

INTER/COURSE

Natalie Rutgers

inter, prep.

The Latin preposition = 'between', 'among'

course, v.

To exchange, to interchange

—*Oxford English Dictionary Online*

Introduction

I'm an ordinary man, Jack, meat and potatoes, I live in the real world. I'm not a big believer in magic. But this place is different. It's special. The others don't want to talk about it because it scares them. But we all know it. We all feel it . . . I've looked into the eye of this island. And what I saw was beautiful.

—*Lost*, "The White Rabbit" (00:29:05)

As the survivors of Oceanic flight 815 try to pull themselves together after crash landing on a seemingly deserted island, they are ignorant of their true location. While the writers of *Lost*, Jeffrey Lieber, J.J. Abrams, and Damon Lindelof, keep their characters and viewers in the dark about the island's identity, they contemplate a middle space between life and death: purgatory. Each character is tested in unique ways, yet only one accepts the new environment with open arms and open eyes. That man is John Locke.

After crashing on the island, the characters become aware of a monster terrorizing the jungle just beyond the safe territory of the beach on which they've made camp. All fear the monster—running whenever they hear the ominous clicking sounds or witness trees toppling over. However, when John Locke encounters the monster—a billowing, unnatural cloud of black smoke—he does not turn to run; he looks straight into its darkness and, as the words above insist, finds it "beautiful."

I. Beauty

“Beauty,” for Rainer Maria Rilke, “is nothing / but the beginning of terror, which we can just barely endure, / and we stand in awe of it as it coolly disdains / to destroy us” (1.4-7). Beauty exists as a delicate balance that inspires not only admiration, but fear. Its inherent contradiction threatens to overwhelm us – for the balance between those opposites cannot always hold, leaving us with two types of beauty: that which is lasting and that which is fleeting. Yet the thing about beauty, and what Rilke’s statement captures so elegantly, is that we wish for it to last; we wish for it to be freed from its aspects of terror and, instead, to become something that we can control and cherish forever.

Recall the first time someone looked you in the eyes and truthfully called you beautiful. While the act of calling someone beautiful is noteworthy, the memory that lasts is not the sound of those words that can be easily woven together. Instead, it is the look in the speaker’s eyes that captivates you as the words brush past the lips. Perhaps he gently cups your cheek and entangles his fingers through your hair. Or maybe he is too nervous to outstretch his own bubble of space, simply leaving his hands at his sides, while he musters up the necessary bravery. Either way, both of you know the consequences of the words. And those consequences are affirmed by that look that pierces your gaze. For in that moment, he admires every facet of you, enamored by his luck at witnessing such astonishing beauty. His eyes, normally a clear, deep blue, seem to shimmer slightly, as if they’ve glazed over, and he’s retreated into a dream. Nevertheless, that mixed gaze holds you—forcing you to accept the truth: in that moment, you are a delicate balance; you are beautiful.

While the admission of beauty fills you with joy, it also instills terror. You fear that your beauty, like that of many others, will not withstand time. That is why you memorize that look in his eyes. That is why you hang on to the sound of his words as they dissipate into thin air. You know that while he may, in that moment, be so sure of the beauty that is there, almost palpably so, it can quickly vanish. Perhaps it will be too much for him to endure—just as Rilke declares. Or perhaps, as is common, it will quietly lose its luster. And when it does, it will no longer threaten to destroy both of you in that

moment, but in the future—when you remember just how powerful it once was. You will yearn for that tantalizing energy that lit a fire in your nervous system, creating an air of electricity to ignite what little space existed between the two of you; you will feel its lack.

For beauty, both that which disappears and persists, evades human capabilities; it always lives just beyond our grasp.

Humans are far more limited than we like to believe. These limitations often lead us to succumb to easy definitions and oversimplifications, which prevent us from understanding the complexities around us. And for Rilke, one of our most debilitating simplifications is to divide life and death: “the living / all make the same mistake: they distinguish too sharply” (1.78-79).

II. Death

Death has plagued us forever—not only by ending the lives of individuals, but by haunting those left behind. In order to cope with the inevitability of death, we attempt to ease its pain, as if “death demands a labor” and “a tying up of loose ends” (Rilke 1.76, 77). Tracing back to ancient Greece, we find one of the oldest traditions of mourning and coping with death in the elegy—“a song or poem of lamentation, especially for the dead” (“elegy”)—whose elements “mirror three stages of loss. First, there is a lament, where the speaker expresses grief and sorrow, then praise and admiration of the idealized dead, and finally consolation and solace” (“Poetic Form: Elegy”).

In his *Duino Elegies*, Rilke utilizes the form of the elegy to unveil an alternative take on the darkness of grief and, ultimately, death. His collection of ten elegies hinges upon death, yet not in terms of its finality. Rather, Rilke extends the form of the elegy beyond a focus on the death of a loved one in order to express and explore the broader emotion of loss itself. Rather than choosing to toil in his own pain and permitting it to consume him, he asks:

Isn't it time that these most ancient sorrows of ours
grew fruitful? Time that we tenderly loosed ourselves
from the loved one, and, unsteadily, survived:
the way the arrow, suddenly all vector, survives the string
to be more than itself. (1.48-52)

Rilke does not tell us to push aside our feelings of grief from the loss of a loved one. No, he wants us to view that grief in a different light—one of opportunity rather than loss. Describing death as loss—“the condition or fact of being ‘lost’, destroyed, or ruined” (“loss”)—implies that we are *without* and forever disabled, when in actuality, that moment of pain, toil, and suffering is an opportunity to gain. In her most recent album, *Vulnicura*, written after separating from her longtime lover, Björk echoes Rilke when she sings, “Don’t remove my pain / It is my chance to heal” (“Notget”). To find clarity and release from her pain, Björk understands the need to not push it aside in an attempt to forget and move on, but to view it as a tool. By embracing death and pain, both Rilke and Björk offer us a new concept for heart-wrenching emotions—one in which death, pain, or sorrow is not an inevitable close but a continuation, a transformation.

Rilke declares that, as angels cross over the border between life and death with ease, what exists in each is not completely separate from the other—life and what mattered in it remains in a multiplicity of forms. Therefore, death is not cause for paralyzing sorrow but an opportunity to progress by seeing what else is strung along in mourning. By exploring death through angels and our connection to them, Rilke blurs the seemingly clear divide between life and its apparent opposite; he creates a middle space for us to dwell in.

Although the middle spaces of the *Elegies* and *Lost* differ, they offer us an alternative to a final, terrifying fate by reminding us to question our simplifications of death. The black smoke in *Lost*, easily classified as a manifestation of evil, may also be an oversimplification. While most characters experience terror whenever the black smoke reveals itself, John Locke sees beauty. Is this not an example of two polarities at work? After all, beauty is not a human power but one of angels, as Rilke claims. The witnessing of beauty is a consequence of “their own outstreamed essence / [that] sometimes, by accident . . . / get[s] mixed in” with our world (Rilke 2.31-33). Therefore, by recognizing the failures of our simplifications, perhaps we can begin to see what “get[s] mixed in.” If we don’t reconcile them, our continued reliance on strict divisions will only perpetuate reactions like Rilke’s—that “Every angel is terrifying” (1.7). Witnessing an angel with this divided mindset would only result in the viewing of a single polarity rather than a balance between the two—so narrow is our way of seeing.

Interlude 1: Polarities

But I want, here, to pause for a moment. The polarities I speak of are not mere instances of graspings at words and ideas in an attempt to design a complex scheme of philosophical nonsense. No, these two polarities—darkness and beauty—have perplexed us for centuries. And, by returning to a human-made middle space familiar to us, purgatory, explored both in religious settings and in *Lost*, we can get a sense of our footing. Purgatory, according to the beliefs of the Catholic Church, is an intermediary state between heaven and hell, light and dark, perhaps even beauty and darkness. And while purgatory does have a strict divide between the polarities, it resonates with Rilke's middle space in that it is "a place of temporary suffering or expiation" ("purgatory"). Rilke would agree with Catholic doctrine that the suffering in a middle space like purgatory is necessary, but he would be hesitant to accept the linear thinking of purgatory as the purifying step before commencing one's eternal fate in heaven. For Rilke, a middle space is not unique to some souls, restricted to those offered a chance at redemption, but necessary for all. He would shun the oversimplified arrangement of the life and a consequent afterlife in heaven and hell—seeing this as just another example of humans creating strict, overly-simplified divides:

Spectators, always, everywhere,
looking at, never out of, everything!
It overfills us. We arrange it. It falls apart.
We rearrange it, and fall apart ourselves.

(Rilke 8.66-69)

In Catholicism's rigid structure, if one cannot purify oneself in life, one gets trapped in hell, in darkness. If one can purge oneself of earthly sins, one ascends into heaven, a fate often depicted as the basking in beautiful, golden light. While heaven and hell are two seemingly intense opposites, both places are infused with cosmic energy. The two work in tandem, revolving around the middle space of purgatory. The two are not entirely separate; they are united by the middle space and are forever connected to human existence by their relationship to purgatory.

While Catholicism promotes the idea that heaven is holy and hell is evil, my interest lies not in the difference but in the fact that both polarities are eternal states. The Catholic Church has long noticed the connection of human life to a forthcoming eternal one. While it recognizes that our individual lives are tethered to mortality, it understands that awaiting us is some eternal fate—one dependent on a middle space of suffering. Yet Rilke shuns the notion of an eternal fate being restricted to the afterlife. Therefore, might his notion suggest that the afterlife's cosmic energies are accessible to us during our mortal lives? With that in mind, I want to further explore our human attempts to recognize these cosmic energies.

III. Sight

We must acknowledge the crucial sense tied to witnessing—"to see with one's own eyes" ("witness"). Beauty, woven into our world or found in cosmic space, can be recognized through sight. John Locke is able to find beauty in the black smoke because he "*looked* into the eye of the island" ("White Rabbit" 0:30:00, emphasis added). An admission of beauty is not noteworthy because of the words on one's lips, but because of the look in one's eyes. In both instances, the lookers sensed something more. While they intuited that they were latching onto something greater than themselves, than any human experience, they were unable to determine what it was, exactly.

But the human ability of sight is not enough. Any glimpse of an angel would be deemed "terrifying," and interestingly enough, both beauty and life are temporal, closed off from us in the blink of an eye. Beauty, like human life itself, seems to be measurable through sight—for when our eyes are open, all that is "[earthly] seems lasting, beyond repeal" (Rilke 9.17). Yet as soon as our eyes close, we are made hyperaware of how ephemeral both beauty and life seem, for we only experience darkness. This inescapable eclipse haunts us because it opposes our belief that "*life* compels us, and [that] everything here / seems to need us" (9.11). We are reminded once again that we and everything we find beautiful can dissipate into thin air and be lost to us. Perhaps our fear of death is much like our fear of beauty's impermanence, fleeting. After all, we are "the *most* fleeting" (9.13). Therefore, we may not be afraid

of death itself, but rather of disappearing *after* death, as time and life continue on and we fade into nothingness.

IV. Darkness

Nothingness—is that how we think of darkness? Death, and all that is attached to it, seems to be wrapped up in obscurity. And that unknown void drives us to “search for an exit” (Berger 105). Rembrandt, according to John Berger in his essay “Rembrandt and the Body,” painted in a manner that seemed to pull the human form out of the darkness. While painting is an art that heavily relies on sight, Rembrandt seemed to delve into a dark sentiment similar to the pains of grief and sadness that toll on Rilke – one that consumes and overwhelms the body and mind. Rembrandt—like John Locke, Björk, and Rilke—actively sought to embrace and explore his wounds in a way he could understand. Through painting, Rembrandt made his “clim[b] . . . alone, into the mountains of primeval grief” in an attempt to transform his suffering; it is this venture that captivates Berger and makes him question the mysterious space that surrounds the body (Rilke 10.06).

Berger declares that “[e]ach one is living in her or his own corporeal space” (107). This domain “is the space of each sentient body’s awareness of itself,” and while it is “always finally bound by the laws of the body . . . its landmarks, its emphasis, its inner proportions are continually changing” (107). Notice, however, the biggest influence on one’s corporeal space: “[p]ain sharpens our awareness of such space. It is the space of our first vulnerability and solitude . . . [b]ut it is also, potentially, the space of pleasure, well-being and the sensation of being loved” (107).

While pain, pleasure, and sensation are often experiences inflicted or bestowed upon one by another, Berger highlights why Rembrandt captures corporeal space so well because his paintings “reveal an ‘innerness’ . . . of the body, what lovers try to reach by caressing and by intercourse” (110). Perhaps then, the “innerness” that can be hinted at, but not attained, through sight can be achieved through touch.

V. Touch

When we touch, we extend past our own corporeal space and into another's. Touch, though an interaction between lovers, is an individual experience. It makes us self-aware, for alone "we don't know our feelings' contour, / only what shapes it from the outside" (Rilke 4.17-18). By touching, we awaken an undeniable sensation and awareness that we do exist. We "grow conscious of each other" and can safely announce, "I *am*" (2.47, 49). This safety comes from a sensation that guarantees something more than transient existence. Finally, an earthly interaction seems to suggest that we are more than temporarily present: "you touch so fervently because the caress preserves . . . doesn't disappear; because, underneath, you feel / pure permanence. Thus, your embraces almost promise you / eternity" (2.56-60).

Yes, the act of touching occurs between the bodies of two people, but it inspires personal revelations. Because touching makes us conscious of our outlines and contours, we, like Rembrandt, find ourselves in that ever-expansive stretch of nothingness that surrounds us, giving ourselves definition, shape, and significance. Therefore, the mutual act of touching is to "clim[b] . . . alone, into the mountains of primeval grief" (10.106). And in that moment of self-awareness, darkness no longer is terrifying, but can transform into something beautiful, into a beauty that is not crippled by volatility, but one that can "promise you / eternity" (2.59-60).

Interlude 2: Transformation

Because Catholic notions of heaven and hell are both tied to the processes that occur in purgatory—the middle space of suffering—they are inextricably linked. I believe that they are not direct opposites; both eternal states are flush with cosmic energy and angels, whose energies have rooted their way into us. Much as "[a]ngels (it's said) often don't know whether they move among the living or the dead," they see no real divide between the cosmic realms of heaven and hell and move freely between the two (Rilke 1.80-81). The barrier that seems to exist between them is a human creation.

Now, I apply the same workings to darkness and beauty: for Rilke, suffering is the middle area that lies between the two and holds them together. Darkness, therefore, does not counter beauty; it is a distant cousin, one that can be transformed to reveal its underlying or hidden beauty.

In his last elegy, Rilke describes a youth trailing after a young Lament as she leads him to a valley. The young Lament—an embodiment of mourning itself—is adorned in “[p]earls of grief and . . . delicate / veils of suffrance” (10.52-53). Epitomizing Rilke’s urging that we take on our toils of grief, sadness, and darkness, his young Lament wears her afflictions not as chains that weigh her down, but as jewelry, decorating her, making her all the more beautiful. She takes on her pains, transfigures them, alters their meaning, effectively demonstrating that darkness is not the opposite division of beauty—but its unexplored and unresolved form.

So is touch our human key to resolving darkness? Touching permits an exchange and a transfer; it creates “paths [for] the energy [to] habitually flo[w]” (Berger 108). This energy, normally only hinted at through sight, finally removes its veil and reveals itself to us when we touch. The powerful energy no longer threatens us, but offers us reprieve from our human understanding of death as conclusive. Death no longer needs to be the enemy, but can become “the intimate Friend” (Rilke 9.77).

But while I have claimed that touch can transform darkness into beauty and “promise us eternity,” what do beauty and eternity have to do with each other?

VI. Eternity

Beauty is a power unique to the angels. Their power, so great, has inevitably woven its way into each of us and our world, depositing fragments of both beauty and terror everywhere (Rilke 2.29-36). But beauty is not all that gets left behind. The beauty of angels is itself immortal, lasting. And for an immortal power to lodge itself in us is to install an aspect of eternity within us, or so the Rilkean voice of the *Elegies* asserts: “The eternal current / bears all the ages with it through both kingdoms / forever” (1.81-83).

But what does this mean for us as mortals? Yes, our bodies themselves are mortal; they will degrade with time and give life to new things as they decompose and blend with the soil of the earth. But our essences—our internal and intrinsic natures on which our entire selves depend—are altered by the cosmic energy to become immortal. This idea may seem far-reaching, but that is because we are so attuned to what is visible. Rather than opening ourselves up to the complex possibilities that circle around us in the shadows of the dark, we shut ourselves off from the forces that live among and inside us.

If we rely on *touch* rather than *sight*, we afford ourselves the opportunity to uncover both the lasting beauty we long for and the opportunity to live on. We counter time.

You see, we don't love like flowers, the effort
of just one year; sap from time immemorial
flows through our arms when we love. O girl,
this: that we've loved, *within* us, not that one person yet to come,
but all the weltering brood; not some single child,
but the fathers who lie like mountain-ruins
within us; and the dried-up riverbed
of former mothers—; and the whole
soundless landscape beneath our cloudy,
or cloudless fate: all *that* . . .

(Rilke 3.66-75)

Touch, here, allows the eternal current to freely flow between Rilke's speaker and girl, and enables them to access the weltering brood "within" their past lives. The darkness so normally beyond our understanding makes itself clear and transforms into something lasting, beautiful—we gain access to our own bit of immortality. Through touch, we can come as close to a higher existence as we ever will: "we can go *this* far; / this much belongs to us, to touch each other *thus*" (Rilke 2.71-72). Touch is ultimately a way to connect to the higher powers that exist among us. That is why "[i]n the fusion between two bodies not only desire can pass, but also pardon or faith" (Berger 110). Pardon and faith, two sacred powers traditionally sought out through prayer or confession, can be acquired through touch because, when touching, we are granted a direct connection to the cosmic realm, to the spaces we are usually blind and closed off to. If all this is true, possibly in senses beyond what words can

finally express, comprehensively, immortality becomes not an eternal fate that we need to aspire to and wait for, but one that we need to uncover within ourselves.

Extension (Beyond Conclusion)

extension, n.

The reaching or stretching (the arm, hand) out or forth.

Enlargement in scope or operation.

—*Oxford English Dictionary Online*

For in love we are immortal / eternal and safe from death

—Björk, "Notget"

Ah, but what can one carry across
into that other relation? Not the art of seeing,
learned so slowly here, and no event that transpired here. Not one.
The pain, then. Above all, the hard labor of living,
the long experience of love, —all the purely
unsayable things

—Rilke, *Duino Elegies* (9.22-27)

I offer these words as another means of solace in the face of death. But I hope, for my sake and yours, that these concepts hold more weight than that. There is an undeniable force that manifests itself between caresses. We seek each other out, maybe to simply avoid a lonely existence and a departure from this life, but I believe in more. When we fall into one another's arms and give ourselves over, is it only for the sake of sexual pleasure? No. Getting lost in the forces of a shared embrace dissipates the fear and pain of isolation. In an instance of touch, you are aware of what is, rather than of what *might be*. Ultimately, you gain an understanding and awareness ordinarily the mark of the higher powers, however we name them.

If you are doubtful, have you found a more powerful sensation beyond that of touch? I have not. And because of this, I will return to the sensation of touch time and time again, believing that its transfer of energies offers me something more: a means of struggling through the many pains of life, offering a metamorphosis of the vast unknown surrounding us into a lasting

beauty, and a relief from the burden of a life that only ends, our conventional wisdom tells us, in death.

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