

## POETRY AND ETHOS: TOWARD AN ONTIC UNDERSTANDING<sup>1</sup>

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### OPSOMMING

Die artikel poneer 'n geïntegreerde strukturele sisteem waarvolgens die leser poësie normatief kan ontleed en evalueer. Hoewel die religieus gefundeerde filosofiese basis rigtinggewend optree, beperk dit die subjektiewe benadering van die leser geensins nie. Aangesien die skrywer van mening is dat die kunsprodukt die totale religieuse standpunt van die digter weergee, word dit hier bewys dat dit dus ook moontlik is om die geobjektiveerde etos in die gedig deur middel van die strukturele metode te kan identifiseer en analiseer.

### 1. THE ANALYTIC QUEST

This short interpretative study endeavours to explicate and illustrate a normative method of poetic analysis. By means of this integrated structural system, the reader has a theoretical construct and effective tool at his disposal. While the reader is completely free to apply these directives subjectively, the objective, religiously founded philosophical basis keeps the danger of pure inspirational analysis at bay.

Each aspect of creational reality is considered in its own artistic right and the inter-relation of the parts continually reassesses the significance of the individual segments. It is nevertheless the coherent unity of the text that remains central to the reading and understanding of the art work.

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This artistic wholeness is the interpretative expression of the authorial presence in the poem. The quest of this integrated approach is to analyse and evaluate such an aesthetic interpretation of reality. And only by unlocking the manifested expression of the artist, can the reader truly penetrate into the 'heartbeat' of the aesthetic experience.

## 2. AESTHETIC ETHOS

As art, or any aesthetic experience, is always an interpretation, a particular view of reality, it is important to gain insight into such a portrayed vision. A system should therefore be devised by which to determine and evaluate the expression of the artist's insight, his feeling and his sense of beauty, his imagination and his subjectivity (Rookmaaker, 1975:229); in short, the reflection of the spirit of man and spirit of the times.

It is this spirit permeating the experience, the human experience recreated as aesthetic expression, which, being concerned with feelings and attitudes, also reflects the "lived fullness of the world" (Brooks, 1976:9).

And yet the spirit of a poem does not exist 'an sich', but is only recognizable in the 'Being' of the poem, the aesthetic expression. In other words, the ethos can be detected "aus dem was es etwa aus dem Menschen macht, also aus dem Gestalthaften und Gestaltgewordenen" (Schneider, 1956:8). Dooyeweerd and Seerveld agree that the eventual artistic activity of the artist is religiously determined and directed from the heart (Van der Berg, 1975:166). If artistic expression is indeed grounded in the "supra-structural rootedness" (Troost, 1970:75) of the 'I', then the ethos or man's "fairly constant foundational attitude (Troost, 1970:77) towards life, must be evinced in a recognizable and analyzable expression.

Detection of the objectified ethos must, like any scientific experiment, be founded upon law-bound analysis in order to be normative. Christian philosophy and Scripture can provide such a basis. I shall attempt to elucidate this point of departure briefly.

Both Christian philosophy and scriptural truth place the religious concentration of human existence in the heart of man or the 'I' (Troost, 1970:72). The confessional witness of man or poem, finds its point of departure in the same root. This 'I' is concretely expressed through human acts and their modal aspects, through human positivation of norm-laws. These acts always have their origin in the integrated centre of life, in the 'I' which cannot be analyzed except in the expression of the selfhood through the ethos.

Troost (1958:372) sees the recognizable manifestation of the ethos in life and culture, as the expression of the internal intention, springing from the human 'I'. The ethos is thus a total reflection of the religious direction of man's life, of all inter-human and all other relationships and also of his cultural artefacts. This implies that the ethos of a poem can also be determined through the reverse approach; from the poem to the ethos.

### 3. THROUGH STYLE TO SPIRIT

For Seerveld the artistic expression is visible in the style of the literary work and significantly enough, it is the whole man with his whole modal make up who is "subterraneanly" (Seerveld, 1977:41) involved.

It is the totality of the poem, the coherent integration of the parts that will be reflected through the style of the literary work. Although each aspect of reality has its own expressive importance and relevance, it is only the inter-relatedness, coherence and dimensionality which will reveal the greatness of the poetic vision. It is this aesthetic vision which lends significance to a poem, this "credal statement" (Rookmaaker, 1975:14), integrated in the totality of the poem, which will be the seal of distinction, unique to every poem.

Only by reading and understanding art in this way can we share in another person's view of the universe. Our quest then is to reveal and understand the literary testimony of the religiously determined 'I'.

#### 4. AN INTEGRATED METHODOLOGY<sup>2</sup>

The structural framework used in the analysis of the following poem, is based on the Dooyeweerdian Philosophy of the Cosmonomic Idea, adapted for the plastic arts by Rookmaaker and for literature by Calvin Seerveld.

The fifteen aspects or modalities represent the full scale of reality. The order of the modalities has been adjusted and the positivations have been specifically devised with the purpose of attempting a practical integrated analysis of poetry in particular.

A literary work of art, qualified by its aesthetic nuancefulness, foundationally exists through the word. It is the lingual base, aesthetically qualified and pistically opened up, that unfolds the literary possibilities of poetry.

In such an integrated approach to art, the following levels of analysis can be distinguished: the constituent lingua-formative aspects, the adherent aesthetic qualities and the pistic qualities of an art work.

##### 4.1 The lingua-formative basis

The surface level of analysis, founded on the lingual aspect, incorporates the first nine adapted modalities (from the numerical to the lingual). This first phase of the first-level analysis (close reading) will begin with the analysis of the numerical aspect and progress towards the lingual foundation. These lingua-formative aspects are simply defined from the text without interpretative deductions.

4.1.1 The interpretative level of the lingua-formative analysis is opened up by the aesthetic qualifying function and thus requires an aesthetic reassessment of the sub-layer (which comprises the first 9 modalities) and its latent secondary possibilities.

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<sup>2</sup> A diagrammatic representation of the literary theoretical applications of Dooyeweerd's modal analysis, has been added as addendum I.

4.2 Under the guidance of the qualifying function of the aesthetic, the higher aspects of an art work are unfolded and revealed in their many faceted potentialities. The artistic quality of the literary work of art is to be determined in direct correlation with the manner in which symbolical originality has been expressed. It is here that the allusive multi-dimensionality of the higher modalities will emerge (naturally only if they are present).

4.2.1 Temporal reality functions in 15 modes of expression or modalities. While each aspect is distinguished by its own special qualities, each modality also mirrors all other modalities. The earlier modalities (e.g. from the numerical to the ligual) refer to the later aspects by means of analogies called anticipations. The higher modalities again refer back to the lower ones by means of retrocipations.

By means of this modal structural framework, a work of art is analysed in its lingual, aesthetic and pistic possibilities. In the Dooyeweerdian tradition, art is founded on a techno-formative basis which controls and organizes the "connotative sub-layer" (Seerveld, nd.:29) into a technical form. Without this basis of primary signification very little communication is possible and yet, no experiential reality can be fully analysed on the clarity level of the word alone. It is here where an interpretative extension is essential; an opening up of all facets of life's experience by means of aesthetic imaginativity. The multi-valencial possibilities of a work of art are discovered and released by the anticipations and retrocipations of the aesthetic modality. Thus the lingual foundation is anticipatorily disclosed and the experience of artistic quality is revealed by means of the retrocipatory analogies of the aesthetic aspect. This means that the aesthetic dimension re-assesses the purely lingua-formative mechanics of a poem (the aspects 1-9) with aesthetic interpretative insight; and the higher modalities (10-15), from the aesthetic to the confessional, are analogically opened up by means of the allusive nuclear moment of the aesthetic quality of reality. Although the lingual is an essential foundation, it requires symbolical originality and allusiveness to open up the possibilities of enriching the normal clarity of speech into an "indigenously, polysemic, metaphorical kind of entity" (Seerveld, nd.:17), revealing the artistic excellence of the literary work of art. This inter-action between the lingual foundation and the aesthetic

'superstructure' which opens up and deepens the aesthetic experience, takes place under the leading function of the aspect of belief.

4.3 The confessional stance of the artist will become evident in the expression of the ethos of the artistic manifestation. This means that a particular religious stand will receive direction and become the religious driving force of an ethos, a world-and-life view, which influences and permeates all human activities and attitudes concretely. This is the crux of this literary analysis.

By means of the leading function of the confessional aspect in the whole unfolding process of analysis, the various parts and their appropriate balance will be unlocked and evaluated.

By means of these various segments, man's deepest convictions may be implicitly or explicitly discovered and interpreted. This then is the moment when the message of the aesthetic meaning attains its uniqueness; the moment when the artist's ontic expression finds an echo in the reader's ontic understanding.

## 5. STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

One poem and only three of the fifteen aspects will be analysed according to the integrated methodology explicated. The choice of any other modalities than those selected, namely the physical, biotic and aesthetic modalities (the fourth, fifth and tenth aspects), would have been equally convincing as each modality has its own positivation in literature and thus would simply have unlocked a different dimension of the poem. The confessional witness pervading the poem as a whole would nonetheless have been revealed.

The selection of two consecutive modalities from the lingua-formative basis, which comprise the first nine modalities, intends to reveal the anticipatory and retrocipatory possibilities between modalities. The aesthetic modality was specifically chosen, as the second level of analysis is an interpretative one. Under the guidance of the qualifying function

of the aesthetic, the higher aspects of an art work are unfolded and revealed in their many faceted potentialities.

The poem 'Kreuzigung' by Rainer Maria Rilke<sup>3</sup> is not purely fictitious but relies on an historical reality recorded in the Gospels. What the poet makes of the event and how it is expressed, is the concern of this analysis.

### 5.1 The physical aspect

The literary positivities of this modality are: sound, rhyme, tension and aesthetic balance.

5.1.1 Poetry is characteristically concerned with sound and the verbal structure of rhyme. Both are original (givens) of language and intimately share in the whole experience of the poem.

On the surface level of the first level reading, which does not yet attempt any interpretation, a predominance of the heavier, long a, ä, ü and o vowels is to be detected. Three consonantal sound patterns can be distinguished: the fricative 'L', guttural 'G' and the sibilant 'sch'. They do not only reflect a euphonious verse but, anticipatorily add to the force of expression of the following aspect, the biotic, and thus sound is fused to the other dimensions of expression. The rhyme scheme shows a correlation of the first, last and second and third stanzas. The fourth stanza has a significant fifth line added.

5.1.2 The interpretative level of the surface reading.

Of the three sound patterns, the strongly represented fricative 'L' reflects a narrative continuity (underlined by the repetitive use of 'und' at the beginning of 5 verses):

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<sup>3</sup> The poetic text 'Kreuzigung' by R.M. Rilke (which is analyzed and discussed in this paper) and a free translation in English, have been included as addenda 2 and 3.

'kahlen Galgenplatze/ Gesindel/liessen/Alle voller Lust/hielten, verfall/Essigalle' and also conveys a certain sense of bewildered unreality ('irgend ein Gesindel/und es war ihm selber, er hätte ihn den Elia rufen hören/sie hofften noch ein ganzes Spiel und vielleicht den kommenden Elia'), an atmosphere of insensibility in the monotony of the repetitive labials, which suggest a positive surrender to circumstance, a pawn-like quality. Even the diction hints at a certain automaticity of action:

Längst geübt ..... ein Gesindel hinzudrängen  
liessen sich ..... hängen  
dann und wann ..... kehrend  
liessen sich ..... schlenkern  
Bis der eine ..... sagte

In contrast to the lulling continuity of the labial sounds, the harsh guttural 'G' and the related 'ng' sound, introduce a tensile element of stress. The deceptive calm of the visual and auditory scenario strives to portray the enactment of just another spectacle, distanced as a play on a stage.

The polarized interplay between the soothing 'L' and the grating 'G' sounds seems like an onomatopoeic undercurrent, straining uncertainly to and fro; very much like the onlooker's eye (discussed under the biotic aspect) surveying the scene.

This tensile quality of breathless expectation and fatalistic unbelief, is particularly noticeable in the second half of the poem. The monosyllabic question 'Welcher?', draws the attention to the single main figure and the expectation of a spectacular miracle (lines 12 & 13). The crowd literally hold their breath but the onlooker-speaker, who seems to have been drawn into this suspense-filled moment, abruptly appears to alter the trend of narration and reports:

'Alle hielten (den Atem: my addition)  
gierig ihm die Essiggalle (das er nicht verfalle)'



In line 18, expectation still runs high in 'sie hofften noch ein ganzes Spiel', which is then finally forced to a conclusive collapse of all hope by the use of the past tense word 'verfiel'. This vacillation between the unspoken question 'Will He or won't He?', is a personal authorial struggle reflected throughout the poem.

The presence of God, never explicitly mentioned, is implied in the accumulative use of the 'G' sound. Scripturally this also coincides with Jesus' cry: "Mein Gott, mein Gott, warum hast du mich verlassen?" (Mark 15:34) and the poetic representation in 'die hielten ... gierig ihm die Essiggalle'.

The significance of the inserted fifth line in the fourth stanza: 'und sie hielten, dass er nicht verfalle', which rhymes with 'Essiggalle' in the next line, is concluded in the finality of the past tense 'verfiel', the last word of the poem. These rhyming words already indicate an important disclosure concerning the sentiments of the crowd and of the implied author (the hope of survival and the concrete collapse). Everything disintegrates with the death of Christ, the unnamed central figure. The additional line sums up the desperate effort and hope of the masses to prevent Christ from really dying like any other person; and the conditional verb 'verfalle' (which convincingly emphasized this hopeful expectation), indicates more than the mere dying of the body.

## 5.2 The biotic aspect

Here a literary theoretical positivation of this modality includes: intensity, climaxing development, force of expression and vitality.

### 5.2.1 The surface level of analysis

If a work of art has vitality, Wolterstorff (1978:314) considers it to possess aesthetic intensity. In this poem the narrative quality attains a developmental vitality in its stressed initial rhyme. The interrelatedness of the various modalities, which are continually revealed by means of the integrated method of analysis, is evident in the retrocipatory correlation of progressive vitality and the vacillating sound quality of the previous physical aspect.

The stressed initial rhyme emphasizes the aspects of time and place in the poem:

'Längst' : time  
'dann und wann' : time  
'Aber oben' : place  
'Bis' : implying extension in time and space  
'und/und/und' : narrative continuity  
'Denn' : conjunctive dependence on time and situation  
'Aber hinten' : place  
'und' : continuity in time

For all its surface air of disengagement and unconcern, the poem is stretched tight with inner struggle; all the more intense for the desperate attempt at disinterestedness. Man's experience and the expression thereof are placed into a spatial dimension and a particular time relevance. The time distance of the beginning, experienced as if from memory, as well as the spatial distance of the conclusion, simultaneously express a psychic distance from the event. Time seems to have lost its relevance because this happening took place 'hinten ferne', beyond any concern for time.

#### Climactic movement

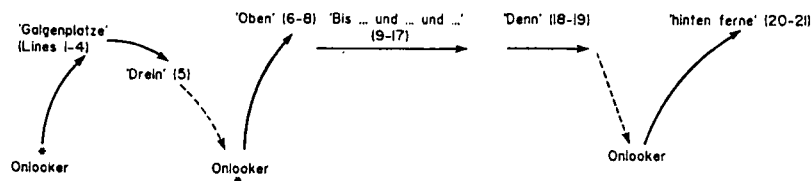
The event of the crucifixion is narrated from the vantage point of the onlooker and his particular confessional stance; thus from the onlooker to the event.

On the surface there are no obvious climaxes. In word, thought and action there seems to be only disinterested narration and observation. The cry of Mary creates a faint flickering of interest, just to collapse into the ash that the final 'verfiel' symbolizes.

### 5.2.2 Interpretative level

The narration is one of climactic sweeps of the eye from the onlooker to the event which is at the place of the skull.

FIGURE I



In lines 1-4 the movement is from the onlooker to the scenic background of the poetic (play); line 5 brings the eye to concentrate on one aspect within the mass scene. While stanza two directs the reader's vision to the happening in the distance once more ("Aber oben"), the third stanza turns the visual focus from the generalization of the mass impression to a detailed close-up between two individuals (a dialogue between the centurion and a soldier). The verb (sagte) portrays close proximity while the bracketed description (fleckig wie ein Selcher) is a visual enlargement. The demonstrative pronoun "dieser hat geschrien" conveys the impression of spatial nearness.

Turning to the fifth stanza and the crucial final act, one notices that spatial distance has again been created in (hinten ferne). Intra-model analogy is revealed between the tensile element of the physical aspect and the intensity (inherent in the biotic aspect) of the suspense-filled test that the implied author puts to Christ. Neither the onlooker nor the avid crowd evinces any real belief in the miraculous restoration of the dying third man on the (cross); and yet they hope against hope to be proved wrong (lined 15 and 18). The tensile-intensity of an expectation held with bated breath, reaches a shocked climax in the collapse of their hopes. The miracle does not take place and God does not prove

himself to be God; instead, Mary cries out in the distance and the man howls and disintegrates:

Aber hinten ferne schrie Maria  
und er selber brüllte und verfiel

It is revelatory that the fluctuating distance of time and place is further extended in the psychic aspect of the poem. Although feeling is the irreducible characteristic of the psychic modality, this poem is strangely insensitive (nach dem Fertigsein/liessen sich die freien Männer schlenkern; Längst geübt ... irgend ein Gesindel hinzudrängen) in its conscious distanciation from personal engagement. The emotive quality is therefore one of calculated non-involvement. The narrator remains strangely aloof and seems to lack feeling or imagination to experience the event sensitively. Spatial and time distance are thus anticipatorily complemented by psychic distance.

### 5.3 The aesthetic aspect

Allusiveness, nuancefulness and symbolical originality are postivations of the aesthetic dimension in literature. Under the title (Crucifixion), the diction falls into two polarities: acknowledged earthly power (of Rome) and unrecognized heavenly power (in Christ). Enveloping both, is historic time and place, and the human element.

Line 1 with its naked place of the skull, sets the scene. The place of the skull is derived from the Aramaic term 'Golgotha'. In Latin "Calvaria" also signifies skull, and is related to "calvus", meaning bald. In German it coincides with "kahl" hence "Calva" is scalp without hair (Hendriksen, 1973:425).

The word-group 'kahlen Galgenplatze' is thus a twofold expression of the same idea, emphasizing the denuded barrenness of the hill and implying at the same time the transitoriness of life. On the other hand, 'skull' symbolizes indestructibility and that which survives death. For the christian believer Golgotha is synonymous with life but the sceptic's interpretation is probably diametrically opposite, twice ascribing emptiness and nothingness to this particular hill.

In this poem the past tense verb (verfiel) does not express the idea of voluntary sacrifice, but is specifically selected to portray visible decline and collapse, like burnt ashes disintegrating or a house of cards falling apart. This is significant, as the scriptural reports all use the word 'verschied' which means that He gave up His Spirit. This indicates a voluntary laying down of His Life which no one took away.

Although the poem is entitled 'Crucifixion', the symbol of the cross is never mentioned; only 'das schlechte Henkern', which semantically implies execution by hanging. The cross which is a symbol of life through the sacrifice of crucifixion and which is thus the concrete crux of the whole event, is not only completely omitted but also reinterpreted (here the cross ended in death).

As the aesthetic aspect is concerned with suggestion-rich allusiveness (Seerveld, 1977:106) it is as natural as it is essential that the authorial confessional stand will here be revealed more convincingly and more clearly than perhaps in other aspects.

#### 5.4 The all-pervading ethos

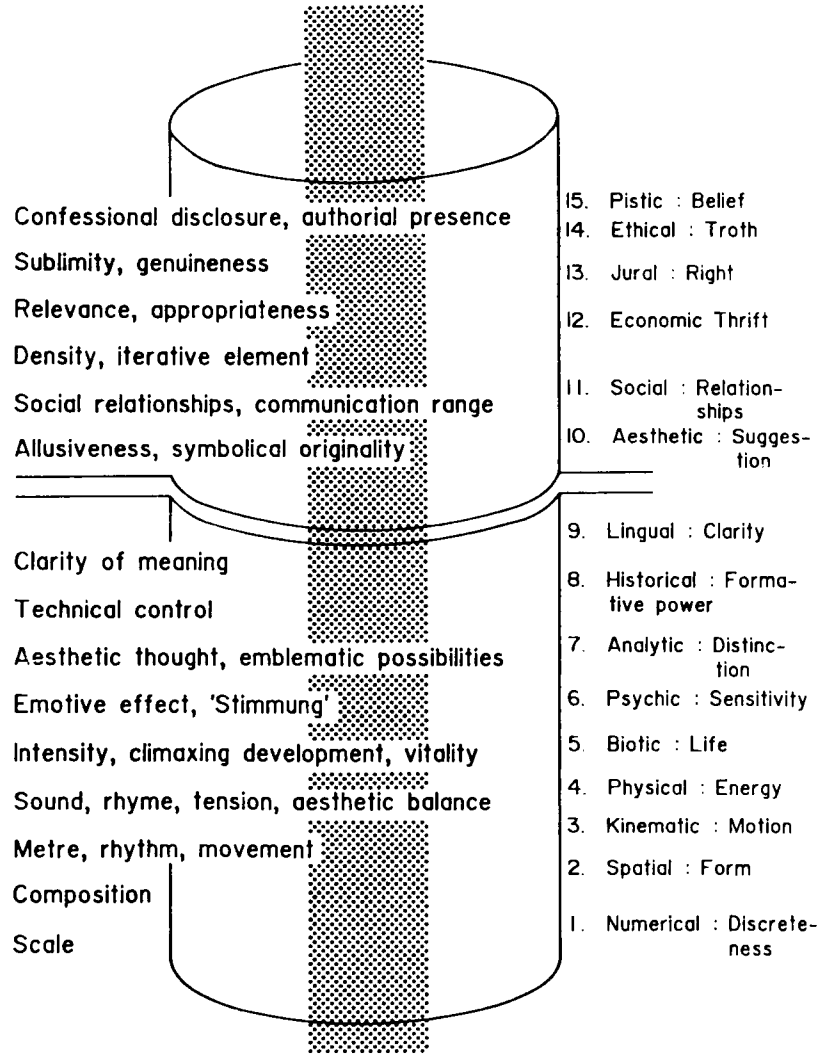
In conclusion one final example must be mentioned to illustrate this permeating ethos, 'Aber hinten ferne schrie Maria'. Here, the conjunctive (Aber) is an expression of the disillusionment following on the expectation shortly before 'Denn sie hofften noch ein ganzes Spiel', hoping for a game and entertainment or for concrete proof that this man is God. When instead, (er selber brüllte und verfiel) in a muffled but violent animal-like cry which equated Him with man, and then collapsed, He lost His validity and is disposed of in the minds of the speaker and most of the crowd. This collapse is not only the decay of the physical body but, more significantly, a disintegration of the crowd's possible belief in Him and above all, a final negation on the part of the implied author's opinion of the non-existence of Christ, a non-acknowledgement of the mediator, Christ.

In this poem there is a biblical theme, often biblical diction, fairly accurate historical narration and yet, the spirit is one of unbelief, neutralizing this crux of christianity to just another incident, signifying nothing.

Thus, if poetic communication wishes to be more than an impersonal artist speaking to an equally faceless reader; if communication desires to become what Martin Buber (1958:57) calls 'encounter', in which the one is sensitized and correlative to the ontic-level of feelings, attitudes and needs of the other, then the spirit of the art work, the 'I' reflected in the ethos, becomes the life-giving pulse of such an encounter.

ADDENDUM 1

ETHOS



A. LITERARY THEORETICAL MODEL OF THE DOOYEWEERDIAN MODALITIES

## ADDEMDUM 2

### KREUZIGUNG

Längst geübt, zum kahlen Galgenplatze  
irgend ein Gesindel hinzudrängen,  
ließen sich die schweren Knechte hängen,  
dann und wann nur eine große Fratze

kehrend nach den abgetanen Drein.  
Aber oben war das schlechte Henkern  
rasch getan; und nach dem Fertigsein  
ließen sich die freien Männer schlenkern.

Bis der eine (fleckig wie ein Selcher)  
sagte: Hauptmann, dieser hat geschrien.  
Und der Hauptmann sah vom Pferde: Welcher?  
und es war ihm selbst, er hätte ihn

den Elia rufen hören. Alle  
waren zuzuschauen voller Lust,  
und sie hielten, daß er nicht verfalle,  
gierig ihm die ganze Essiggalle  
an sein schwindendes Gehust.

Denn sie hofften noch ein ganzes Spiel  
und vielleicht den kommenden Elia.  
Aber hinten ferne schrie Maria,  
und er selber brüllte und verfiel.



### ADDENDUM 3

#### CRUCIFIXION

Long since practiced to force  
any kind of rabble to the place of the gallows  
the heavy servants let themselves be hanged  
now and then only a grimace

directed to the disposed-of three.  
But above, the poor execution  
was quickly done; and after the conclusion  
the free men shambled around swinging their arms

Until the one (spotted like a butcher)  
said: Captain, this one shouted  
and the centurion, looking from his horse: Which one?  
and it seemed to him that even he

had heard Elijah calling.  
Everybody was watching with pure pleasure  
and greedily held the vinegar  
that he might not collapse  
to his dwindling cough

Because they still hoped for a full show  
and perhaps the coming Elijah.  
But behind, far off, Mary screamed  
and he himself howled and collapsed.

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