

KAREN LEEDER AND ROBERT VILAIN

## Introduction

Glücklich, die wissen, daß hinter allen  
Sprachen das Unsägliche steht

Happy are those who know that behind  
every language there stands the Unsayable

Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) is one of the leading poets of European modernism, comparable in importance and influence with American-born T. S. Eliot and the French poet Paul Valéry. Arguably the greatest German poet of the twentieth century, his influence nevertheless extends far beyond poetry and far beyond Germany. His work has been important in philosophy, religion and the visual arts. Despite being famously ‘difficult’, his work continues to attract new readerships and is regularly translated and re-translated, into Japanese, Chinese and Arabic as well as the European languages.

He features regularly as a source or an inspiration in a variety of creative literatures from across the world and has motivated a host of visual artists; he has often been set to music (classical and rock) and is a staple of television and Hollywood film. Today he even enjoys a reception as a guru of queer studies and New Age thinking. The fact is that Rilke developed tropes of style and attitude that have proved essential for the cultural life of the twentieth century and beyond. To speak of Rilke is to speak of world literature. It is almost impossible to grasp the key elements in the development of modern culture without reference to him.

Rilke was the author of some twenty volumes published between 1894 and 1927, mostly verse (in German and latterly in French), but including a unique prose work *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, often described as the first truly post-realist novel of international stature. Rilke’s poetry might be said to encapsulate many of the dilemmas of the twentieth century and beyond: the loss of belief in a divinely sponsored universe, the struggle with industrialisation, a preoccupation with war and death and the atomisation of society. However, his canonical published collections, like the *New Poems* or

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the *Duino Elegies*, represent less than half of the prodigious volume of poetry he produced. There is a vast body of what the translator Stephen Mitchell has called ‘uncollected’ poetry that includes some of his most important and often-cited individual poems: ‘Turning-Point’, ‘Exposed on the Mountains of the Heart’ or ‘Gong’.

Rilke was, however, also an author of dramas in the Naturalist and Symbolist modes, and an accomplished translator, whose versions of poems by Paul Valéry and of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese* are still widely admired and read in their own right. Indeed he is one of only a handful of writers able to publish original work successfully in more than one language. His late poetry, written in French after his move to Muzot in the Valais in 1921, has still not gained the critical attention it deserves, but allows an insight into how creative processes move across traditions and languages. Moreover, his critical essays are rich in reflections on the ambitions and diversions of an age, fuelled as they are by an engagement with the traditions of the past and the thinkers of the moment (Nietzsche and Freud, for example).

But they also offer a perspective on his own aesthetic convictions and practice. For example, his acclaimed letters on the painter Paul Cézanne or his monograph on the sculptor Auguste Rodin still have much to tell us about their subjects’ vision, but they testify also to Rilke’s own developing aesthetic. Equally, there is a considerable (in part still unpublished) correspondence: both private, with his many sponsors, colleagues and lovers, but also more public, as he was acquainted with many of the prominent writers, artists and thinkers of his age. Throughout his life Rilke wrote letters as an almost daily custom in which he explored circumstances or ideas that were concerning him at any given moment. Philosophical explorations rub shoulders with frank insights into the messy reality of his relationships or descriptions that will find their way into his published poetry barely revised. The letters are a seedbed for his published work; but they are also in many ways continuous with it. They shed a very significant light on the writer and the age in which he lived, as well as continuing to inspire in their directness and intensity of address – as in his famous and often reprinted *Letters to a Young Poet*.

But it must finally be as a poet that Rilke is read. His early poetry, a densely textured and imagistic form of subjectivism, was redolent of the mystic neo-Romantic turn of the declining years of the nineteenth century. His *New Poems* (1907 and 1908) heralded the cleaner, clearer saying of the new century in their concentration on ‘things’, but also extended the poetic lexicon and the possibilities of verse – especially through his manipulation of the fixed form of the sonnet. The novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*,

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started in 1904 and completed in January 1910, is a sustained reflection on death, but also documents the phantasmagorical breakdown of reality, the degradation of urban modernity in the shape of Paris, the atomisation of narrative and encroaching psychosis, which for many mark the archetypal confrontation with the modern. It was death in the terrible reality of the First World War that contributed to Rilke's long creative crisis and effective silence between 1910 and 1922. When this was broken with the publication of the *Duino Elegies* and *The Sonnets to Orpheus* it was in the context of a changed world. The *Elegies*, in particular, chime with T. S. Eliot or Wallace Stevens to speak of a world after God, after catastrophe, and after any sense of coherent wholeness has been lost. The only place it can be regained is in the work of art itself. This is reflected in the way Rilke's poetic language stretches the boundaries of the sayable by drawing on traditional forms but pressing them into new and often radical coinages in the white heat of intense bursts of creativity. It is here that Rilke's true legacy can be identified: in the injunction to an orphic celebration of the here and now which will lift life out of mortality and transform it into the sanctity of art.

It is not surprising if that mission has sometimes been misunderstood or rejected by later generations. Some have found Rilke's view of the world unpalatable and, especially after 1945, his elitism and otherworldliness was met with profound scepticism. Rilke found himself rejected by left-wing critics in the west and in the socialist regimes in the east including the German Democratic Republic. The scathing allegories of modern life; the praise for a self-negating kind of intransitive love (which did not preclude treating some of his many female admirers notably badly); the brooding on death; the aristocratic insistence on the magisterial role of the poet: all these seem precisely to devalue the ordinary human reality upon which the poems claim to insist. There is some truth in all of these charges. However, for all that Rilke seems to offer an aesthetic solution, one fit only for the poet, he in fact insists that all human beings share the ability to translate the world. 'You must change your life' was the credo of 1908 that ends the poem 'Archaic Torso of Apollo' and, at its profoundest level, Rilke's work is about an experience of being which includes, indeed privileges, but is by no means limited to, the experience of art. It is perhaps this vivid exposure of being, together with all its vulnerabilities and celebrations, that has allowed his work to transcend the boundaries of culture and language and has secured his reputation right up to the present day.

In any case despite a decided 'Rilke abstinence', as Manfred Engel nicely puts it (*RHB*, p. 11), especially on the part of German critics after the War, Rilke's influence on modern literature is both well documented and

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inescapable and reads like a roll-call of the greats of the twentieth century. His poetry has inspired translators and other poets from Auden to Heaney. It has been set to music by a range of composers as diverse as Paul Hindemith and Arnold Schoenberg, Darius Milhaud and Dmitri Shostakovich, Harrison Birtwistle and Oliver Knussen, and has inspired a number of contemporary Indie rock bands. Artists who have sought to interpret him include Cy Twombly and he has been quoted on TV by representatives of the popular mainstream such as Oprah Winfrey. He is cited in work by authors including J. D. Salinger, James Merrill, Adrienne Rich, Milan Kundera, Amitav Ghosh and Philip Roth as well as contemporary authors from as far afield as Iran and Cuba; he even features in crime fiction, most persuasively in Ken Bruen's *Rilke on Black* (1996). He has also been subjected to a large range of cultural analyses by important critics such as Martin Heidegger, Paul de Man, Maurice Blanchot and Giorgio Agamben. Despite his aversion to the paraphernalia of the modern, he has fascinated many in the cinema: both auteurs, who have set out to come to terms with his legacy, such as Wim Wenders in his *Wings of Desire* (1987), but also in Hollywood, where he pops up in a plethora of often unlikely places from Woody Allen's *Another Woman* (1988) to *Sister Act 2* (1993). Most recently he has furnished texts for CDs and sell-out tours of twenty-four cities across Germany, as part of the 'Rilke Project' (2005).

Rilke's own cultural roots go well back into the past: drawing sustenance from the great writers of antiquity, including Ovid and the ancient Egyptians, from thinkers and from artists. Thus while his voice is unique and instantly recognisable, his work draws together many disparate strands of thought and aesthetics. One of the goals of this volume has been to take full advantage of the challenging variety of his work and to elucidate precisely this richness. Thus a familiar text-by-text approach has been supplemented by a structure that highlights the variety and interdisciplinary nature of his work. As has been mentioned, Rilke's difficulty is a prominent feature in his reception and can be daunting, especially for those readers coming to him for the first time. This volume aims, like all the *Cambridge Companions*, to give the reader some sense of the character of his work, some impression of his achievement and some orientation within the critical debates that have raged over some aspects of his work and status, combining information and critical evaluation in a sophisticated yet approachable manner. The contributors have in general been sparing in their use of traditional critical apparatus (especially when discussing a single work) but their essays are designed to bring readers up to date with the fruits of recent as well as older scholarship.

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In addition to an introductory survey of his life and a study of his social context, the volume therefore includes an essay on his correspondence (Rilke articulated some of his key poetic principles in letters, and indeed ‘correspondence’ is itself a vital poetic term for him) and a chapter on the early Rilke and his transition from the poetic legacy of the nineteenth century into a poet with his own original voice. Readers can then progress to a discussion of individual works, including all his major collections of poetry, and his seminal novel of modernist anxiety, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Each of the chapters on single major works or collections contextualises those works, most notably with reference to the large number of free-standing, uncollected poems that often crucially articulate Rilke’s developing poetics. A second section focuses on six of the key frameworks that help situate Rilke culturally. Four chapters situate Rilke in his own context: the first offers a sustained examination of Rilke’s place in modernism, the defining cultural development of the early twentieth century; the second analyses Rilke’s reception of (and debt to) a large and eclectic range of literature in German and from elsewhere; the third considers Rilke’s vital engagement with the visual and plastic arts; and the fourth examines Rilke’s reception of significant trends in European philosophy, including the spiritual, religious and mystical dimensions of thought. Two final pieces situate Rilke from a later perspective: the first examines developments in Rilke’s treatment by successive waves or styles of criticism, for many of which he was almost exemplary; and finally Rilke is read through the many significant poets from the English-speaking world who have engaged with him and his legacy. With its invaluable guide to further reading and a chronology of Rilke’s life and work, it is hoped that this *Companion* will provide students and scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with an accessible, engaging account of this extraordinary poet, his enduring legacy and far-reaching influence.

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PART I

Life

## I

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## Rilke: a biographical exploration

Among the stunning array of German-speaking writers and intellectuals around 1900 the poet Rainer Maria Rilke was perhaps the most cosmopolitan, only matched in his worldliness by his friend and compatriot, Stefan Zweig. Even though Rilke's actual knowledge of the world was mainly confined to continental Europe, except for his journey to North Africa in 1910–11, and firmly excluded the Anglo-Saxon sphere, of whose blunt materialism he remained suspicious until the end of his life, the poet's outlook was decidedly international and anti-chauvinistic, and he remained open-minded towards other cultures until the end of his life. His horizon as traveller and reader stretched from Bohemia to Russia, France to Scandinavia, Italy to Egypt, and from Spain to Switzerland and their respective literatures. He was a migrant and a belated troubadour, at times a vagrant revered, if not idolised, by aristocrats, industrialists, fellow artists and artisans alike, and eventually recognised by anyone able to appreciate German poetry as probably its most sublime master after – or even alongside – Goethe, Hölderlin and Heine.

There was something anachronistic about this poetic artist even though his art was quintessentially modernist in style and poetic approach without ever disregarding, or disowning, tradition. Bach, Beethoven and Nietzsche influenced him as much as Rodin, Cézanne, Klee and Picasso. He studied eclectically, if not erratically, and liked to read the Grimm brothers' German dictionary like a novel. His life was full of rich experiences that were without exception intimately connected with art. His creed was that life and art should serve each other.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the concept of 'life' had become a buzzword among artists and intellectuals in Europe. 'Life' deserved a realistic, if not naturalistic, treatment in the arts; it challenged scientists and ideologues alike who investigated the forces in, and behind, 'life' or distorted them in the shape of a precarious biology, or rather biologism, which was prone to turn into racist ideology. Undercurrents of nationalistic conflict

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became increasingly difficult to contain, particularly in multi-ethnic states, such as the Austro-Hungarian empire, in whose core province, Bohemia, and her capital Prague, Rainer Maria Rilke lived until the age of ten. Those undercurrents surfaced as folkloristic versions of 'life' in the arts (for example in the music of the Czech composers Dvořák and Smetana) and politics, eventually striving for proper political, social and cultural recognition, or released in open aggression. 'Life' was deemed a drive worth dying for – at least this is how ideologues later indoctrinated and mobilised the young to enter the First World War triumphantly, only to find that the triumph of 'life' ended in carnage. But art, too, mirrored this attitude. It is telling, for instance, that Cavaradossi, the artist in Puccini's opera *Tosca* (1900), should end on his heart-rendering confession that, in real terms, he had but loved 'life' by itself. This belief in 'life' was perceived as the main legacy of Nietzsche's Zarathustrian vision of perfecting oneself,<sup>1</sup> which was perpetuated by Stefan George and his circle as well as the poets Richard Dehmel, Franz Werfel and many others.<sup>2</sup> 'Life' was also the object of aesthetic refinement as demonstrated by the young Hugo von Hofmannsthal, whilst others (most notably the early Thomas Mann) showed that the artist was unable to attain 'life' and live it to the full. 'Life' was at the time in competition, so to speak, with the experience of 'decadence', half-heartedly deplored by Nietzsche, but unequivocally advocated by Oscar Wilde; a sentiment that led writers such as Gottfried Benn, in his early career, to focus on dissecting the decay of life.

By the 1890s 'life' determined a new understanding of art. Biographies began to flourish and be turned into a popular genre. The suggestion was to regard the arts as graphics of 'life'. Nietzsche, or what was thought to be the essence of his philosophising, turned into the main inspiration for this tendency to establish the sacred trinity of 'life', 'will' (preferably to an initially rather undefined 'power') and the 'aesthetic justification of Being'. This is the intellectual setting against which Rainer Maria Rilke's cultural socialisation developed.

### **'An anxious, heavy childhood'**

These are the words with which Rilke once characterised his early years in Prague, in an exchange with Ellen Key, the great Swedish educationalist whose study *The Century of the Child* Rilke praised in a review (1902; KA IV, 262–8) as a breakthrough in the understanding of childhood and the principles of a humane education. René Karl Wilhelm Johann Josef Maria Rilke was born, two months prematurely, on 4 December 1875. His parents, Josef and Sophie Rilke, married in 1873, suffered from unfulfilled ambitions



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for themselves. Josef had hoped for a major military career but had to confine his hopes to advancing within the offices of the North Bohemia railway, and Sophie – or Phia as she was known – dressed for ever in black, as if perpetually mourning her lot. She had dreams of a life in high society but instead had to put up with her husband's stifling conventionality and at times uncouth behaviour. All their frustrated aspirations were projected onto René who was even dressed as a girl to compensate for the loss of their daughter who had died only a few days old. Estrangement between René's parents was always in the air and led to their separation in 1885.<sup>3</sup>

The weight of this 'anxious childhood' in Prague, where the Rilkes belonged to the German-speaking minority, was increased rather than shed when René was taken to the military academy of St Pölten in Lower Austria in 1886. He loathed life there and later admitted that it had traumatised him, but this experience taught him to cope with adverse conditions and to 'persist'; 'persistence' was to become one of his most frequently cited notions. One of his first major expressions of self-assertion was to insist on being discharged from this academy only to find that the family council back in Prague had determined that he would attend the school for trade and commerce in Linz, which he did, albeit only for half a year (1891–2). Afterwards he returned to Prague where he found in his uncle, Jaroslav Rilke, a relative who was most sympathetic to his intellectual needs.<sup>4</sup> He provided the means for René to complete his Abitur (school leaving certificate) and later to study literature, art, history and even one semester of law, but in 1896 René left Prague for Munich without a degree although accompanied by his artist friend, the painter Emil Orlik (1870–1932).

It was whilst he was still in Prague that Rilke published his first two volumes of poetry, *Lives and Songs* (1894) and *Offerings to the Lares* (1896), inspired both by his first real love, Valerie von David-Rhonfeld, and by the atmosphere of Prague, which also informed most of his early prose. *Offerings to the Lares* in particular displays a profound sympathy for Czech tradition and culture, striking for someone who belonged to the German-speaking community that on the whole segregated itself at the time quite demonstratively from the Czechs. Not so early René Rilke, who turned this segregation into the subject of many a story and poem.

Equally, however, Rilke needed distance from his home town, which seemed increasingly oppressive to him, in order to find himself and his own voice for writing about the darker and sinister side of this strangely fascinating jewel on the river Moldau. During his time in Munich and, from 1898 until 1901, in Berlin, Rilke explored his memories of Prague in numerous, at times haunting novellas, poems and short plays. Symptomatically, he called one collection *Am Leben hin* (1898), suggesting an existence just 'alongside

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life' without being in the midst of the 'élan vital'; and one stage piece is titled *Everyday Life* (1900; KA III, 743–76), implying that one first needs to deal with the ordinary before indulging in the Dionysian ecstasy of life for life's sake. In his play one of the protagonists speculates about a cynical desire to have 'many a life', which is glossed by his female counterpart with the words, 'That would be the art of modern man' (KA III, 771). Rilke's actual object at the time was to match every experience with a 'new' life. The play was completed at Easter 1900, was first performed in December 1901 in Berlin, and published one year later. When writing this play, it must indeed have seemed to Rilke that, by then, at least two such 'experiences' had supplied him with more than one life: first, his encounter with the Russian-born writer Lou Andreas-Salomé in Munich in the spring of 1897, and second, his reading of Nietzsche and his subsequent journey to Florence.

### Transformations in life – for the arts

Under the influence, if not the tutelage of Lou Andreas-Salomé, whose books *Female Figures in Ibsen's Plays* (1892), *Friedrich Nietzsche* (1894) and an essay entitled 'Jesus the Jew' (1896) had impressed the young poet, Rilke experienced a fundamental change: he turned his effeminate first name 'René' into 'Rainer'. Later on he was even to change his style of handwriting in an attempt to abandon any traces of playful ornamentation. It was Lou, once for a short while Nietzsche's closest friend, who communicated to her young admirer, and lover to be, the essence of Nietzscheanism, and in his 'Florentine Diary', which he kept for Lou, Rilke attempted to see art from the perspective of Nietzsche's Zarathustra and engage in reflections on the meaning of art and the existential condition of the artist: 'Every artist is born abroad, as it were; and his home is nowhere but within himself.'<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, the 'Schmargendorf Diary' assembles Rilke's attempts to gain insight into the working of the artistic mind and to acquire utmost precision in describing 'life'. It was in Berlin that he met the revered playwright Gerhart Hauptmann to whom he was to dedicate the first edition of his collection of poems, the *Book of Images* (1902). Moreover, Berlin brought Rilke into contact with the sociologist Georg Simmel whose student he became for a short while and who taught him to perceive objects as meaningful entities containing not only matter but shape and time. In Berlin-Schmargendorf Rilke worked on what was to become the only 'best-seller' during his lifetime, his dramatic prose poem *The Lay of the Love and Death of the Cornet Christoph Rilke* (1899; subsequent versions 1904 and 1906) and on the first part of his major early poetry composition *The Book of Hours* (1899–1903; first published 1905). Whilst the 'Cornet' takes the reader back