

Introduction: Rilke's writing desk

When Rilke's older friend Ellen Key, a well-known Swedish social reformer, wrote to him that his poetry smacked of the writing desk,¹ she meant that it was too meagrely rooted in actual experience. She thought of poetry as the result of personal suffering, and she wished her friend Rilke had had more of it. Rilke himself thought he suffered quite enough: he had been a lonely little boy and he led a somewhat isolated adult life. Whenever real experiences loomed, he shied away from them: from building a life with his wife and baby daughter, from the troubling events of his trip down the Nile, and from service at the front during the First World War. Still, at the end of his life, when he had to endure the terrible pains of leukemia, he refused heavy doses of drugs that would prevent him from fully experiencing his suffering. His final poem, an expression of this suffering, is devastating to read; but in formal respects it is also a highly literary production.

Lack of personal experience is not the only reason for the 'writing desk' effect. Part of it comes from Rilke's use of unusual vocabulary, his fondness for exotic rhymes, his love of tight forms like the sonnet. More than anything else, the 'writing desk' effect derives from echoes of other writers' poems. He read extensively, mostly in recent literature, and he engaged in a lively exchange of literary enthusiasms and discoveries with his friends and patrons. Reminiscences from his reading repeatedly find their way into his work.

Rilke, Modernism and Poetic Tradition is the story of Rilke's complex path toward modernism. Like many other young writers, Rilke began as an imitator. But these early imitations have a curious quality that makes one wonder whether their tone is admiring or mocking. Rilke was indebted to tradition at the same time as he tried to free himself from it. As time went on, Rilke's dependence on other people's work became less evident. In part, his move to Paris and the cross-linguistic nature of his borrowings meant that they were far less evident. Later, when he

immersed himself once more in his native literary tradition, he grew more concerned about his imitative impulses.

Much of the special resonance of Rilke's poetry comes from the density with which he distilled effects from other poets' work and recombined them with his own unusual turns of phrase and mind. His relation to poetic tradition is complex, not to say ambivalent. One way of explaining this ambivalence would be to point to the body of literature that sustained his interest most consistently throughout his life: the aestheticist movements of the late nineteenth century. Aestheticist poetry trod a delicate line between originality and imitation, casting its private frames of reference in mannered and often traditional forms. Both Rilke and his public had a highly developed taste for stylised modes of expression. Still, the Romantic conception of originality continued to play a powerful role in literary value judgments of his day.

Debates about originality in our own time still defer in many ways to the Romantic ideal. The shift in scholarly usage during the nineteen-seventies and -eighties from 'influence' to 'intertextuality' was partly an attempt to reconceptualise literary debts in more positive terms. It was also intended to replace the notion of an author's individual psychology with the concept of texts as forms animated by a life of their own. Moving away from an assumption that literary echoes were the result of mechanisms at work in the depths of an author's subconscious mind,² newer theorists saw them more in terms of rhetorical strategies located in texts themselves.³ More recently, we have rediscovered that texts are not the only elements involved in cultural exchange: paintings, photographs, films, historical events, fashion and much else are now recognised as part of a vast and complex dynamic.

Rilke's poetry becomes more vibrant when seen against this conceptual backdrop. In fact, Rilke was not quite as tied to his desk as Ellen Key's comment implies. He was a frequent visitor to art museums, a careful student of architecture and monuments, a knowledgeable writer about the decorative arts; he went through phases of interest in theatre and dance; he read avidly about religious, mystical and occult traditions; he travelled widely and devoured travel guides; he loved history; he was attracted at various times by alternative lifestyles; he was interested in psychology and psychoanalysis. In the ebb and flow of cultural fashions, he sometimes let himself be carried along; at other times, he mounted resistance. He was susceptible to market forces, yet never quite managed to free himself from the aestheticist vogue to which he owed his first major successes. Although we are accustomed to think of Rilke in the way he

wished to be seen, as a figure aloof from mundane affairs, the only way to understand Rilke's writing fully is to see it in its cultural context.

This study traces the many ways in which contemporary culture is 'constituted and contested'⁴ in Rilke's work. Literary texts and works of visual art dominate the discussion, since these were what was most often uppermost in his mind, if not actually present on or pinned above his writing desk. Other cultural phenomena, such as fashions in dress, theories of sexual pathology, ancient religions or the ballet mania of the early twentieth century, are drawn in along the way. Texts, discourses, visual iconography, performance arts and other cultural productions are often difficult to separate as they manifest themselves in Rilke's writing. Where Rilke contests contemporary fashions, rather than letting himself be swept away by them, he often seems to protest too much. The more he finds fault with aestheticism, the more he seems infected by it. When he explores ancient Egyptian religion, he assimilates it to his own quirky system of belief, or perhaps more accurately, to his idiosyncratic aesthetic practices.

In tracing Rilke's poetic development, I diverge in certain ways from received opinion. The *Neue Gedichte* [New Poems] are not presented as a clean break from his previous poetry; *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* [The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge] is studied in terms of its earliest origins; and the *Duineser Elegien* [Duino Elegies] are not regarded as a fully coherent project. The borderlines between what have been conventionally considered separate 'periods' in Rilke's work are deliberately broken down. While biographies of Rilke have done something of this already – especially with respect to *Malte Laurids Brigge* and the *Elegies*, both composed over a period of years – studies of his poetry have tended to consider Rilke's published works in terms of the cyclical structures in which he liked to present them.

The book is divided into four chapters, each concerned with a different creative strategy. The first chapter, 'Fashioning the self', looks at Rilke's earliest attempts to shape his professional identity, which move from gentle parodies of German Romantic models to a pronounced alignment with turn-of-the-century art and culture. The chapter goes on to examine Rilke's involvement with Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics, Nordic novels about sensitive young artists and early modernist ideas about psychological development. The second chapter, 'Arts and crafts', explores Rilke's critique of, and simultaneous dependence on, the concept of the well-wrought and autonomous art object. His interest in French and Belgian Symbolism, Rodin's concept of fragmentary

sculpture and Ruskin's heterodox art criticism are treated in this chapter. Rilke's poetic and personal crisis is the focus of the following chapter, 'Writing troubles'. Here we see him worrying about the connection between madness and creativity, dabbling in theories of sexual pathology, returning desperately to aestheticist fashions and practices while casting about among canonical writers for new ideas and formal models. The fourth chapter, 'The modernist turn', studies the fragile emergence of experimental tendencies in Rilke's work. At the same time, it highlights his renewed engagement with the traditional debate between painting and poetry, as well as about the ways in which poetry can be said to form a monument that lasts beyond death. The conclusion situates Rilke within the broader context of the second and third decades of the twentieth century and from the perspective of current debates about what constitutes the modernist movements.

Each chapter focusses on a small cluster of separate texts.⁵ One of these is a prose poem, another an excerpt from Rilke's novel *Malte Laurids Brigge*. Most of them are verse poems of varying lengths. In most cases, the analysis explores outward from individual texts to their contributory artifacts and the contemporary fashions that go into their making. The analyses are not close readings or explications; I make no pretence of commenting on every interesting feature in the chosen texts. Rather, I visualise each text as a kind of comet, attracting a certain amount of cosmic dust and incorporating it within its own visible trajectory.

Arranged around texts, the book samples characteristic work from different phases of his career. The translations are my own. Current fashion prefers translations to be unrhymed, but this method ignores an essential feature of much of Rilke's work: he adored esoteric rhyme words. At the risk of losing some nuances, the translations given here reproduce as much as possible of the formal structure of Rilke's poems. They are intended as an aid to understanding my argument, not as a basis for further work with the poems, which can only be fully understood by reference to Rilke's originals.

Rilke was well aware that his manner laid his works open to misuse: he was disturbed by all the young people who wrote to him for advice about the conduct of their personal lives. German-speaking soldiers took his *Cornet* into the First World War, and his *Duino Elegies* into the Second. Even today, many readers of Rilke's writing feel it speaks directly to them. Still, it would be wrong to think of Rilke's works as a self-help manual in disguise.

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Nor is Rilke's poetry a product of pure inspiration. It is also the result of hard work, sometimes against immense odds. Rilke lived from his royalties, his publisher's advances, and the support of wealthy patrons. Poetry was his profession, and he pursued it zealously; though his work often smacks of the writing desk, it is permeated by the cultural context in which he lived. At the same time, it also provides a lens through which the genesis of modernism comes into unusually clear focus.

CHAPTER I

Fashioning the self

RILKE'S DRESS

Rilke's earliest poetry is scarcely known to modern readers. Yet his beginnings not only reveal his conscious shaping of a poetic career, they show him absorbing and adapting multiple aspects of the culture around him. He had a good sense of the niches in which a beginning poet could lodge his work, from fashionable Viennese magazines to the souvenir shelf of Prague bookstores. From his emergence as a child prodigy, he situated himself within the framework of a progressively conceived 'feminine aesthetics' – today we would speak of an androgynous gender ideal – that was widely fashionable at the time and that continued to resonate throughout his works. His first volume of poems articulates a crisis of marginality common to artistic self-stylisation at the turn of the century. Far from being derivative, Rilke's early verses are in fact an attempt to disengage himself from the clutch of German poetic tradition. By giving his neo-Romanticism a slightly critical edge and thus underscoring his half-affectionate, half-alienated depictions of conventional scenes, Rilke implicitly declares his readiness to embark on a new kind of poetry.

Throughout his development, Rilke follows the cultural interests of his day. His almost seismographic response to fashion in every sense of the word lies at the heart of his early self-styling. He worked hard to attune his projects to current demand and 'package' his works to ensure their success. In the early years of the century, when his cousins discontinued the stipend he had been receiving from the inheritance of his uncle Jaroslav, he was entirely dependent upon what he earned through his writing. Only later, once he was under the wings of a distinguished publishing house, Insel, did he have more financial leeway in the form of advances for work in progress. By then he had also cultivated friendships with rich or well-to-do people who subsidised his

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work in various ways, mostly by inviting him to spend time in their houses and castles. Rilke's letters provide ample testimony to his attempts to secure patronage.

Altogether, Rilke's career presents an intriguing example of a writer poised between patronage and the market. His Paris years, in particular, show him moving towards a new professionalism, assiduously developing his talents as a literary and art reviewer. Accepting an assignment from the prominent art historian and editor of popular books about art, Richard Muther, was an important ingredient in this attempt to create, as it were, his own by-line. Under the influence of Rodin, he consciously shifted from what Louis Menand has called the 'innocence of design'¹ affected by the Romantics and neo-Romantics to the cultivation of a specialised profession characteristic of the modernist movements.

Like much aesthetic modernism, Rilke's poetry disguised its susceptibility to fashion by an ostensible rejection of it. In the first poem Rilke published (in 1891, when he was sixteen), he shows a spirited and playful approach to fashionable women's dresses:

Die Schleppe ist nun Mode –
 verwünscht zwar tausendmal,
 schleicht keck sie sich nun wieder
 ins neueste Journal!
 Und so dann diese Mode
 nicht mehr zu tilgen geht,
 da wird sich auch empören
 die 'strenge' Sanität;
 ist die dann auch im Spiele
 und gegen diese Qual,
 daß man geduldig schlucken
 soll Staub nun sonder Zahl –
 schnell, eh man es noch ahndet,
 die Schleppe' vergessen sei,
 eh sich hinein noch menget
 gar ernst die Polizei.
 Die müßte an den Ecken
 mit großen Scheren stehn,
 um eilends abzutrennen,
 wo Schleppen noch zu sehn.

(3: 415)

The train is now in fashion –
 a thousand times be cursed,
 into the latest newspaper
 it boldly slips, head-first!
 And seeing that this fashion
 is not to be erased,
 we'll see stern public hygiene
 indignant and red-faced:
 once it's been alerted
 to defy this torture-rack
 that makes you calmly swallow
 dust enough to make you hack –
 quick, before they fine us,
 let's just forget the train,
 policemen might get serious
 and interfere again.
 They'd need to stand on corners
 with monstrous pairs of shears,
 prepared to sever hastily
 whatever train appears.

An offence against practicality and hygiene, the train forces upon its viewer the idea of fashion pure and simple, form exaggeratedly in evidence for nothing but its own sake. Dragging behind its elegant wearer, the train draws attention to itself more than to her. Though flamboyant, it is also sneaky: it slips into fashion reports as if it were illicitly following the dress it is attached to. Unlike a poem, newspaper article or fashion illustration, the vogue for wearing dresses with trains cannot so easily be expunged or 'erased'. And although the train is the newest of fashion, the verses Rilke uses recall something more traditional: German Romantic imitations of mediaeval songs. The poem echoes the rhythms of a lyric in Eichendorff's novella *Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts* [From the Life of a Good-for-Nothing] (1826), the protagonist's song of praise to a beautiful woman, a servant he has mistaken for an elegant lady. The ironic implications of parodying this well-known serenade in a piece of occasional verse about fashion would not have been lost on Rilke's readers.

The notion that trains stir up dust and present a danger to the health of others is ludicrous, of course. But these lines also contain a play on the word 'swallow', in the sense of resigning oneself to something unpleasant. The speaker is a curmudgeon for whom the trailing cloth is an extravagance, a sin against the better judgment of people like himself.

But he goes on to suggest that if we do not dwell too much on the idea of the train, it might slip out of existence as suddenly as it has slipped in. The concluding image envisages the police lying in ambush to snip off ladies' trains as they go by. Throughout the poem, the fashionable accoutrement seems to be strangely detached from any human wearer. The poem itself is also a train, dragging its length down the page and ending at the very moment when its speaker imagines the police snipping off the hateful extra fabric.

'The train is now in fashion' appeared in a Viennese paper in 1891 over the signature of 'René Rilke in Prag, Smichov' ('René Rilke, of Smichov, Prague'; 3: 801). Rilke must have written the poem in the interval between his departure from military academy in June of that year and his enrolment at a commercial school in September. He had lost all hope of receiving the officer's commission he had once desired; but he was not entirely crushed. His light-hearted poem even won a prize.

Glimpses of humour surface here and there in Rilke's early work. Three years after the publication of 'The train is now in fashion', the nineteen-year-old author of *Leben und Lieder* [Life and Songs] (1894) expressed the fear that his verses were primarily destined to be bought as Christmas presents for young girls (3: 443). Rilke's mother, herself not free from literary ambitions, appears to have been the instigator behind this approach to poetic success; and she was doubtless also behind his awareness of women's fashion.

Rilke's mother has received rather bad press.² This negative image derives more from Rilke's novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, and possibly also the influence of his psychoanalytically trained friend Lou Andreas-Salomé, than from any objective perception of the case. Yes, Rilke's mother had lost a baby girl before the birth of her son, but was her way of dressing the young Rilke really the product of a pathologically disturbed psyche? There are certainly photos of Rilke as a small child wearing a dress – but this was progressive and fashionable at the time. Young boys not only wore tunics over pleated skirts, they also wore smocks and dresses trimmed with lace, tied with silk sashes, and decorated with bows. In daguerrotypes and photographs from the period, Oscar Wilde, at the age of three (1857), appears in a velvet dress trimmed with white broderie anglaise; Marcel and Robert Proust at five and three respectively (1896) sport double-breasted tunics over skirts, one of them quite lacy. In Mallarmé's fashion magazine, issued between September and December 1874 (just one year before Rilke's birth),

paper patterns and line illustrations of young boys' clothing follow an androgynous model until the children reach the age of about seven or eight. Smocks, skirts, and dresses were not only worn by boys in families with an artistic bent: even royal princes, including Prince Wilhelm of Prussia and Napoleon's son, the Prince Imperial, wore lacy dresses in their early years. If royalty dressed their young sons this way, can it really have been child abuse when Phia Rilke did so?

If we explore nineteenth-century fashion more closely, we discover that the combined influence of fashion and hygiene created a new style for male children in the period around 1870. The appearance of 'die strenge Sanität' (stern public hygiene) in Rilke's poem is not as far-fetched as it may seem. In the late nineteenth century, dress was increasingly linked to health. Reformers argued for easily-fitting clothing for young children, just as they railed against corsets and other forms of tight-lacing on grown women. At the same time, an androgynous style of upbringing was being advocated in many quarters. In Victorian England around the mid-nineteenth century, for example, what was then called a 'feminine ethic' was proposed as a way of reducing the supposedly innate wildness of young boys and imbuing them with ideals of 'manly purity'.³ Elizabeth Barrett Browning adopted this ideal for her son, Pen, whom she hoped to keep in delicate fabrics and long hair until the age of ten.

Rilke wore smocks and dresses until he was seven. A photograph taken in 1882 is inscribed on the back by Phia Rilke: 'My darling in his very first pants'. This shift to trousers may have taken place somewhat late by Prague standards (to judge from photographs, Kafka seems to have worn pants at the age of five), but it was certainly not late by those of fashionable Paris. Phia Rilke's book of aphorisms shows her to have been ahead of her time in many ways, and the androgynous model of child rearing fits well with her other progressive attitudes.

In his earliest published volume of poetry, Rilke writes without embarrassment about having played with dolls as a child: he describes the blue silk drawing room where he looked at picture books, where 'ein Puppenkleid, mit Strähnen dicken Silbers reich betrefßt, Glück mir war' (a doll's dress, richly decked with thick silver strands, was a joy to me; 1: 41). There, too, he writes in the same poem, he liked to read verses and play tram or ship on the window ledge; sometimes he waved to a little girl in the house opposite. Activities we think of today as gender-specific (dressing dolls versus playing tram) are part of a single, undifferentiated complex in this nostalgic picture of a Prague childhood.