913, Rilke expresses this same drama in condensed form. The end of the poem brings into view the relationship between the Angel and the one who seeks to speak to it: "Yes, I am crying, and two sticks I am beating, / for I perceive not to be heard at all. / And my noises leave no mark on you / unless you acknowledge that I do exist. / Shine bright, so the stars will look at me! / I have nearly dissolved into mist" (Rainer Maria Rilke, *Pictures of God: Rilke's Religious Poetry*, trans. Annemarie S. Kidder, Bilingual edition [Livonia, Michigan: First Page Publications, 2005], 106–07).

[37] Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, 17. Elsewhere, while commenting on the Book of Revelation, Guardini names angels as the personalizing powers of the cosmos (Guardini, *The Lord*, 565–68); cf. Romano Guardini, *Dante*, 4th ed. (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1999), 38–39. In his spiritual reading of Genesis 1, Augustine presents

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hierarchically, taking in and showing forth the presence of God. Rather than mediating presence, Rilke's Angel absorbs presence. It does not mediate and it is not personal; it is fullness. Guardini's summative comment on Rilke's Angel is that "the Angel thus stands for man at the furthermost limit of experience, illustrating what an earthly creature is *not*."[38]

The fullness of the Angel informs Rilke's doctrine of love. The Angel who is neither compassionate nor cruel does not give or seek shelter. The question that bursts forth from the cliffs of Duino was a sounding for a place where one's concern could nest in another, and perhaps also for another who would respond by giving something of themselves to nest in the questioner. That would accord with the Christian doctrine of love as a connection of homemaking and homecoming, or, as Thomas puts it, the effect of union and even the effect of mutual indwelling.[39] The heart of the Rilkean doctrine of love, however, is the conviction that perfect love has no object. This notion of love without object will eventually do away with the lover as subject as well as the beloved as object. Rilke imagines absolute love as pure movement freed from the confines of intentionality and communication, which only fabricate the illusion of permanence in the exchange between lovers: there is no home to give and no home to come to. Rilkean love moves out into the "open" as it breaks away from the transient personal poles of the lover and the

angels as unceasingly gazing upon the divine face and reading the divine Word. They are, in other words, filled by what they heed; they are not fullness itself (see *Confessions* XIII.18); cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1, q. 50, 1 (hereafter cited as *ST*).

[38] Guardini, *Rilke's Duino Elegies*, 21. For more on Guardini's view of angels, see Silvano Zucal, *Ali dell'invisibile: l'angelo in Guardini e nel '900* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1988), and Silvano Zucal, *L'angelo nel pensiero contemporaneo* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2012). For his part, Hans-Georg Gadamer contends that "the Angel … is a supreme possibility of the human heart itself—a possibility never fully realized" (Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Mythopoietic Reversal in Rilke's 'Duino Elegies,'" in *Literature and Philosophy in Dialogue: Essays in German Literary Theory*, trans. Robert H. Paslick [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994], 157). Christoph Hollender is critical of both Guardini and Heidegger in regard to their interpretations of Rilke's angels, averring that "their own completed systems of thought are very much present, highlighting their own differences with Rilke's poetry, and thus erecting a barrier for understanding Rilke" (Hollender, "The Angels in Rilke's Duino Elegies," 308). Hollender further argues that the proper interpretation of Rilke's angels necessitates that one account for the ongoing historical development of intellectual and artistic thought, both leading up to and following Rilke's own period. In making his case, Hollender too swiftly pronounces judgment on at least Guardini, whom he says "allows as context nothing but the Bible and the church fathers."

[39] Aquinas, *ST* 1–2, q. 28, 1–2.

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beloved. This love tends ineluctably toward pure being, which overwhelms divisions, distinctions, and individuality. The Angel is the terminus of love.

This Rilkean doctrine of love squares with what Guardini calls the "deep feeling of homelessness—the sense of not belonging—which underlies Rilke's view of life."[40] In a turn toward the psychological, Guardini connects the view Rilke purveys to Rilke's own personal deficiency in establishing meaningful relationships, of ever feeling at home anywhere or of providing a home to anyone else.[41] With the *Elegies*, Rilke claims that this homelessness is constitutive of human existence, but we habitually deceive ourselves in attempting to find a home for ourselves and give a home to others through our peculiar interpretations of the world. "Our interpreted world"[42] (*First Elegy*) is that in which a sense of permanence is assumed and asserted, as if the stream of becoming stopped with particular moments or places or persons. In Heraclitan fashion, Rilke sees this shelter-making as fictitious. The one seeking a home cannot find one, just as the one who wants to give shelter to another cannot actually provide any. It is all illusory and ephemeral. According to Rilke's diagnosis, the problem is not with the seeking but with the ends that are sought. He wants to uncouple seeking from the ends and ultimately from the origins so as to portray love as a seeking without beginning or end. This—and this alone—is a pure and unobstructed loving.

The Hero, upon whom Rilke muses in the *Sixth Elegy*, is the figure of the lover cleansed of the desire for any beloved or to be desired by another.[43] The Hero only ever charges ahead; the illusion of responsibility to another and the temptation to mutuality do not impede his progress: "Permanence does not concern him. / He lives in continual ascent, moving on into the ever-changed constellation of perpetual danger."[44] Lovers cling to each other; the dying man of the *Eighth Elegy* stares by necessity into the openness of death, but the Hero alone possesses the inner unity to dispose himself in his quest, clinging to nothing, seemingly by his own power.[45]

[40] Guardini, *Rilke's Duino Elegies*, 24.

[41] Guardini, *Rilke's Duino Elegies*. Intriguingly, Krieg makes a similar observation about Guardini's own life and personality: "Guardini knew the loneliness of which Rilke spoke. He struggled throughout his life with introversion and depression" (Krieg, "Romano Guardini's Theology of the Human Person," 470).

[42] Rilke, *Duino Elegies & The Sonnets to Orpheus*, 3.

[43] "Strange to no longer desire one's desires," Rilke writes in the *First Elegy* (Rilke, *Duino Elegies & The Sonnets to Orpheus*, 7).

[44] Rilke, *Duino Elegies & The Sonnets to Orpheus*, 37.

[45] See Guardini, *Rilke's Duino Elegies*, 177–78.

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Rilke's human ideal is approaching the figure of the Angel, but here Guardini reads only tragedy: "[The Hero] is driven on merely by the dynamic of the deed, not by its content—by the danger itself, not by the life-service in which it is incurred. He is a hero for the sake of heroism. This is absolute heroism, dissociated from ends and hence strangely devoid of meaning."[46] The Hero is meant to be the image approaching authentic existence, and yet he seems to touch nothing.[47]

It is here with the figure of the Hero that Nietzsche's influence on Rilke's doctrine of love is most apparent. The Hero—the lover's ideal image—welcomes what comes his way without prejudice, refusing to seek shelter from or give shelter to anyone or anything as he pursues only heroism—that is, the acceptance of what appears. He gives himself to this task alone. This is what Nietzsche commissions his prophet to proclaim as the "*immaculate* perception of all things: that I desire nothing of things, except that I lie down before them like a mirror with a hundred eyes."[48] Or elsewhere he writes, "A strong and well-formed man digests his experiences as he digests his meals, even when he has hard lumps to swallow."[49] This is the heroism of sheer acceptance, shorn of judgment, accountability, and interpretation.

The Angel sets the tone—he is the overwhelming fullness who perceives all, whole and entire. The myth of loving is in finding rest—finding permanence—in or from another. The Rilkean correction is to incite the energy of loving while dismissing the illusion of permanence in or from another. The Hero is this well-trained lover, who charges into the open, where the half of existence called "life" is joined to the other half, the greater half: death.

[46] Guardini, *Rilke's Duino Elegies*, 179.

[47] It is interesting to juxtapose Rilke's image of the hero with someone like Francis of Assisi. As read in the Christian tradition—from Thomas of Celano and Bonaventure on down—Francis charges ahead in zeal, wholly open to God, and in that openness to God open, too, to all of the world, which he refers back to God. As Lee Patterson aptly put it, "Indeed, for Francis nature represented a realm of being that relates to God in a way that is unaffected, spontaneous, and authentic—an ideal to which fallen man could only aspire"; Lee Patterson, *Acts of Recognition: Essays on Medieval Culture* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 242. Compare this to Guardini's own essay on St. Francis, entitled "St. Francis and Divine Providence," in *The Human Experience*, trans. Gregory Roettger (Providence, RI: Cluny Media, 2018), 1–32.

[48] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," in *The Nietzsche Reader*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 273, emphasis in original.

[49] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Genealogy of Morality," in *The Nietzsche Reader*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson and Duncan Large (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 24.

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Rilke's Dead and Cosmic Dissolution

To Rilke, death is "life's averted half."[50] Like the dark side of the moon that is forever turned away from the sightline of the Earth, death is that part of the whole hidden from the gaze of the living.[51] What is hidden—or what the living will not see—is what is disclosed in the *Tenth Elegy*: that pain and suffering are the basic forces of life.[52] The dead know what the Angel sees and the Hero strives toward: that the final cost of everything in life is the loss of it. That is what death is, and the dead know the cost because the realm of the dead is the cost of joy. It is not sadness as regret, but rather completion. Authentic existence is welcoming the whole.[53]

In life, as Rilke sees it, we waste precious possibilities—the possibilities presented in sorrows. In verses 10–12 of the *Tenth Elegy*, he writes, "We wasters of sorrows! / How we stare away into sad endurance beyond them, / trying to foresee their end!"[54] The conviction that there is inevitably an end to sorrow, that contentment and stability are modes of permanence, is precisely the inauthenticity of human life. Rilke reverses it. The essential foundation in life is suffering: whatever comes to be for a time will be released and lost. To welcome that reality is its own joy.

Guardini becomes increasingly sensitive throughout this *Tenth Elegy*, beginning especially here. In this lengthy quotation, Guardini's crescendoing concern is made manifest:

> In reading these lines our conscience must be on the alert, for if the meaning of suffering is revealed anywhere it is in the Christian religion. Here suffering and sorrow are accepted and lived out to their final conclusion in the very heart of God. But Christianity also says that our normal sufferings are *not* necessary and do not form part of the essential ground of existence. There is no such thing as that pain which is later called "Primal," in the sense that it forms the substance of existence. This would make pain an inescapable necessity of life and would deprive it of its ultimate meaning. Suffering is significant as something which exits, but not "of necessity." Once it has taken shape, then certainly it penetrates to the very roots. Its significance is thus not unlike Death. But if we look back at the *Elegies* we shall see how a whole series of images expresses this single idea: that suffering is not something which we can get rid of but an essential part of human existence which gives our life its final meaning.[55]

[50] Rilke, *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke, 1910-1926*, 316.

[51] Rilke, *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke, 1910-1926*, 373.

[52] Guardini, *Rilke's Duino Elegies*, 288.

[53] See Rilke, *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke, 1910–1926*, 316.

[54] Translation provided in Guardini's commentary (see Rilke, *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke, 1910-1926*, 270).

[55] Rilke, *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke, 1910-1926*, 270–71.

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The question at issue is why suffering is meaningful. For Rilke, it is because suffering is necessary and essential to existence—it is permanent. For Guardini, suffering is meaningful in an ultimate sense because it is welcomed into the very heart of God, folded within divine love for creation. Guardini is especially critical here because in the Christian view, suffering is neither everlasting nor erased; it is healed.

Through the unstoppable loss that is the theme of the *Tenth Elegy*, Rilke presents this final meaning of suffering as an ongoing journey—a pilgrimage that is no pilgrimage because it has no end. As if painting a Last Judgment scene, Rilke gathers the dead—not according to the saved and damned, though, but as a soundless whole.[56] The poet brings us to the "city of grief" or "city of Pain"—a necropolis—that is filled with the "pseudo-silence of drowned commotion."[57] Here there is that eerie silence of a graveyard that is not the absence of activity, but rather its impossibility. All the ornamentation we add to such a place of memorial is really a "market of comfort," which an Angel would trample underfoot. Rilke sees a church alongside with "its ready-made consolations," and these are nothing more than one last vain attempt to see the other side of pain. The "billowing fair" of the living's distracted activity is perched on the rim of the necropolis, where the living busy themselves so as to avoid listening to the drowned commotion of the dead.

From this gathering place, the journey begins. A youth emerges—a youth in love; in love with a youthful Lament (41–42). She leads him, saying "It's a long walk. We live way out there."[58] In spectacular and haunting verses to follow, the Lament leads the youth, showing him the "Land of Pain," the "Trees of Tears," and the "Fields of flowering Sadness."[59] At last we are told, "They stand at the foot of the mountain-range. / And she [now an older Lament] embraces him, weeping. / Alone, he climbs on, up the mountains of Primal Pain. / And not once do his footsteps echo from the soundless path."[60] There is no sound for who would hear it? To give a sound would be to give something back, to offer an answer from the realm of the dead. But the dead move into the depth of being, the true reality of loss and of sorrow. They recede, endlessly and soundlessly.

[56] For more on the dissolution of the person in the *Tenth Elegy*, see Mor, "'La parola di un uomo onesto significa ció che dice' Romano Guardini Lettore Di Rilke," esp. 64–65. Guardini criticizes Rilke precisely for depersonalizing the person in *Sprache, Dichtung, Deutung* (Germany: Werkbund-Verlag, 1962), 43.

[57] Guardini, *Rilke's Duino Elegies*, 272.

[58] Rilke, *Duino Elegies & The Sonnets to Orpheus*, 63.

[59] Guardini, *Rilke's Duino Elegies*, 269.

[60] Rilke, *Duino Elegies & The Sonnets to Orpheus*, 67.

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Rilke concludes his masterpiece by musing that, if the "endlessly dead" could awaken some symbol in us, "We, who have always thought / of happiness as *rising*, would feel / the emotion that almost overwhelms us / whenever a happy thing *falls*."[61] This is Rilke's response to the religious emotion welling up. Rilke sees this emotion—the one that calls for resolution and bravery—as calling for the acceptance of unending loss. Rilke's dead are the pilgrims of a limitless cosmos who, as Guardini writes, "are remote and inaccessible. They know the final meaning of existence."[62] Rilke foretold this end in the *First Elegy*: "In the end, those who were carried off early no longer need us: / they are weaned from earth's sorrows and joys, as gently as children / outgrow the soft breasts of their mothers."[63] The dead are what we truly are and shall become: nonpersons without names.

With "the dead" now fully portrayed in the completion of his *Elegies*, Rilke presents a secularized communion of saints. This is the communion that is no communion, of nonpersons who have lost personality. This is the end that determines all that precedes it. Detachment, depersonalization, and the dissolution of bonds have all become virtuous because of the end to which all is drawn: the end of loneliness.

Looking back, we can see how Rilke's end was already present in his beginning. His vision of the last things is thoroughly impersonal because, as poet, he assumes first of all a position of isolated individualism in which awareness of being is the only task. This starting point is decisively *not* dependent on receiving an address and, in like manner, the task that follows from it has nothing to do with addressing another. The primary question that launches and runs through the *Elegies*—"Who if I cried out would hear me among the angelic orders?"—is, ultimately, not a question in search of companionship and certainly not a question springing from companionship, but rather a question set in what Guardini calls an atmosphere of "oppressed loneliness—one might also say desolation."[64] Guardini thus calls Rilke the spokesman of our time.[65] Rilke gives a vision at the end of the modern world—a world that goes on endlessly in the soundlessness of the dead. Responsibility in the Rilkean vision is in throwing off your vestiges of attachment; resolution is charging headlong into this fate; and bravery is achieved in relinquishing your given name (see *First Elegy*).

[61] Rilke, *Duino Elegies & The Sonnets to Orpheus*, emphasis in original.
[62] Guardini, *Rilke's Duino Elegies*, 297.
[63] Rilke, *Duino Elegies & The Sonnets to Orpheus*, 7.
[64] Guardini, *Rilke's Duino Elegies*, 17.
[65] Guardini, *Rilke's Duino Elegies*, 303; cf. Kuhn, "Romano Guardini," 264–65, and Gerl-Falkovitz, *Romano Guardini*, 251.

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Rilke himself had steadily and willfully withdrawn from Christianity and what he saw as its weak and insufficient worldview, even confessing in a letter to having become "almost rabidly anti-Christian."[66] In his withdrawal, he did not knock everything down in a Nietzschean manner; instead, he reenvisioned the world from a new starting point. That starting point was the assumption of the impossibility and undesirability of receiving or giving a word that lasts. His doctrine of love becomes his doctrine of death in the certainty of endless noncommunication.[67] In this, Rilke canceled out the foundation of the Christian religion, which is the assertion that life itself comes as an address. It is given in the Word. That Word brings into existence what does not yet exist, orders what is disordered, and gives life to the dead (see Rom 4:17). In brief, "Those who hear will live" (John 5:25).

Guardini found Rilke dangerous not because of his imaginative energy or artistic skill. In fact, like Rilke, Guardini calls for a posture free of that technological control which overdetermines the meaning of things according to usefulness.[68] Like Rilke, Guardini calls for a posture of openness that welcomes both the strangeness to which we are typically averse and the connections we could not previously apprehend; and like Rilke, Guardini calls for a posture of awareness, of uninhibited perceptivity free from that fearfulness that imposes itself on what would be revealed. The degree of aesthetic receptivity that Guardini calls for is just as profound as Rilke's, and for each the aesthetic recalibration of the visionary and the artist is a necessary task. Yet, the one crucial point that separates Guardini and Rilke proves decisive: what Rilke denies and Guardini affirms is the basic Christian assumption of Revelation as an address. That is Christianity's inscrutable starting point; Rilke's rejection is foundational. The upshot is that Rilke says we lack courage because we cannot stand to abandon our delusions of permanence, whereas Guardini says that we lack courage because we will not risk trust.[69]

Guardini's Saints, Dante's Rose, and Creation's Fulfillment

Where you stand affects what you see. Guardini's critique of Rilke ultimately comes down to where the poet presumes to stand and thus what he is

[66] Quoted in Guardini, *Rilke's Duino Elegies*, 273.

[67] Harmut Heep celebrates Rilke's accomplishment as a liberation, or what he calls "the transcendence of the immanent" (837). Needless to say, he does not sense what Guardini senses regarding the collapse of the integrity of the human person in this achievement. See Hartmut Heep, "Rilke and Religion: A European Battle," *History of European Ideas* 20, no. 4–6 (February 1, 1995): 837–43.

[68] See, for example, Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, 97–113.

[69] See, for example, Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, 77–96.

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willing or able to see. To ultimately see the truth of human existence to its eschatological conclusion, Guardini knows that we must stand upon the place given in creation and open ourselves to being formed according to what we see from there.[70] On behalf of modernity, Rilke denied his own givenness.

In the first section, I gleaned Guardini's diagnosis of the end of the modern world in relation to the world that came before it—namely the medieval world. Guardini's point about the medieval world is that it was a limited world but not a closed world because it was a world pierced by Revelation. Upon that fact, the human being and the whole cosmos came into view.[71] When Dante—the poet of that medieval world—looked up, he saw the heavenly spheres arrayed in order, receiving and orchestrating their movement from the Primum Mobile where abides the most sublime of angelic orders and ultimately from the divine dwelling: the Empyrean.[72] Dante's cosmology was, of course, the cosmology of his day, a cosmology that as seen from where we are now appears quaintly outdated. Our understanding of orbits has shifted, and when we look up into the dark sky—if we do—we see a vast expanse that goes on and on in every direction. From here it looks like Dante was wrong about the order of space; it seems we have no point of orientation above. Guardini, however, did not concede that the modern view of the cosmos was right and Dante's was wrong. Instead, he asked a question about Dante: What is the philosophical and Christian image of the world that grounds and structures the *Divine Comedy*? That question led to the next: Is that image of the world true, and if so, in what way?[73]

Rilke begins to reveal his vision of the cosmos with his lonely figure, beset by existential concerns, asking a question about the efficacy of crying out: "Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angelic orders?" Dante begins to reveal his vision of the world through his pilgrim who is likewise alone, in a dark wood, in which all gain seems bound for loss. But Dante's pilgrim does not ask a question about the permissibility of crying out;

[70] This point is reminiscent of Ratzinger's articulation of the relationship between "standing" and "understanding" in the nature of belief; Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2nd. ed. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2004), 69–74.

[71] Regarding Guardini's theological anthropology, see Krieg, "Romano Guardini's Theology of the Human Person," and Alfons Knoll, *Glaube und Kultur bei Romano Guardini* (Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 1993), 338–73.

[72] Guardini studied the angels of Dante's poem deeply, and even commented on them in relation to Rilke (e.g., 39). His major work on Dante's angels is in Guardini, *Dante*, 11–130. Bringing Rilke's angelology into contact with Dante's via Guardini would be a fascinating and fruitful study, which, alas, exceeds the bounds of the present study.

[73] See Guardini, *Dante*, 11–12.

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instead, he actually cries out: "*Miserere di me*" (*Inferno* 1.65). Beginning with these words the world is re-presented to the pilgrim in a vision that will stretch to encompass the entire cosmos. Crucially, though, it is a vision, as Guardini recognized, "that must be fulfilled not only in the gaze of contemplation but also in doing and inner becoming."[74] The cosmos that is revealed is held between the depths of the one who seeks mercy and the heights from which mercy comes. Moreover, this cosmos is structured by a mediatorial pattern, by which the gift of mercy is extended and the progress toward beatific fulfillment is ventured. The cosmos is ordered to communion, through and through.[75]

Guardini's rejection of Rilke's vision is completed, in positive terms, with his discovery of Dante's vision.[76] Like Rilke after him, Dante turns toward rather than away from suffering and loss, he strains to the see the truth beyond the blur of convenience and comforts, and he asks in the medieval world that fundamental question which Guardini along with Rilke knew must be asked afresh at the end of the modern world: "What am I, this human being?." The difference is Rilke assumed isolation and found it, whereas Dante risked trusting in mercy and was thus opened to a world tending toward communion. Rilke's was a world without poles: no substantive personhood below, no source and summit above. Dante's was a world where the divine decision was above, where that which is above moves downward as grace—according to the eternal principle of the incarnation of God[77]—and where that grace is made manifest in "a chain of helping hands reaching from the inaccessible height of God to the present concreteness of the time, place, and need of this particular person."[78] Rilke's pilgrim progresses by dissolving all attachments; Dante's moves only because of how he is called and aided. What makes the movement of Dante's pilgrim into

[74] Guardini, *Dante*, 16. All the translations from this Italian work are my own.

[75] See Guardini, *Dante*, 264. For a thoughtful essay about the relationship between cosmological models and human perception of reality, see John Brungardt, "Ah, to Live in a Cosmos Again!," *Church Life Journal*, September 19, 2018, https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/ah-to-live-in-a-cosmos-again/.

[76] Guardini wrote and lectured on Dante from the 1930s through the 1950s, which includes the time he was working on Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. At the end of his collected works on Dante, Guardini provides a personal epilogue in which he recounts his own intellectual and spiritual relationship to Dante's work. That personal account shows Guardini himself becoming more conformed to what he learned in Dante: that true progress in the deepest human matters is never attainable from study alone, but must be matched by the ordering of the will and the transformation of desire (see Guardini, *Dante*, 367–72).

[77] Guardini, *Dante*, 370.

[78] Guardini, *Dante*, 17.

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progress is the degree to which the pilgrim's own will and desire are brought into harmony with the transcendent divine will that shines above.[79]

The beginning of progress for Dante is thus the plea for mercy—that partial, desperate desire for being lifted up out of despair. Progress in this manner continues from down in the depths of the *Inferno* to the peak of the *Purgatorio*, before the movement by will and desire becomes a dominant theme in the *Paradiso*. At the beginning of *Paradiso* 2, Dante warns his reader not to follow him further if the reader intends to listen only to what he says. Movement from that point forward leads to disarray unless those who seek progress are open to willing and desiring according to what is being revealed and presented. In other words, there can be no mere objective, disinterested vision; one's own subjectivity (the pilgrim's, the reader's) is being called into play (see 2.1–6f.). In *Paradiso* 3, Dante states that beatitude is explicitly connected to accepting and dwelling in the will of God—of willing what God wills (3.79–81). Then in *Paradiso* 10, as the pilgrim looks up into the heavens to observe the celestial movements, the poet addresses the reader: if the reader is to enjoy and delight in the vision hereby heralded, dispassionate study—as from "a lecture bench"—will not suffice (see 10.22–27). The reader, like the pilgrim, must move by will and desire, in harmony with the promptings of the intellect and affections that are now being transformed. The pilgrim only then journeys to the pilgrimage's end once he himself moves harmoniously, by will and desire, with that love that he has been studying all throughout his pilgrimage education (see especially 33.46–145). The vision of the world that Dante presents is not only one marked by poles—one above, one below—but indeed ordered to the union of what is above and below. The theme is harmony in the most personal terms.

When Guardini writes of Dante's cosmology, he brings forth the fundamentally personal, relational quality of this world, which has been shot through by the deed of Revelation. Above the highest heavens is the Empyrean, the "place of God," but not a "place" such as would preexist the

[79] The act of seeing a "cosmos" at all should not itself be taken for granted. To see a whole—a unity—is already itself an act of interpretation. As Seth Benardete put it, "We see heaven and earth, but we do not see their unity, which we call cosmos. 'Cosmos' puts a label on an insight about the structure of the whole that is simply not available to sight" (*The Tragedy and Comedy of Life: On Plato's Philebus* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993], 162–63). Rilke does have a cosmological vision (a vision stretching to what is endless precisely because the "averted half" is death as perpetual loss) and is thus engaged in an act of interpretation, which begs the question of what informs his interpretation. What I have sought to show previously is the basic assumptions—and denials—that ground the sort of vision of the cosmos that Rilke projects. Cf. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, 18.

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God who may be found "there"; rather, it is "realized" because of the presence of God. "By 'Empyrean,'" Guardini explains, "we mean that area of the world with which thought seeks to express, moving from space, the relationship between God—the absolutely transcendent—and the world."[80] That is the pole above. As for the pole below: "In the same way, the mystical concepts of the eye of the mind or the bottom of the soul indicate the anthropological sphere with which the relationship between God and man is expressed, starting from the spiritual element."[81] What is seen in the Empyrean is the truth of the world, and each person is true to the extent that they are collected into the presence of God. The eschatological image of this creaturely communion in the fullness of the divine presence is the celestial rose.[82] The rose, in which all the saints dwell in union with one another in the mutual indwelling of the Trinity, is what Guardini calls the reality in which all life exists.[83] This is the cosmic sphere of creaturely life; it is a sphere with radii of personal relations in every direction. The saints know one another in their faces and by their given names. They give and find shelter in one another. They desire one another to be, and they claim one another in charity.[84]

Guardini discovered Dante's rose as befitting the eschatological end of the human person in a Christian vision, and yet it is not an image easily contemplated. It cannot be seen from the safe distance of an objective observer. It is seen only from the ground of faith, and from there it takes an extraordinary act of seeing. It is a matter of humbly assenting to a given perspective and then moving by will and desire into the order of charity. That given perspective is claimed in the plea for mercy, by which the pilgrim assents to his status as creature. This most serious realism structured Dante's pilgrimage. The whole journey—his whole life—was bound between the end he moved toward and the inner movements of his will and desire—from one pole to

[80] Guardini, *Dante*, 174.

[81] Guardini, *Dante*.

[82] Guardini, *Dante*, 111.

[83] Guardini, *Dante*, 102–03; cf. Paradiso 30.109–123; see also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Romano Guardini: Reform from the Source*, trans. Albert Wimmer and D. C. Schindler (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1995), 15, 69.

[84] For more on Dante's eschatological imagination and the life of the saints, see Leonard J. DeLorenzo, *Work of Love: A Theological Reconstruction of the Communion of Saints* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), esp. 142–52. For his part, John Thiel works to show the importance of the connection between the beatific afterlife and the promises, sins, and events of life, especially in terms of how we conceive of purgatory; see John Thiel, "For What May We Hope? Thoughts on the Eschatological Imagination," *Theological Studies* 67 (2006): 517–41; cf. John Thiel, "Time, Judgment, and Competitive Spirituality: A Reading of the Development of the Doctrine of Purgatory," *Theological Studies* 69 (2008): 741–85.

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the other. All is complete in the celestial rose, which basks in the light of the transcendent God who has opened a path to these heights through the incarnation: the descending mercy now extended through "the chain of helping hands" Dante encountered. This is the thing Guardini saw lacking in Rilke: the fact of creatureliness itself. Rilke begins with the image of a lonely figure in a cosmos where no one can or will hear: the fullness of the Angel secures the anonymity and homelessness of the isolated pilgrim for whom the only path is loss. Dante begins with a solitary figure who has forgotten or forsaken the truth of the world, enclosing himself in a dark and lonely space, but whose closed world can be and eventually is pierced by mercy. The mercy Dante's pilgrim cries for is a mercy already given, and the whole cosmos is structured to mediate that mercy should he learn to will and desire accordingly. On behalf of his age, Dante showed what it means to be God's creature, from beginning to end. Whereas Rilke cried into the certainty of loneliness and arrived at endless loneliness, Dante cried out for mercy and arrived at the communion of saints. The cry for mercy is the beginning of the end of loneliness.[85]

When Guardini asks if Dante's vision is true—as he asked of Rilke's—his affirmative response is not reducible to the outdated Ptolemaic system, nor does it require a historical transposition whereby one must situate oneself in a bygone world that is not one's own, as if engaged in an archaeological search. Guardini finds the "overall reality of the poem so alive and current"[86] because the overwhelming power of the total image is a world and persons whom God created in order to give himself, as love.[87] The spaces that Dante makes visual through his poem depend on the astronomy of his day, but that astronomy was the form by which that which is always "alive and current" was manifestly expressed. That vivid poetic image is how Dante asked and responded to the question of the meaning of existence and the right use of time. Rilke saw that all time leads, ultimately, to loss, but in Dante's vision time is for gain when movement is directed toward willing and desiring in harmony with the transcendent divine will; it is for loss when not. The issue of the right use and misuse of time emerges at the outset of the *Divine Comedy*. Disoriented midlife (*Inferno* 1.1–3), Dante confesses to being full of sleep and sluggish (1.10–12), and even as he discovers the path of progress, he hesitates and looks back, dragging one foot, by which he likely means not his reason but his will (1.26–30).[88] The would-be pilgrim

[85] Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, 108–09.

[86] Guardini, *Dante*, 178.

[87] Guardini, *Dante*, 174–75.

[88] For one illuminating account of Dante's vision in terms of the priority of redeeming time, see Matthew Treherne, "Beginning Midway: Dante's Midlife, and Ours," in *Dante, Mercy,*

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begins in a condition of not moving, far from harmonizing with the "love that moves the sun and the other stars." Thus is the dynamism of the world Dante apprehends: one measured in movement toward harmony.

In rejecting Rilke and affirming Dante, Guardini is not prescribing a total retreat into the medieval world or recommending that modern persons find all their solace in a visionary who is unfamiliar with our own time. Guardini rather wants us to see with all the power and conviction of a Dante because we need our own poetic vision today, which will help us grasp our creatureliness in a world such as ours, and he wants to persuade us into seeing this world from where we are as structured and ordered by divine love, as Dante sought to do. It is about how to use *our* time aright. For that, what we look for matters. To begin from the certainty of isolation means ending in perpetual loneliness; indeed, "no one gets out alive." But to begin from trust in an address—the address of an act of creation, indeed of re-creation—opens up the hope of communion. To will and desire that end both relies on and commits one to a fundamental claim about the whole of the cosmos.

If Guardini has one recommendation, it is to allow the liturgy to teach us how to desire and to will in order, in time. He understands that human beings learn to desire communion by practicing it. Quite fittingly, he closes his book on *The Spirit of the Liturgy* by appealing to the stars and to courage:

> The liturgy has something in itself reminiscent of the stars, of their eternally fixed and even course, of their inflexible order, of their profound silence, and of the infinite space in which they are poised. It is only in appearance, however, that the liturgy is so detached and untroubled by the actions and strivings and moral position of men. For in reality it knows that those who live by it will be true and spiritually sound, and at peace to the depths of their being; and that when they leave its sacred confines to enter life they will be men of courage.[89]

Liturgical time is measured according to charity unto communion. It sets about healing the breaks in charity that imperil communion, testifying to the charity that forges communion, offering the charity that is complete in communion, and commissioning those on whom it works to practice charity for the sake of communion. Guardini interpreted Dante's vision of the celestial rose as the final end to which the work of liturgy tends. The everlasting communion of the saints in Christ presents a definitive image of what

and the Beauty of the Human Person, ed. Leonard J. DeLorenzo and Vittorio Montemaggi (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 83–97.

[89] Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. Ada Lane (New York: Herder and Herder, 1998), 95.

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the human person is by showing what the human person is to become, in communion, in the fullness of time.

In critiquing and responding so vigorously to Rilke, Guardini resets the task for the visionary, the poet, and the believer at the end of the modern age. The task is to take responsibility for answering that question about ourselves, including the question "What am I, this human being?." In Rilke's eschatological vision, the answer is that the human being is one bound for endless loss in a kind of cosmic dissolution. But in the eschatological vision of the communion of saints, the answer is that the human being is one bound for, judged by, redeemed for the sake of, and perfected in communion. From the perspective of that eschatological vision, everything else must be reconsidered and recast, for "the end determines all that precedes it."[90]

Conclusion

Guardini's critical interpretation of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* amounts to a prolegomenon for the theology of the communion of saints—a prolegomenon penned as a form of protest. As much as Guardini admired the beauty and the power of Rilke's verse, he was not wooed; he saw the catastrophic danger of Rilke's vision. The consequence of the vision Rilke projects is nothing short of the erasure of the human person.

In his Angel, Rilke eliminates all possibility of the human person being known or heeded. The Angel absorbs all particularity into its fullness of being. Rilke's doctrine of love that follows promotes the energy of loving but dissolves the substance of both the lover and the beloved. To Rilke, love that seeks to unite persons to persons is no love at all, but rather only grasping after the illusion of permanence. In his vision, love is energy and striving without exchange. The Hero, then, is the figure who approximates to the authentic being of the Angel, always charging forward, never hesitating or relenting, untroubled by the desire to rest with another or give rest to another. The Hero only ever hastens to what the dead become: ones shorn of concern and relieved of the burden of this weighty life. In the end, there are no ties that bind, which means that all ties now are at best ephemeral, and more likely deceptive and inauthentic. There is no notion of "person" here.[91]

[90] Guardini, *The Last Things*, 12.

[91] Among the classic modern accounts of what is meant by "person" and where this notion comes from is, of course, Joseph Ratzinger's "Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology," *Communio* 17 (Fall 1990): 439–54.

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Guardini objects to Rilke for the sake of retrieving the meaning of the human person. To do so fully would, in the end, require the recovery and bold rearticulation of the meaning of saints, precisely as the eschatological image of persons-in-communion. Guardini glimpses such an image in Dante's celestial rose. In his critique of Rilke and his appeal to Dante, Guardini calls for saints who are themselves a response to the problem of the modern age, which Guardini sees as having lost its sense of what humanity is, who the human person is, and what the world is. But the saints Guardini calls for are not just a tonic for the modern age. They press the urgent question in every age—the question of how to seek communion in *this* age, in *these* times, unto consummation in beatitude.

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