

LIVING WITH AND BEYOND THE GREAT UNKNOWN

Stuart Wang

1. Terror—The Angel

Every angel is terrifying (1.7)

—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*

Thus begins the *Duino Elegies*. Immediately, we feel a sense of troubling uncertainty towards Rilke's angels. These beings of "stronger existence," whose power would consume and "destroy us," are not benevolent guardians of our well-being; at the very best, they are indifferent to us (1.4, 1.7). This indifference negates the Christian portrayal of angels so common to Western literature, instead forming the image of a foreign, morally ambiguous angel.

In Rilke's world, the unknowable and seemingly unattainable nature of the angel creates fear in mankind. Therefore, "[e]very angel is terrifying" is a complicated assertion, rooted not only in the Rilkean portrayal of angels, but also in the way we think about ideas beyond our own existence. As humans, the rulers of all living things in the kingdom of Earth, we can only think selfishly—every organic thought arises from our minds, and concerns only ourselves. It is because of this limited perspective that we instinctively perceive any greater, unknown power as a threat.

Rilke's declaration that "beauty is nothing / but the beginning of terror, which we can barely endure" is an elegant, succinct encapsulation of the way we see anything beyond our immediate understanding (1.4-5). Initially, we marvel at what confounds us, caught in the overwhelming power of experiencing something we cannot understand or express. But before long, the self-serving animal inside us awakens, and we shrivel from our own amazement because something that cannot be intellectualized, surely, cannot be trusted.

Along these lines, Edwin A. Abbott's novel *Flatland* offers insight into how we handle unknown realities. The novel's protagonist, a square that lives in a two-dimensional world known as "Flatland," finds himself on an inter-dimensional journey, up to and beyond his bounds. The Square visits the one-dimensional world "Lineland" and immediately sees the lower state of being that the Linelanders represent, their horizons and sightlines restricted to a single dot. The Square tries to describe Flatland and the second-dimension to Lineland's one-dimensional beings, but his exposition is met with outrage. "Can anything be more irrational or audacious?" exclaims the King of Lineland, and exiles the Square immediately (47).

Returning to Flatland, the Square receives a visit from a Sphere, an occupant of three-dimensional "Spaceland." Ironically, despite his interaction with the ignorant Linelanders, the Square rejects the notion of a third-dimension, demanding that the Sphere stop its "mockeries" (58). Later, after the Square is taken beyond Spaceland, to the fourth-dimension, he attempts to educate the Sphere about life beyond three-dimensions, but to no avail. By way of ironic repetition, Abbott shows us how each life form possesses the common, flawed belief that it is the highest possible form of existence.

Engrained with an agenda of sociopolitical views, *Flatland* was published in 1884 with the intention of political satire, but is now most notable for pioneering the way we think about dimensional existence. In crafting this wonderfully allegorical narrative on human nature, Abbott chose the Square as the novel's protagonist. Ignoring for an instant the novel's plot, we can realize how inherently egotistical mankind is; we can only begin to recognize our own existential ignorance through a self-serving parable of geometry. Furthermore, moving back towards Rilke's universe, Flatland personifies the chronic denial we have towards the great unknown. Even after confronting the stubborn ignorance of the Linelanders, after seeing the foolishness of their limited perspective, the Square refuses to accept the Sphere's claim that there is a higher form of existence until he sees beyond himself. Such an assertion, that one's kingdom is nothing but a microcosm, a minor parameter within a much greater universe, is simply too devastating.

If, indeed, we are graced by a being of the angelic order, whose very presence proves that there is a greater plane of existence, would we accept the truth of our subservience? Perhaps this is what Rilke contends with when he

paints us “in awe of [the angel] as it coolly disdains / to destroy us” (1.6-7). We are the Linelanders, the Square, the Sphere. What threatens to destroy us is not the angel itself, but rather our own terrifying realization that we are not God’s “favored first prodigies, creation’s darlings,” and we never were (2.10).

2. Struggle—The Hero

Ascent is his existence (6.22)

In an attempt to defy our troubling insecurities with our place in the universe, mankind created *the hero*, whose sole purpose is to rise above the bounds of humanity. The word *hero* derives from the Latin *hērōs*: “favored by the gods” (“hero”). Thus, as a universal symbol of triumph, the hero can be seen as an elevated, divine form of man, not so different from the angelic order. In the Sixth Elegy, Rilke’s focus falls solely on the hero, conveying him as a counterpart to the natural perfection of the angel. In this context, the hero can be seen as the intersection of man and angel: he endures struggles that only man can fathom, to achieve results that only angels can imagine.

As a representative of our potentiality, the hero also fulfills our fantasy of transcendence. Indeed, the hero exists to ascend; that is his identity, his sole purpose in humanity’s self-serving mission. His struggle, although desperate and frenzied, is not unaided; “Fate, / which wraps us in mute obscurity, grows ecstatic / and sings him into the storms of his tumultuous world” (6.24-26). Here Rilke makes the important distinction that the hero is not destined to triumph—no, instead his place in the universe is determined by the strength of his own current and privileged by the devices of Fate.

I will turn now to Stanley Kubrick’s film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, a cinematic masterpiece that tells the transcendent story of our past and future. Kubrick opens his film with the dawn of man in a sequence that shows man’s origin from primates. One day in the prehistoric era of primal existence, a black rectangular monolith suddenly appears, rooted into the ground at the primates’ cave of shelter. The monolith exudes a mysterious, terrifying power, and as the primates approach it, we hear amplified shrieks,

hair-raising wails. The audience assumes that this otherworldly sound is coming from the monolith, but its reason remains unknown. After suspiciously circling it in what oddly resembles a ritualistic dance of prayer, the hominids run their hands over its smooth surface. Shortly after, one of them becomes conscious of the fact that the bone of a deceased animal can be used as a weapon. He immediately uses the bone to fight off another tribe of primates, marking the local waterhole as his own territory. This, says Kubrick, is how man was born.

The film now jumps from prehistory to the future, to the year 2001. Aided by space travel and artificial intelligence, humans have discovered and excavated an artifact buried beneath the moon's surface some four million years ago. When a team of scientists visits the moon in top secrecy to uncover the nature of this troubling evidence, we see that it is the same monolith that appeared in the prehistoric era. Once again, we hear haunting shrieks as men circle around the monolith. One of the scientists reaches out. As he touches the slab there is a moment of chaos—our intrigue and captivation are pierced by a high-pitched screech. Contact with the monolith has been made, but the film suggests that we are incapable of understanding its consequences. If first contact with the monolith birthed mankind, what next evolution are we headed for?

Man's interaction with the monolith in *2001* is, of course, symbolic, and can enhance our understanding of the *Elegies*. The monolith, with its inexplicable, paralyzing power, inspires the same sense of terror that the Rilkean angel does. It represents ambiguous elegance, offering no solace or explanation in its deep blackness. Just as Rilke does in the *Elegies*, mankind in *2001* cautiously probes the unknown entity, wary of its power, but driven by a sense of self.

Consider, for a moment, the image of the hominids circling the monolith in prehistory, and the image of the scientists approaching the monolith on the moon. Separated by millions of years, on opposite ends of history, Kubrick creates two scenes strikingly similar in composition. The beings in both frames are bound by cosmic repetition. Indeed, at its core, the monolith symbolizes an idea that has been presented throughout mythology, literature, and human culture. We, as temporary beings in an infinite universe, repeatedly encounter forces that are greater than ourselves. Unable to overcome or

even comprehend what we perceive, we are often only able to graze the surface—to run our fingertips over the veil. And, through these tireless attempts to handle what is beyond our means, we begin anew, and ascend. *2001: A Space Odyssey* sees mankind continuously realizing a better form for itself. We never quite attain the power of the monolith, but through our interaction with the great unknown, we are reborn as something greater than before.

My call is like
an outstretched arm. And its raised hand, tensed
as for grasping, remains before you
always, defense and warning,
Ungraspable One—palm out, wide open.

(Rilke *Duino*, 7.89-93)

In the context of the *Elegies*, the hero's existence, unlike that of the angel, features constant struggle, inevitable failure, and rebirth as "someone new" (6.46). Is this not the image Kubrick created of mankind in *2001*? At the end of the film, we ambitiously see ourselves among the stars, as part of the eternal landscape that created us. This is an inherently human idea of heroism, something we have propagated since constellating the stars in our image. Thus we can certainly say humanity is portrayed heroically, overcoming the indifference of the universe to transcend its bounds with the help of Fate. Even the title word "Odyssey," often overlooked, implies our heroic, epic journey, overseen and ordered by ostensibly divine forces.

When an angel or monolith—or any other symbol of the unknown—descends upon us, it is in our nature to fear it. But—rather than turn our backs to it—we must confront it, for it is our duty to struggle with the truth, to grapple with the fact of our insignificance. "Was he not always the hero?" Rilke asks; "Thousands teemed in the womb, wanting to be *bim*" (6.33, 6.35). Yes, our journey to find our way into this world, to seek a place for ourselves in the universe, is truly heroic—"favored."

3. Existence—Our Place

Look, I am living
—Rilke, *Duino* 9.78)

At the close of the *Duino Elegies*, Rilke's view of the angel is markedly different, indicating that an evolution of thought has taken place across his poems. The Ninth Elegy, in particular, stands out in the way it speaks to us about life in the presence of angels. Accepting the unreachable, eternal power of the angelic order, Rilke asks us to do the same. "You can't impress [the angel] with lofty emotions; in the cosmos / that shapes *his* feelings, you're a mere novice," Rilke preaches (9.52-53). This sentence offers two ideas: first, we are undeniably subservient to the angel and the great unknown, and second, the universe is *his* domain, rather than ours. In comparison with the angel, mankind merely passes through the universe; its time and space are rented and quickly returned.

Rilke delivers this solemn truth with a dignified indifference. Gone is the paralytic fear found in the earlier *Elegies*; now Rilke opens our eyes to the beauty, power, and transcendence of mankind. He writes, "[s]how [the angel] / some simple object, formed from generation to generation / until it's truly our own, dwelling near our hands and in our eyes" (9.53-55). "Show him how happy a thing can be," Rilke goes on, "how innocent and ours, / how even sorrow's lament resolves upon form, / serves as a thing or dies into a thing" (9.58-60). It is, after all, beautiful, what we have managed to create for ourselves in helplessness, in transience.

In *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rilke speaks of acceptance. "We can delude ourselves about this and act as if it were not true," he writes, "[b]ut how much better it is to recognize that we are alone; yes, even to begin from this realization" (87). With this sentiment, Rilke seems to convey a solemn acceptance of our condition, yet approaches this solemnity with a certain measure of optimism. He challenges us to rebirth ourselves from this realization because is it our journey—the hero's journey—to reshape our perspective when encountering adversity. This, of course, implies the great existential shock of "a Man taken out of his room and, almost without preparation or transition, placed on the heights of a great mountain range" (87). But it is also

a carrier of relief. The burdens of contending with the universe fall away, and mankind is left to simply *be*. Perhaps by implementing the simile of man at the summit, Rilke is suggesting that this is the path to our transcendence.

Clinging desperately to life, we understand the urgency of the moment more clearly than the angel can. Terror, loss, sorrow, evolution, rebirth, joy: these are essential facets of our existence that are unknowable, perhaps terrifying to the angel. Our relationship with “Death, the intimate Friend” is incomprehensible to the Angel; in this regard, we are higher beings (Rilke *Duino* 9.77). Reversing the hierarchy between man and angel, Rilke tells us that the angelic “look to us, the *most* transient, to be their rescue” (9.65). Unlike them, we can say that, beyond simply existing, we are truly living—is this not a higher state of being? The collective efforts of our struggles, the tapestry of mankind’s greatest triumphs, make up a living, changing shape that, in itself, is terrifyingly beautiful:

But suppose the endlessly dead were to wake in us some emblem:
they might . . . direct us to the rain
descending on black earth in early spring. —

And we, who always think of happiness
rising, would feel the emotion
that almost baffles us
when a happy thing *falls*.

(10.107-115)

Thus ends the *Duino Elegies*. We are no longer looking up at the angel; now we are looking down, and around us, for the heavens have showered us with happiness. Understanding that the great unknown—the Sphere, the monolith, the rain—descends and plants itself in our world, we can stop looking up with fear, and instead look around, at all we have been privileged with. “Look,” Rilke shows the angel; “I am living . . . Superabundant existence wells in my heart” (9.78-80). And the welling, the texts tell us, is all.

WORKS CITED

- 2001: A Space Odyssey*. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. Perf. Keir Dullea, Gary Lockwood, and William Sylvester. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1968. Film.
- Abbott, Edwin Abbott. *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*. NY: Classic Books International, 2009. Print.
- “hero, n.” Def. 1. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2015. Web. 25 June 2015.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Duino Elegies*. Trans. Edward Snow. NY: North Point Press, 2000. Print.
- . *Letters to a Young Poet*. Trans. Stephen Mitchell. NY: Vintage, 1986. Print.