

RILKE, MODERNISM AND
POETIC TRADITION

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page</i> ix
Introduction: Rilke's writing desk	i
1 Fashioning the self	6
2 Arts and crafts	50
3 Writing troubles	98
4 The modernist turn	156
Conclusion: restorative modernism	219
<i>Notes</i>	228
<i>Index of Rilke's works</i>	250
<i>General index</i>	252

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

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 Schlepp' 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 betreßt, 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.

Attending military academy, a plan Rilke later said he accepted mainly because his father told him of the impressive uniform he would wear there, must have clashed dramatically with his androgynous childhood years. Rilke's prose sketch, 'Pierre Dumont' (1894), and his powerful short story, 'Die Turnstunde' [The Gym Lesson] (1902) render this conflict vividly. Still, even after he left military school and began to attend commercial school, Rilke liked to wear his uniform. We know much less about Rilke's sartorial interests than we do about Kafka's,⁴ but both spent their adolescent years steeped in the aesthetic cult imported from France via Vienna. The Houghton Library has a drawing by Rilke from his cadet years depicting a dandy and a lady; the sketch, though artistically inept, pays careful attention to the finer details of its two figures' clothing, thus testifying eloquently to Rilke's interest in fashionable attire. Rilke's novella *Ewald Tragy* (written in 1898 but not published until after his death), a slightly transposed autobiographical narrative about the young poet's decision to leave Prague for Munich, opens with reflections on the women's dresses Ewald sees on his Sunday afternoon walk with his father. Some of the ladies are wearing last summer's colours and fabrics, while a lovely young woman in up-to-the-minute pink crepe de Chine spoils the effect by wearing refurbished old gloves (4: 512).

Despite Rilke's affectations during his Prague years, he did not really embark on a radical course of self-fashioning until he met Lou Andreas-Salomé in 1897. A former lover of Nietzsche and now the wife of a distinguished professor of Persian, Lou was an independent and impressive woman. It was Lou who suggested that he change his name to something more 'Germanic', Rainer (perhaps not coincidentally, also less androgynous than his given name René); it was Lou who sent him to Italy in 1898; and it was Lou who took him with her on two trips to Russia (in 1899 and 1900) that were to be crucial for his aesthetic self-development. Even more significantly, she insisted that he model his handwriting after her own, developing the elegant style he was later to use for copies of poems offered to friends as gifts.

Rilke's self-fashioning proceeded quite consciously. In moving first from Prague to Munich, then to Berlin and finally to Paris, Rilke had been approaching, stage by stage, the centre of fashion and culture. When planning his trip to Russia with Lou, he thought of himself as stripping off all his accustomed habits and guises, reducing himself to an essential nakedness. In actual fact, he startled his new Russian friends by appearing everywhere in a Slavic peasant blouse.

Rilke's fascination with the arts-and-crafts movement, as well as with

alternative lifestyles such as those represented by the artists' colony in Worpswede, Ellen Key's experimental school in Sweden, and the artists' studios in Hellerau, a garden suburb of Dresden, are all part of his effort to keep up with the latest cultural trends. He was one of the first to write an informed and genuinely insightful essay on the neo-Impressionists (1898), and he was also among the first to review Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* and appreciate its accomplishment (1901).

His ideas for developing his own writing projects were consciously guided by cultural fashions. Rilke admired the actress Eleanora Duse, whom he had hoped to see in the title role of his stylised verse drama *Die weiße Fürstin* [The White Princess] (1899, revised 1904). Since he did not see her on stage until he attended a performance of Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* in 1906, he was going solely on her reputation. Following the *Rosmersholm* performance, he apostrophised her in a famous passage in *Malte Laurids Brigge* (6: 924); he also presented a portrait of her acting in one of his *New Poems* (1: 608). In 1914, she seems to have suggested that she might give a recitation of his *Marien-Leben* [Life of the Virgin Mary] (1911), dressed as a shepherdess or – according to some versions of the story – a nun; but although Rilke managed to secure the support of the director Max Reinhardt for the project, it did not in fact materialise.

Lou encouraged him to 'work through' his memories of childhood along the model of the Freudian analytic techniques that were beginning to capture her attention. His novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, begun in 1902 and published in 1910, was in part the result of this effort. Here he attempts to recover the childhood that seems 'wie vergraben' (as if buried; 6: 721), reinterpreting his androgynous upbringing as the product of a psychologically disturbed mother:

Es fiel uns ein, daß es eine Zeit gab, wo Maman wünschte, daß ich ein kleines Mädchen wäre und nicht dieser Junge, der ich nun einmal war. Ich hatte das irgendwie erraten, und ich war auf den Gedanken gekommen, manchmal nachmittags an Mamans Türe zu klopfen. Wenn sie dann fragte, wer da wäre, so war ich glücklich, draußen 'Sophie' zu rufen, wobei ich meine kleine Stimme so zierlich machte, daß sie mich in der Kehle kitzelte. Und wenn ich dann eintrat (in dem kleinen, mädchenhaften Hauskleid, das ich ohnehin trug, mit ganz hinaufgerollten Ärmeln), so war ich einfach Sophie, Mamans kleine Sophie, die sich häuslich beschäftigte und der Maman einen Zopf flechten mußte, damit keine Verwechslung stattfinde mit dem bösen Malte, wenn er je wiederkäme. (6:800)

It occurred to us that there had been a time when Mama had wished I were a little girl and not the boy that I happened to be. I had somehow guessed this,

and I hit upon the idea of knocking on Mama's door on occasional afternoons. When she then asked who was there, I happily called out 'Sophie', making my little voice so delicate that it tickled in my throat. And when I stepped inside (in the little girlish house dress that I wore anyway, with sleeves rolled up all the way), I was simply Sophie, Mama's little Sophie, busy with household tasks, who had to braid Mama's hair so that there could be no confusion with naughty Malte, if he were to come back again.

However close this scene from the novel may be to games René Rilke actually played with his mother, it is an interpretation of reality, not a simple transcription. Dress is a distinct motif in the novel, frequently connected with questions of identity (though not always with issues of gender), as in the scene where Malte dresses up in old clothes that have been stored away in guest rooms, and then rushes away in horror when he sees his unfamiliar image in the mirror (6: 806). Disguises, masks, and various forms of clothing give shape to Malte's probing of identity, his own and others', as the novel progresses. Even the idea of an 'eigener Tod' (personal death), which Malte believes has been lost in the impersonal atmosphere of modern hospitals, is seen through the metaphor of a custom-made suit: 'voilà votre mort, monsieur' (here is your death, sir; 6: 714).

At the same time, fabrics and laces are also metaphors for aesthetic pleasure and the free play of the imagination. When Malte comes upon the old clothes in the guest rooms, he feels almost drugged by their drape and textures:

Was mich aber in eine Art von Rausch versetzte, das waren die geräumigen Mäntel, die Tücher, die Schals, die Schleier, alle diese nachgiebigen, großen, unverwendeten Stoffe, die weich und schmeichelnd waren oder so gleitend, daß man sie kaum zu fassen bekam, oder so leicht, daß sie wie ein Wind an einem vorbeiflogen, oder einfach schwer mit ihrer ganzen Last. (6: 805)

What put me into a kind of trance, though, were the roomy coats, the scarves, the shawls, the veils, all these yielding, expansive, unused fabrics, soft and flattering or so fluid that one could hardly keep hold of them, or so light that they flew past one like a breeze, or else simply heavy with their entire weight.

Rilke himself was attracted by the dancer Isadora Duncan, who had used a gallery in the Hotel Biron for her rehearsals when Rilke was living there in 1908. Perhaps her scarf dances are reflected in Malte's delight in floating lengths of fabric. Later, Rilke was enraptured by Nijinsky and his Russian Ballet, and even began to conceive a pantomime in which Nijinsky would play a central role.

This preoccupation with moving fabric, costume and decorative motifs is the Rilkean equivalent of Kafka's 'pleats, pockets, buckles and buttons',⁵ with their implications of aestheticist ornamentation and disorienting detail. In the Louvre, Malte observes young women who have left home to study painting. Their sense of dislocation in a big city that pays them no attention is captured by the two or three undone buttons that cannot be reached in the upper back of their dresses (6: 831). In another scene, Malte and his mother look at rolls of old lace, transforming each in turn into imaginary scenes of cloisters, prisons, gardens and hothouses (6: 835). Imagination, pattern and the survival of the past in the present are the leading ideas in this scene, not only drawing on a contemporary interest in lace and lacemaking, but also indebted to aestheticist ideals in a broader sense.

Rilke never lost his interest in beautiful fabrics and interior decor. As a guest at the castle of Princess Marie von Thurn and Taxis, he amused himself by taking a meticulous inventory of all the old lace, veils and scarves that had belonged to the princess's mother and grandmother. He gathered tiny objects – unusual perfume bottles, porcelain cosmetic pots, little needlework cases – and arranged them artfully in a small glass curio cabinet. He even furnished an outdoor pavilion with an ancient fringed reading chair.⁶

His fascination with fabric and design continued into the final years of his life. In 1923, after viewing a collection of Kashmiri shawls in the Bern Historical Museum, he wrote two poems titled 'Shawl' (2: 476–477); a third poem on the same topic followed a year later (2: 488–489). Now the primary emphasis is on pattern: the shawl's design, perceived as constant motion around a still centre, is read as an objective correlative for the course of the viewer's individual life. At the same time, the shawl continually unfolds an entire panoply of traditional motifs, both natural and more abstractly figural. Simultaneously an art object and a historical document, it takes us out of ourselves and demonstrates a kind of permanence our own lives can never attain.

The idea that tradition and history – the very opposites of fashion – are falling out of modern consciousness is a pervasive motif in Rilke's writing, but whenever he tries to conjure up this past it is transfigured into the static and stylised form familiar to us from pre-Raphaelite painting. What he 'rescues' from the past through poetry was precisely that which had become fashionable in turn-of-the-century art and literature; but in regretting the loss of vitality in modern life, Rilke's early poetry continues to reduce it to formal configurations that are the

very opposite of breathing actuality. This paradox constitutes the underlying tension in *Das Stunden-Buch* [The Book of Hours], written between 1899 and 1903, precisely during the years when Rilke was performing his most deliberate act of self-construction. Images of building and pilgrimage are its poetic correlatives, and the dichotomy between creating *ex nihilo* and preserving sacred relics from the past says much about Rilke's struggle during that transitional period to decide between tradition and originality. A similar tension, with the balance tipped in the direction of tradition, is evident in *Malte Laurids Brigge*. Here, as Robert Jensen has shown for modern painting, 'the "alienation" of the artist was [. . .] largely a fiction that served rather than denied the commodification of art'.⁷ Today's readers of Rilke tend to fall into one of two groups: those who identify with his alienation and those who are made uncomfortable by his aestheticism. Both of these effects must be seen, however, as related parts of a single attempt to gain a grip on the market by constructing a professional identity.

Rilke's translations from other languages, projects he mostly pursued during lean moments in his own career, make this effort especially evident. Well aware that his readership was largely to be found among proponents of 'feminine aesthetics', he created, in 1908, a poetic version of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*; in 1913, he published a translation of the *Letters of a Portuguese Nun*, at the time still thought to have been written by Marianna Alcoforado, and in 1917, he translated twenty-four sonnets by Louise Labbé. Rilke came to think of femininity as an aspect of all human beings that needed to be cultivated and saved from its unfortunate polarisation in the man-woman dichotomy.⁸ His devotion to female admirers and patrons, his self-identification with a series of women writers, his development of an idiosyncratic theory revolving around abandoned women and unrequited female love, testify to an interest in the feminine that runs through his entire life and work.⁹ In all these ways, Rilke continued to cultivate ideals that had characterised his early childhood.

Rilke's simultaneous pursuit of fashion and his self-presentation as marginal to it is central to the persona he creates. The two main art centres at the turn of the century were Berlin and Paris. As a student of art history, Rilke naturally moved to Berlin; but once he discovered that the most important art historians of his time, Richard Muther and Julius Meier-Graefe, saw French art as the model on which to base a historical understanding of nineteenth-century European art in general, he quickly shifted his focus to Paris. Writing about, working for and staying with

Rodin gave Rilke access to a large number of artists based in Paris at the time. Yet although he was in the thick of conversations about aesthetic principles and practices, Rilke never became an exclusive disciple of any particular school. His poetry belongs to none of the many movements that rapidly followed one another in the development of twentieth-century modernism. Even when Rilke was in a culturally central location, as was certainly the case in Paris, he took up a position on the margins, preferring to remain unaffiliated.

As Stephen Greenblatt has shown for sixteenth-century England, self-fashioning 'is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile'.¹⁰ He argues that 'if both the authority and the alien are located outside the self, they are at the same time experienced as inward necessities, so that both submission and destruction are always internalized' (p. 9). Greenblatt's description of Renaissance self-fashioning applies remarkably well to Rilke, especially during his Paris years, when the 'authority' was located for him in French art and poetry, and the 'alien' manifested itself every day in the sights and sounds of the chaotic foreign city. Rilke's cultivation of an aesthetics of femininity was well suited to this situation, since it allowed him to re-evaluate his marginality and lack of genuine control by converting them into positive capacities of intuition and receptivity.

This analysis of Rilke's self-creation places him firmly in the context of aesthetic modernism. In the chapters that follow, we will see him struggling with central issues of the period: autonomy and engagement, originality and borrowing, tradition and technology. Above all, Rilke was an early participant in the internationalising movement that swept through the arts in the first decades of the twentieth century. In this venture, his work shows more clearly than that of many others the strain internationalism placed on modern writers. At the same time, this strain is precisely what ultimately produces Rilke's most accomplished poetry. The ways in which he interacted with current cultural trends throughout his career are remarkable for a writer who, as a young man on Europe's cultural margins, had proposed in light verse that one might wish to clip the train of contemporary fashion.

OLD PRAGUE

In sharp contrast to the remarkable early poems produced by his Viennese counterpart, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Rilke's verse of the mid- to late eighteen-nineties was highly uneven: by turns trite,

precious, sentimental, naïve and curiously knowing, it was the work of a young person accustomed to being treated as a prodigy. Stefan George once commented that Rilke had started to publish too early, a judgment Rilke himself later cited with agreement.¹¹ Yet even these very earliest productions of Rilke can tell us much about the way he positioned himself within the German-language literary canon.

Characteristic of Rilke's early work is his second collection of poetry, *Larenopfer* [Sacrifices to the Lares] (1895), with its charming little portraits of old Prague. Most of the poems in *Sacrifices to the Lares* were written in late autumn 1895, presumably in the hiatus between Rilke's matriculation exam and his first semester at Prague University. He had already published another collection of poems, *Leben und Lieder* [Life and Songs], the year before.

Why did Rilke call the volume *Sacrifices to the Lares*? Critics have paid curiously little attention to this question. We know, however, that Rilke was to move to Munich in 1896, the first geographical displacement designed to help him escape his peripheral position. *Sacrifices to the Lares* is a collection of verbal postcard views, as if Rilke felt obliged to propitiate the household gods before he left his native city for good.¹² The volume takes us on a guided tour, stopping at historic monuments (the Hradshin, the chapel of St. Wenceslas, the monument to Emperor Rudolf, the Town Hall clock and so forth), noting the mixture of religions (from Ursuline nuns to Rabbi Löw), recalling principal figures from Prague's history and literature (Kajetan Tyl, Dalibor, Julius Zeyer), and observing the city at different seasons of the year. The main focus is on Prague's historic charm and its linguistic and cultural multiplicity.

Characteristic of the volume is 'Auf der Kleinseite' [In the Little Quarter], about a section of Prague that lies across the Moldau from the main business centre of the city. The quarter's dominant architectural style is baroque, and it is full of magnificent palaces and villas with richly decorated façades, elegant balustrades, and a proliferation of statues, niches and interior courtyards:

Alte Häuser, steilgegiebelt,
hohe Türme voll Gebimmel, –
in die engen Höfe liebelt
nur ein winzig Stückchen Himmel.

Und auf jedem Treppenpflocke
müde lächelnd – Amoretten;
hoch am Dache um barocke
Vasen rieseln Rosenketten.

Spinnverwoben ist die Pforte
 dort. Verstohlen liest die Sonne
 die geheimnisvollen Worte
 unter einer Steinmadonne.

(1: 9–10)

Ancient houses, steeply gabled,
 lofty towers full of bells, –
 Heaven, flirting with the fabled
 narrow courtyards, weaves its spells.

And on every porch and stair,
 languid, smiling, cupids breathe.
 Baroque, on rooftops in the air,
 vases rustle round with wreaths.

Spider webs obscure the portal
 in that place. The furtive sun
 reads the mystic words immortal
 on a Virgin's pedestal of stone.

'In the Little Quarter' recalls Eichendorff's poem 'In Danzig', of 1842, a text that had become a staple in school anthologies. It would not be fair to describe Rilke's text as derivative; neither is it a parody, like 'The train is now in fashion': rather, it presents itself as a deliberate rewriting of an existing text using its external form and some of its stylistic peculiarities. In fact, a number of poems in the same volume are reworkings of familiar texts.¹³ The poem's charm lies in the way it reconfigures Eichendorff's text while retaining its rhythms and some of its imagery. Here is Eichendorff's poem:

Dunkle Giebel, hohe Fenster,
 Türme tief aus Nebeln sehn,
 Bleiche Statuen wie Gespenster
 Lautlos an den Türen stehn.

Träumerisch der Mond drauf scheint,
 Dem die Stadt gar wohl gefällt,
 Als läg zauberhaft versteinet
 Drunten eine Märchenwelt.

Ringsher durch das tiefe Lauschen,
 Über alle Häuser weit,
 Nur des Meeres fernes Rauschen –
 Wunderbare Einsamkeit!

Und der Türmer wie vor Jahren
Singet ein uraltes Lied:
Wolle Gott den Schiffer wahren,
Der bei Nacht vorüberzieht!¹⁴

Sombre gables, lofty windows,
Towers peering deep from mist,
Pallid statues, ghost-like figures,
Stand at doors in silent tryst.

Dreamily the moon shines down,
Taking pleasure in the town,
As if what lay there, petrified,
Were a fairy countryside.

All around the deepest listening
In the houses' interlude,
Just the ocean's constant rustling –
Wondrous solitude!

And the watchman as of yore
Sings his ancient song of prayer:
May God keep the sailor safe
Whose boat is passing over there!

In Eichendorff's Danzig poem, the architectural elements of the town are transformed by the mysterious powers of mist and moonlight into a fairy-tale world that no longer seems like the product of human hands. As the silence of the sleeping town is overlaid by the distant sound of the sea, the speaker is filled with awe at the 'wunderbare Einsamkeit' (wondrous solitude) it seems to embody. The final stanza of Eichendorff's poem deconstructs its own Romantic myth, however, by invoking a traditional watchman's prayer for the safety of ships passing by at night. 'In Danzig' expresses the late German Romantics' sense of profound ambiguity about the relations between reality and imagination, past and present, human and natural life. Poetry, symbolised by the night watchman's song, has the power both to heal these rifts and to reveal them in all their terror.

Rilke's adaptation of Eichendorff's model says a great deal about how Rilke saw his relation to this tradition during his early years. Prague and Danzig share the steep gables mentioned in the opening lines of both poems, but the mysterious Gothic effects of Eichendorff's Danzig are replaced by more playful baroque decorations in Rilke's Prague.

In Eichendorff's poem, the city's living spirit seems to have been turned to stone: statues stand beside doorways like paralysed ghosts, and the moonlit buildings look like a kind of petrified forest. In a paradoxical and even logic-defying way, however, everything is also somehow animated. What begins as simple anthropomorphism, with towers peering out from the mists and the moon taking a dreamy pleasure in the sight of the city below, shifts to a strangely disembodied version of the pathetic fallacy, as the atmosphere above the houses fills with listening. We do not know who breathes the rapt exclamation, 'wondrous solitude!' that closes the third stanza, nor whether it refers more to the silence of the city or the distant sound of the ocean. Only the fourth and final stanza of Eichendorff's poem returns to a more conventional perspective in which the watchman in the tower is heard singing his prayer for those at sea.

Like Eichendorff, Rilke also anthropomorphises some elements in his scene: the sky that flirts its way into the courtyards in the opening stanza and the sun that sneaks a glance at the words on the stone madonna in the poem's conclusion. The spider-webs on the door suggest a sleeping-beauty world scarcely touched by modern life. But unlike the stone statues of Eichendorff's Danzig, the stone cupids of Rilke's Prague are full of languid motion, and even the ropes of carved roses on the baroque vases seem to ripple or rustle as if touched by the breeze.¹⁵ The emphasis is on make-believe, playfulness, delicacy; the Little Quarter is charmed into a moment of fleeting life by the fanciful gaze of the spectator. The scene is expressive, communicative, full of meaningful sounds, glances and gestures. Yet none of these signs can be fully decoded, at least not by their human observer. The cupids smile to no one in particular, and the words on the madonna's stone pedestal, though furtively read by the sun, remain mysterious to the speaker. Whereas Eichendorff's poem puts a name to the emotions aroused by the scene he describes ('wondrous solitude') and repeats a line from the watchman's prayer, Rilke's text stops short of articulating a response to its scene, and although it does not hesitate to anthropomorphise both natural and architectural elements, it neither explicates nor moralises. At times, the syntax itself is sketchy and the descriptive method impressionistic; the enjambements in the third stanza close, rather than open, the door to meaning. The eye moves rapidly about the scene without putting together a coherent whole. At first, the characteristic features of the quarter seem to be repeated everywhere alike: houses, towers, courtyards, cupids and vases appear quintessentially plural. When the

observer does try to gain optical purchase on a single spot, as in the final stanza, the ancient architecture seems to offer resistance. He cannot look beyond the cobwebbed door or understand the words on the base of the statue.

The history of place is differently conceptualised in Eichendorff's and Rilke's poems. In Eichendorff's Danzig poem, history underlies the present just as the gables and towers hide behind the mists; by the same token, a primitive fear of the demonic, represented by the possibility of shipwreck, forms the obverse of poetic delight in solitude and silence. The schema behind Rilke's 'In the Little Quarter' is not dualistic in this way. Instead, the entire scene is composed of surfaces without depth. We cannot see through to the old town's historic origins, which appear only in the form of mysterious vestiges and unreadable signs.

The young Prague poet regards himself as part of a distinguished poetic lineage, yet he also sees himself as a latecomer who does not have complete access to this heritage. He speaks partially in Eichendorff's voice, but his world is no longer invested with the same – or perhaps indeed with any – significance. Eichendorff's vision of Danzig provides a schema that superficially applies to Rilke's Prague, but in the last analysis it does not help to make sense of the Czech city. In contrast to the speaker of Eichendorff's poem, whose listening is homologous with the greater 'listening' of the atmosphere, Rilke's observer stands at one side, unable to enter the scene even as much as the sky is able to insinuate its way into Prague's narrow courtyards. The sense of inauthenticity, superficiality, detachment, and frustration that speaks here is the expression of a young poet's feeling of exclusion from the cultural centre. The crisis expressed here is a crisis of marginality.

A mild irony threads its way through much of the volume's homage to Bohemian folk songs and Czech poets. In the Bohemian Ethnographic Exhibition of 1895, which was energetically boycotted by the German-speaking population of Prague, the room in which Kajetan Tyl had composed his patriotic poem 'Kde domov můj' [Where is my homeland?] (later to become the Czech national anthem), was recreated in faithful detail. Rilke's poem about Tyl describes the room as small and furnished only with a chair, a trunk that served as a writing desk, a bed, a wooden cross and a jug (1: 38–39). Still, the last stanza tells us, so strongly attached was he to his native land that he would not have left it 'für tausend Louis' (for a thousand Louis; 1: 39). Rilke himself was soon to move away.

Another poem in *Sacrifices to the Lares* draws out the irony explicitly, this time in connection with the Czech writer Jaroslav Vrchlický (1853–1912). The speaker of Rilke's poem describes himself as leaning back in a comfortable armchair and reading a book of poems by Vrchlický until dusk falls (1: 20).¹⁶ Rilke's speaker falls under the spell of the verses, feeling that they allow him to overhear solutions to 'divine problems' – yet he also has enough presence of mind to ask whether he might not just have been drugged by the scent of chrysanthemums in a vase nearby. Unlike Kajetan Tyl, the speaker of Rilke's poem enjoys not only a life of comfort but also of aesthetic pleasure. In a poem about another Czech poet, Julius Zeyer, Rilke contrasts political struggle with the equilibrium of art (1: 36).¹⁷ Zeyer, he claims, leads his people in their attempt to achieve national identity, but has also mastered the art of aesthetic balance.

The poems of *Sacrifices to the Lares* forge an aesthetic of marginality by looking at home from the perspective of a tourist. A conscious discrepancy between German literary language and Czech folk tradition runs through the entire volume. If the opening poems rework Eichendorff, the concluding poem recalls Heine. 'Vom Feld klingt ernste Weise;/ weiß nicht, wie mir geschieht...' (From the field a solemn melody resounds / I don't know what's happening to me...; 1: 68). The 'Märchen aus alten Zeiten' (tale from olden times) that Heine recounts in his 'Lorelei' is transposed here into a Czech melody, sung not by a Rhine maiden on the cliff top but by a girl from the Czech people mowing hay in the fields. The song she sings is Tyl's 'kde domov můj', and it not only brings tears to her own eyes but elicits a copper coin from her listener. The reader of this pastiche knows, however, that the Lorelei lures men to their deaths. The past, transposed in Heine's ballad into a beautiful and seductive fairy tale, is an attraction that can only cause shipwreck. No wonder Rilke fled from Prague to Munich less than a year after composing *Sacrifices to the Lares*.

THE CULT OF YOUTH

Rilke's construction of a poetic persona went forward rapidly after his move to Berlin in October, 1897. In November of the same year, he began work on a volume of poetry, titled *Mir zur Feier* [To Celebrate Myself], that was to establish a tone quite different from that of his previous two volumes.

Here, playfulness and self-irony disappear as Rilke steep himself in turn-of-the-century art. The flowing lines and decorative surfaces of Jugendstil art give new shape to Rilke's language and imagery.¹⁸ Jugendstil's abolition of clear distinctions between background and foreground, nature and the human figure, subject and object, presents a seductive but troubling vision for the young writer trying to fashion a new lyric identity. Moving in from the cultural margins means immersing oneself in this flux. No longer does Rilke look quizzically at women's dresses or wistfully at city architecture; he is much more involved in the culture around him. Two aspects of the Jugendstil movement attract his attention: its fascination with floral decor, and its cult of youth. To represent his new sense of interrelation with this culture, Rilke develops the image of the 'inner garden'.

A sequence of three garden poems, written in November and December, 1897, follow the epigraph that opens Rilke's volume, *To Celebrate Myself*.¹⁹ They set forth a new poetic credo that proclaims a removal from vulgar reality and a heightened degree of sensitivity, an increasing involvement with Jugendstil, and, above all, the first development of Rilke's ideas about interior landscape. Here is the first in the sequence:

Ich bin so jung. Ich möchte jedem Klange,
der mir vorüberrauscht, mich schauernd schenken,
und willig in des Windes zartem Zwange,
wie eine Ranke überm Gartengange,
will meine Sehnsucht ihre Schwingen schwenken.

Und jeder Brünne bar will ich mich brüsten,
solang ich fühle, wie die Brust sich breitet.
Denn es ist Zeit, sich reisig auszurüsten,
wenn aus der frühen Kühle dieser Küsten
der Tag mich tiefer in die Lande leitet.

(3: 205)

I am so young. And trembling, I incline
to every sound that rustles through the air,
and in wind's tender clasp, like columbine,
or vines across the garden path that twine,
my longing sends forth swaying pinions there,

And free of armour I will make my way,
as long as I can feel my lungs expand.
For it is time to leave, not time to stay,
when, from this early coastal coolness, day
guides me more deeply on the road inland.

The idea of the ‘inner garden’ – a projection of the poet’s psyche into the external world – had already become a staple of French Symbolism.²⁰ German and Austrian poets influenced by that movement, notably Stefan George and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, picked up the motif and worked it out more intricately.

Rilke had read George’s poetry with Lou in her Berlin apartment in the autumn of 1897, and met him personally at a reading in the salon of the painters Reinhold and Sabine Lepsius.²¹ George’s two volumes of poetry, *Algabal* (1892) and *Das Jahr der Seele* [The Soul’s Year] (1897), make copious use of garden imagery. For Rilke’s ‘I am young’ sequence, *Algabal* is a crucial point of departure. George’s emperor Algabal is depicted as a young, handsome, but cruel potentate, given to a life of luxury and sensuality. His subterranean palace, with its artificial gardens, is a timeless realm totally removed from the sphere of real life and action. Its underground garden is composed of petrified trees and lifeless birds; only the glimmer of lava and the dusty scent of incense lend a semblance of life to his artificial paradise. Algabal’s sole frustration in this crystallised kingdom of his own making is his inability to create the dramatic and sinister blossom he dreams of, the ‘dark, large, black flower’ that symbolises poetry itself. Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* [The Flowers of Evil] were doubtless prototypes of the black flower Algabal longs to create.

In 1892, Rilke’s Austrian contemporary, Hugo von Hofmannsthal had already pulled off a brilliant contrafacture of Algabal’s petrified garden. Called ‘Mein Garten’ [My Garden], it was written after he first met George in 1891 when he was only sixteen.²² Hofmannsthal begins by creating a pastiche of George’s artificial and lifeless garden, but then goes on to compare it unfavourably with the original garden, paradise. In its ironic inflection of George’s precious effects, Hofmannsthal’s poem is a brilliant example of aestheticist self-critique.

Rilke’s takes a different tack in his engagement with George. Instead of the unchanging garden George creates for his underground ruler Algabal, Rilke’s garden is full of motion. George’s trees of coal, fossilised birds, and fruits made of lava are replaced by rambling vines, blowing breezes, and rustling leaves. The shapes invoked are the curvilinear forms of Jugendstil art, and the speaker’s insistence on his youthfulness refers to the cult of youth promulgated by the movement. Indeed, just a year before, Rilke had already described himself for an entry in a lexicon of poets as editor of a journal called *Jung-Deutschland und Jung-Österreich* [Young Germany and Young Austria] (6: 1204), a move clearly designed to align him with the late nineteenth-century youth cult.

Despite an element of self-indulgence, these poems mark an important way-stage in Rilke's development. In them, he stakes a new claim to a sensitive, supple, and mobile kind of writing that will include increased responsiveness, change and growth.

Rilke's garden poems retain George's tight, rhymed forms while countermanding his constraints on the expression of emotion. The receptive posture of the speaker in Rilke's poems replaces George's controlled subjectivity. To use the terms of the day, Rilke substitutes a 'feminine aesthetics' for a 'masculine' one. Rilke's garden poems are suffused with indeterminacy: longing, dreaminess and numbness are their most pervasive qualities. The speaker gives himself up to the sounds wafted in by the wind and lets himself be led by the emerging daylight. The poem's self-reflexivity creates some logical problems. Are the vines that creep across the garden path projections of the speaker's desire, or are they obstructions on his way through the landscape? There is something threatening about this apparently easy commerce with nature. Why does the poet shudder when he yields himself up to the sounds borne by the wind? Why does he even imagine freeing himself from armour? Everything in Rilke's sequence remains vague and abstract, and the poem even flaunts its essential passivity.

At the same time, a new conception of the relation between experiencing subject and poetic object begins to emerge. Alliteration, assonance, rhyme, and other self-echoing effects enhance the reflexivity between speaker and garden to create an interior landscape in which subject and object are suspended in complex interaction. Apparently countermanding this self-reflexivity is the summons to travel; yet the trip, far from leading into the open, will take the speaker inland into a topography of enclosure.

In the second poem of the sequence, he metamorphoses into a garden himself, and does no more than attend to the sensations of his and its growth:

Ich will ein Garten sein, an dessen Bronnen
die blassen Träume neue Blumen brächen,
die einen schwarmgesondert und versonnen,
und die geeint in schweigsamen Gesprächen.

Und wo sie schreiten, über ihren Häupten
will ich mit Worten, wie mit Wipfeln rauschen,
und wo sie rasten, will ich den Betäubten
mit meinem Schweigen in den Schlummer lauschen.