

## THE QUEST FOR TRUTH AND AUTHENTICITY IN RAINER MARIA RILKE'S "THE PANTHER"

Mohammad Reza ZARE\*

**Abstract:** The opaque poetic language of Rainer Maria Rilke as a symbolist writer facilitates the reader to elicit diverse interpretations from his poems and refabricate their meaning as befitting. Rilke's poem "The Panther", is highly recognized as a prominent symbolic modernist work, showcasing Rilke's profound insight into the human condition and the intricacies of existence. By adopting the framework of existentialism and relying on the symbolic language of the poem, this paper tries to transcend the poem's literal meaning and bring up the possibility of considering "The Panther" as a symbol of modern human questing for truth and authenticity in the backdrop of modernity.

**Key Words:** Rilke, The Panther, Existentialism, Authenticity, Truth, Modernity.

### RAİNER MARİA RİLKE'NİN "PANTER" ADLI ESERİNDE HAKİKAT VE ÖZGÜNLÜK ARAYIŞI

**Öz:** Rainer Maria Rilke'nin simgeci bir yazar olarak opak şiir dili, okuyucuların şiirlerinden çeşitli yorumlar çıkarmasını ve anlamlarını kişisel deneyimlerine uygun bir şekilde yeniden yapılandırmasını sağlar. Rilke'nin "Panter" adlı şiiri, insanlık durumu ve varoluşun karmaşıklıkları üzerine derin içgörüler sunarak önemli bir sembolik modernist eser olarak geniş çapta kabul edilmektedir. Bu çalışma, varoluşçuluk perspektifinden, fırlatılmışlık, edimsellik, kaygı ve aşkınlık gibi varoluşsal boyutları inceleyerek bu karmaşıklıklara daha derinlemesine inmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Şiirin sembolik diline odaklanarak, analiz, yüzeysel anlamın ötesine geçmeyi ve "Panter" in modern insanın hakikat, özgünlük ve öz gerçeklik arayışının bir metaforu olarak yorumlanma olasılığını keşfetmeyi hedeflemektedir. Modernite bağlamında ele alındığında, kafesinin içinde hapsolmuş panter, bireyin toplumsal yapıların kısıtlamalarından kurtulma mücadelesini ve giderek parçalanan bir dünyada anlam bulma çabasını yansıtmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Rilke, Panter, Varoluşçuluk, Otantiklik, Gerçeklik, Modernite

### Introduction

With a career spanning over thirty years, Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) is considered by many to be one of the most influential poets of the 20th century due to his highly crafted verses and compelling contributions to the field. As a modernist writer, Rilke's affiliation with Symbolism approved his perspective on the autonomy of art and its disengagement from external reality

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\*Arak Universty.

while, accentuating internal relations (Kramer, 2010: 115). This attitude, abundantly, made his poetry a suitable medium for confronting and representing human's fundamental dilemmas. Ensuing a visit to the studio of the esteemed French sculptor Auguste Rodin in 1907, during which profound inspiration was gleaned from his oeuvre, he published a collection of poems called *New Poems* that among his numerous works, stands out as a testament to his deep-rooted insight into the human condition and the intricacies of existence. Arguably, Rilke's most famous piece in *New Poems* is "The Panther" which was first written around 1902 but published synchronously with other poems in the collection, becoming a touchstone against which all of Rilke's poems for the next few years were measured.<sup>1</sup> Considering The Panther's symbolic traits due to the opaque nature of language in Rilke's poetry as a symbolist, facilitates us to go beyond the panther's literal representation hence, depicting it as a symbolically referential object. In this paper, I aim to investigate the existential themes imbued within Rilke's poem to portray it as a symbol of modern human striving for authenticity and ultimate truth amidst the backdrop of modernity. The analysis seeks to illuminate the panther's symbolic significance as a representation of modern human's relentless pursuit of authenticity and truth in a rapidly changing world.

### 1. Philosophical Framework

As a newly emerged doctrine stemming from the heart of modernism following the devastation and disillusionment brought about by World War I, "Existential philosophy" tended to question the meaning of human's existence in a society uprooted from traditional norms and conventions. It is mostly argued that the roots of existentialism can be traced back to the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) although it evolved into a broader and more diverse form in the 20th century, as practiced and developed by philosophers such as Jaspers, Heidegger, and Sartre. With the intention of comprehending why existentialism came to existence, we may trace its lineage back to ancient Greece. Western philosophy's metaphysical tradition since the time of Plato, prioritized a methodology that delineated the subject from the object to capacitate the subjective consciousness apprehend the representations of the objects—a paradigm mainly referred to as representational thinking. Existentialists however, eschewed the idea of representational thinking by fleeing from observing human as a subjective consciousness striving to uncover the truth behind the objects. Alternatively, they conceived human as an existence "already thrown into the self-interpreting event or activity of existing,

1. See the letter to Clara Rilke of 1 February 1906.

that is always embodied, felt, and historically situated” (Aho, 2023: 4). In this respect, human’s existence is disclosed to, and is in unity with his environment by confronting the givens of his existence, hence, the truth unconcealed for human is in placation with his unique relation to his environment, concrete experiences, and givens. This notion of subjective truth, provoked existentialists to uncover how the self [existence] is, how the self relates to the world, and what the self’s potentialities are (Palmer, 1959: 194). Existentialists have different attitudes and interpretations towards human’s potentialities and moods but despite noticeable differences in this way of philosophizing with different philosophers, they all share some major recurring themes or moods such as freedom, finitude, alienation, anxiety, transcendence, thrownness, facticity, and death that constitute the core of existential philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Focal to existentialists, is the dichotomy of authenticity and inauthenticity in human existence. Preeminently, existence’s inauthenticity manifests as “complacency, conformity, and self-forgetfulness” (Michelman, 2008: 43) and its authenticity is epitomized by a recognition of “essential finitude, freedom, and responsibility” (Michelman, 2008: 43). To elaborate, the existence fleeing from its substantial potentialities ascertains its inauthenticity, and choosing its “ownmost” potentialities by realizing and actualizing them in concrete moments designates authenticity. For the most part, existence sustains in inauthenticity unless it endeavors to reach and grasp its authentic self, however, this effort would not permanently authenticate the existence as authenticity is not a static state but a dynamic and ongoing process of self-discovery and self-realization. In the following section, drawing upon this theoretical framework, I aim to investigate some of the existential themes and dimensions of Rilke’s “The panther” to depict it as a symbol of modern human yearning for truth and authenticity in a world devoid of fixed values and universal truths. The poem is short enough to be illustrated here along with its English translation since throughout the analysis, I mainly rely on the German version for more precision and integrity.

Sein Blick ist vom Vorübergehn der Stäbe  
so müd geworden, daß er nichts mehr hält.  
Ihm ist, als ob es tausend Stäbe gäbe  
und hinter tausend Stäben keine Welt.  
Der weiche Gang geschmeidig starker Schritte,  
der sich im allerkleinsten Kreise dreht,  
ist wie ein Tanz von Kraft um eine Mitte,  
in der betäubt ein großer Wille steht.  
Nur manchmal schiebt der Vorhang der Pupille  
sich lautlos auf –. Dann geht ein Bild hinein,

His vision, from constantly passing bars,  
has grown so weary that it cannot hold  
anything else. It seems to him there are  
a thousand bars, and behind the bars, no world.  
As he paces in cramped circles, over and over,  
the movement of his powerful soft strides  
is like a ritual dance around a center  
which a mighty will stands paralyzed.  
Only at times, the curtain of the pupils  
lifts, quietly –. An image enters in, rushes

2. In his book *Existentialism* (1973), John Macquarrie considers the presented themes as essential existential themes common among existentialist.

geht durch der Glieder angespannte Stille –      down through the tensed, arrested muscles  
und hört im Herzen auf zu sein.                      plunges into the heart and is gone.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Existential Analysis of *The Panther*

The first existential dimension that comes to fore in “The panther” is ‘thrownness’. Rilke brings forward a vivid image of a thrown and captivated panther in a cage, commencing describing the panther’s status within its given environment from the beginning of the poem. The common description of a panther is a dynamic and rageful creature with no sign of languor but Rilke’s poem describes an animal that has given up and broken down, mentally, by the monotony of life in captivity (Driscoll, 2018: 42). The very first lines of the poem “Sein Blick ist vom Vorübergehn der Stäbe so müd geworden, daß er nichts mehr hält” initiate depicting the panther’s dimension of thrownness behind bars as an embodiment of its existential finitude and illustration of its situation of confinement and limitation. Correspondent to thrownness is existential “situationality” that is the “inescapable fact of always being in a situation and never being able to escape it and always having to find one’s realization through it” (Palmer, 1959: 198). It is through this confrontation with thrownness that existence can strive for its authentic self. Consequently, the panther should relate itself to its situation and environment to obtain self-realization but as Rilke depicts, the animal is so exhausted of struggling to achieve self-determination that “it cannot hold anything else”. This image of a panther captivated and thrown into a cage, symbolizes modern human being captivated and thrown into a predetermined situation of life in the age of crisis and uncertainty, whose weariness is vivid due to existential struggle for truth and authenticity as “the quest for authentic personal being meets with resistance and sometimes with frustration” (Macquarrie, 1973: 4). Rilke correlates the panther’s weary and exhausted vision to “Vorübergehn der Stäbe” thus, the panther’s “Blick” could stand for human consciousness and “die Stäbe” presents the possible forms of truth Man has examined but none being the ultimate one.

Sequacious to thrownness, “facticity” is the dimension we envisage next. For existentialist, the term facticity, refers to how existence apprehends its concrete social, historical, and physical givenness of its situation (Michelman, 2008: 146). Encompassing social and historical aspects, facticity, is the closest existential dimension to the idea of “thrownness” demonstrated in the opening lines of the poem and the image Rilke exhibits of a thrown and captivated panther into a situation of confinement. Rilke’s enigmatic symbolist language portraying ambiguity between physical and metaphysical realms effectuates our

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3. Translated by Stephen Mitchell.

interpretation of facticity in “Ihm ist, als ob es tausend Stäbe gäbe” to be simultaneously physical and metaphysical due to the obscurity of the language. In a sense, concentrating on the physical givenness, “tausend Stäbe” might allude to the panther’s incarnated existence within its given physical structure of which there is no emancipation inasmuch as “existentiality is essentially determined by facticity” (Solomon, 2005: 136). The consequence of facticity, however, is the need for the pure awareness of self to realize that its realization must come through incarnation in the body (Palmer, 1959: 199). This idea leads us to discuss the metaphysical aspect of the existence’s facticity. As the idea suggests, it is through the awareness of incarnation that existence comes to achieve self-realization. Having in mind the assumption that the panther’s exhaustion could relate to its struggle for self-realization, hence, the “tausend Stäbe” in a metaphysical sense, is an embodiment of the panther’s metaphysical constraints in becoming self-aware as the basis for self-realization. Succeeding line “und hinter tausend Stäben keine Welt” endures a demonstration of the panther’s existential isolation albeit, owing to the obscure language of Rilke, the distinction between physical and metaphysical isolation is not very clear-cut. Being alone in experience and not sharing interpretations, perceptions, and reactions with the outside world arise the feeling of existential isolation (Long et al., 2022: 494) and the portrait we have hitherto, is a panther isolated from the outside world either physically by being in a cage or metaphysically by being unable to express itself. Nevertheless, physically or metaphysically, the panther is condemned to exist in this isolation considering there is no world behind the bars of constraints. Rilke’s illustration of the panther’s mood of facticity to be presenting human’s physical and metaphysical existential constraints, touches upon human beings’ existential crises and struggles to achieve self-determination and subsequently, authenticity and truth in the age of modernity.

As a fundamental dimension, “anxiety”, plays a crucial role in the journey of existence’s appetite for authenticity. Not as a psychological state but an ontological mood, in existentialism, anxiety is defined as a “precognitive apprehension of the groundlessness of the world in tandem with the groundlessness of the self” (Michelman, 2008: 243). In other words, Existence’s confrontation with anxiety reminds it of the possibility of its impossibility, meaning death. Having anxiety, the existence is aware of living in the face of an end and any time it may vanish into nothing (Macquarrie, 1973: 152-153) thus, by confronting the anxiety of this nothingness, it endeavors to achieve self-realization and take responsibility for its choices, yearning to achieve its authentic being. The existential phenomenon of anxiety is often associated with “Helplessness” which is the imposition of anxiety on existence that cannot be helped

for being an ontological dimension. “Helplessness in the state of anxiety can be observed in animals and humans alike and it expresses itself in loss of direction and inadequate reactions” (Solomon, 2005: 331). Referring to the poem, the image depicted of the panther’s ceaseless pacing in tight circles by Rilke in “Der weiche Gang geschmeidig starker Schritte, der sich im allerkleinsten Kreise dreht” could ingeminate its confrontation with existential anxiety and helplessness. The panther appears to be lost in direction and captivated in a repetitive mode of action, indicating its struggle for acquiring the authentic self or the ultimate truth before facing its possibility of impossibility and its helplessness of not being able to escape this anxiety. This portrayal of the panther’s movement could symbolically reflect the modern human’s condition in dealing with existential anxiety in the face of life’s constraints and is a poignant reminder of the unsettling realization of the self’s limitations and the inevitability of death. In a sense, anxiety awakens the existence from its illusions and confronts it with the responsibility to grasp its authentic being (Macquarrie, 1973: 131) likewise, as for the panther, the modern human who confronts his existential anxiety would be lost in direction and struggles to grasp his authentic self.

In existentialists perspective, the term “Transcendence” does not refer to the sublime and beyond empirical world experiences but it is determined as a way of comprehending and actualizing the potentialities of the self [existence] and projecting possibilities into the future (Michelman, 2008: 315). Accounting prudently, I assume Rilke in “ist wie ein Tanz von Kraft um eine Mitte” after depicting the panther’s repetitive motion and helplessness, tries to describe the panther’s “Tanz von Kraft” as its ownmost potentialities. However, by placing it around a “Mitte” that is an embodiment of constraint and deadlock, he affirms the potentialities are suppressed and the panther is incapable of projecting possibilities into the future or in other words, incapable of transcendence. Applying the prefix *be-* to a word in German, as in the word *be-täubt*, indicates the matter is being imposed upon the object, consequently, it is possible to consider the panther’s paralyzed being as the result of the inflicted facticity and thrownness, preventing its transcendence. Although the panther is paralyzed and its inner potentialities are suppressed, its will to transcend is somehow displayed in ‘in der betäubt ein großer Wille steht’. Observing the panther’s situation, we can metaphorically presume it to be portraying the modern human struggling to project possibilities into the future although his inner potentialities might be suppressed by his facticity, isolation, and thrownness.

As formerly stated, existence would not always abide in authenticity and should constantly struggle to grasp its authentic self. This notion is ingeniously

depicted by Rilke in “nur manchmal schiebt der Vorhang der Pupille sich lautlos auf”. Although the panther constantly scrabbles for authenticity, only sometimes does it grasp its authentic self as the unveiling of the pupils symbolically presents this notion. In continuation to this line that we interpreted as a moment of authenticity, the poem continues to demonstrate the panther’s encounter with the glimpse of truth in “Dann geht ein Bild hinein”. For Heidegger as a well-known Existentialist, truth “happens” when concealments are stripped away and when things emerge into openness (Macquarrie, 1973: 105). Considering the “Vorhang” as a sign of concealment bested before the panther’s eyes, Rilke in unveiling the curtain of the pupils approaches the eradication of the concealment and accordingly the panther’s confrontation with the “Bild” as a truth disclosed to its existence. The idea of ultimate truth in tandem with the context of modernism is challenged in ‘geht durch der Glieder angespannte Stille – und hört im Herzen auf zu sein’. The “Bild” symbolically presenting a glimpse of truth, turns out to be an arbitrary and impermanent form of it as it goes through the muscles of the panther and reaches the heart of it but after this journey which metaphorically demonstrates the journey of finding the truth, vanishes in the heart of the panther. Symbolically representing the human of modernity, the panther, after having a glimpse of truth through an introspective journey realizes the “image” is still the same as the thousand bars and forms seen and comprehended before. This grasping and losing of the truth, could be accounted as modern human being’s existential absurdity, trapped in an unlimited loop of crisis for grasping truth and authenticity.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, relying on this existential analysis, Rilke’s “The Panther” as a prominent symbolic modernist work, adequately resembles some of the existential moods modern human tolerates in the journey of longing for his authentic self and the ultimate truth requisite for being. In this sense, it is worthy to look at the poem as symbol of modern human beings who are divorced from their conventional values and endeavor to find authenticity and truth in an indifferent world.

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