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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO  
RILKE

Often regarded as the greatest German poet of the twentieth century, Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) remains one of the most influential figures of European modernism. In this *Companion*, leading scholars offer informative and thought-provoking essays on his life and social context, his correspondence, all his major collections of poetry including most famously the *Duino Elegies* and *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, and his seminal novel of modernist anxiety, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Rilke's critical contexts are explored in detail: his relationship with philosophy and the visual arts; his place within modernism and his relationship to European literature; and his reception in Europe and beyond. With its invaluable guide to further reading and a chronology of Rilke's life and work, this *Companion* will provide an accessible, engaging account of this extraordinary poet, his enduring legacy and far-reaching influence.

KAREN LEEDER is Professor of Modern German Literature at the University of Oxford and a fellow of New College.

ROBERT VILAIN is Professor of German and Comparative Literature at Royal Holloway, University of London.

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*and*

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Drang (1980), *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (1986), *Postmoderne – Zeichen eines kulturellen Wandels*, co-edited with Klaus Scherpe (1986), *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (1995) and *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (2003). Editor of *Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries in a Globalizing Age* (2008). His work has been translated into many languages.

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## CHRONOLOGY

- 1875 4 December: birth of René Karl Wilhelm Josef Maria Rilke in Prague. Parents Josef Rilke and Sophie (Phia), formerly Entz, belong to the German-speaking minority of what was then the Austrian principality of Bohemia. Their first child was a girl who had died at birth; Rilke is dressed in girls' clothes until he starts school.
- 1882 School in Prague.
- 1885 Separation of parents.
- 1886 Military Academy in St Pölten, Lower Austria.
- 1890–1 Military Academy Mährisch-Weißkirchen (Hranice), remembered by Rilke as a time of persecution, until he is able to engineer his departure.
- 1891–2 School for Trade and Commerce in Linz
- 1892 Return to Prague and the start of private tuition for the 'Abitur' (school leaving exams). Death of his Uncle Jaroslav Rilke, Ritter von Rülicken, with whom he was staying, who leaves a legacy to allow him to study.
- 1894 *Lives and Songs* with the support of his friend Valerie von David-Rhonfeld.
- 1895 University in Prague. At the end of his first semester he publishes *Offerings to the Lares*, dedicated to Prague, and works on a number of literary magazines.
- 1896 Leaves Prague and follows his friend, the painter Emil Orlik, to Munich to study there.

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- 1897 Meets the German Russian writer Lou Andreas-Salomé, fourteen years his senior, and spends June–August in Wolfratshausen near Munich as part of her circle. Changes his name to Rainer. In October he follows her back to Berlin and finds quarters near her and her husband. Dedicates himself to writing and publishes the collection *Dream-Crowned*.
- 1898 Returns to Berlin-Schmargendorf. Spends April–May in Florence and Tuscany with Lou and writes ‘Florentine Diary’, dedicated to her, though not published until 1942. Publishes *Advent*.
- 1899 In Vienna meets Arthur Schnitzler and Hugo von Hofmannsthal. April–June first Russian travels with the Andreas couple. Visit to Leonid Pasternak and Leo Tolstoy in Moscow. In autumn he writes the first version of the poems (he calls them prayers) that will become ‘The Book of Monastic Life’ and the first part of the *Book of Hours* (1905) as well as the first version of *The Lay of the Love and Death of the Cornet Christoph Rilke*. Publishes *Two Tales from Prague*, the collection *In Celebration of Myself* and writes an essay on ‘Russian Art’ which will be published in 1901.
- 1900 Intensive study of Russian literature and poetry. Second Russian journey with Lou Andreas-Salomé from May to the end of August. Visits and cements friendship with writers and critics. In September accepts an invitation from the painter Heinrich Vogeler to visit the artists’ colony in Worpswede; there he is inspired by the landscape but also by the artists he meets: the painter Paula Becker, the sculptor Clara Westhoff and the visiting writer Carl Hauptmann. His impressions are contained in his so-called ‘Worpswede Diary’ but also in the poems that will become the collection *The Book of Images* (1902). *Stories of the Dear Lord* is published. Paula Becker becomes engaged to Otto Modersohn and Rilke leaves abruptly to return to Berlin.
- 1901 Separates from Lou, breaks off his studies. Marriage to Clara Westhoff on 28 April. The young couple move to Westerwede, near Worpswede. Their daughter Ruth is born on 12 December. Première of the drama *Everyday Life* in Berlin at the Residenztheater is a failure.
- 1902 Financial crisis drives Rilke to work as a critic for the newspaper *Das Bremer Tagblatt*. He is commissioned to write a monograph on the artists’ colony at Worpswede, and also one on Rodin. The

## CHRONOLOGY

collection *The Book of Images* appears. At the end of August Rilke moves to Paris and visits Rodin for the first time. Clara follows him; their daughter is left behind with grandparents in Bremen. Inspired by the relationship with the sculptor, but made anxious by the city, Rilke writes the poem 'The Panther' probably in November. This will become one of the most famous of the *New Poems*.

- 1903 The monograph *Auguste Rodin* appears. Spends April in Viareggio to recover from his city sojourn, and finishes what will become the *Book of Hours*. Begins correspondence with Lou Andreas-Salomé which allows him to process his experiences in Paris. Many of the passages will find their way into his novel of 1910 *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. From September spends time in Rome with Clara until June 1904. Letter writing becomes important. Correspondence with Ellen Key and *Letters to a Young Poet* (to Franz Xaver Kappus), which will be published in 1929, date from this time.
- 1904 Rilke journeys to Sweden on the invitation of Ellen Key to stay at Lund with Hanna Larsson and the painter Ernst Norlind.
- 1905 Travels in Germany. July–September in Friedelheim, also with Clara, on occasion, and gets to know the banker and writer Karl von Heydt. In the autumn returns to France to Rodin. Spends winter in Rodin's house in Meudon-Val-Fleury where Rodin asks him to stay on as his private secretary. *The Book of Hours*, which has been finished since 1903, appears with the Insel publishing house. His first lecture tour on Rodin in Dresden and Prague.
- 1906 Meudon and then to Paris. His father's death in Prague on 14 March interrupts Rilke's second lecture tour. In Paris he gets to know Amélie Nádherný von Borutin and her daughter Sidonie and the poet Emile Verhaeren. Rupture with Rodin. Work on the *New Poems*. In the summer he journeys to Belgium and in December to Capri, where he will stay until May 1907, as the guest of Alice Faehndrich who assists him with his translations of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1908). *The Book of Images* appears, and *The Lay of the Love and Death of the Cornet Christoph Rilke*, which becomes a bestseller.
- 1907 June–October in Paris, finishing the *New Poems*, which will be published later the same year. Inspired by the Cézanne exhibition

## CHRONOLOGY

in the Salon d'Automne. Visits almost daily and records his impression in letters to Clara which will be published posthumously as *Letters on Cézanne*. November: his third lecture tour. Correspondence with Sidonie which will continue for the rest of his life. In Vienna meets Rudolf Kassner, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Richard Beer-Hofmann. Holiday in Venice which will inspire two of the last of the *New Poems*. On 20 November Paula Modersohn-Becker dies in childbirth. In December Rilke returns to Germany with Clara.

- 1908 Stays with Alice Faehndich on Capri again and then, after successful negotiations with Insel secure him an income, he moves straight back to Paris to finish the *New Poems: The Other Part*, dedicated to Rodin. Moves to attic room of Palais Hôtel Biron with Clara to work on his novel. The anniversary of the death of Paula Modersohn-Becker prompts his poem 'Requiem for a Friend' and a few days later another poem 'Requiem for Wolf Count of Kalckreuth', a young Munich poet of Rilke's acquaintance who had committed suicide.
- 1909 Concentrated work in Paris on reissues of earlier poems. On 13 December meets Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe in Paris.
- 1910 Visits Anton and Katharina Kippenberg, the publishers, in Leipzig to dictate the last parts of his novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* to them, which then appears at the end of May. A period of restlessness follows after publication of the novel. Guest of Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe in Castle Duino, near Trieste; followed by a stay at Castle Lautschin in Bohemia in August, then with the Nádherný sisters in Janowitz. Persuaded by Jenny Oltersdorf to embark on a journey with companions at the end of November to North Africa, Algiers, Tunis and the holy city of Kairouan and thence to Egypt.
- 1911 Returns to Paris in April. Still without orientation after the publication of *Malte*, he embarks on various translations (the strong impressions from Egypt will find their way into the *Duino Elegies*). Agrees to a divorce from Clara which, because of the religious cast of the Austrian laws, does not take place. Visits Castle Duino on the Adriatic coast from October until May 1912. Aesthetic crisis.

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- 1912 Mid-January he writes the first lines of what will become the *Duino Elegies* ‘Who, if I cried out, would hear me – among the angelic orders?’. He completes two *Elegies* and some fragments, but keeps them back. Summer spent in Venice in the company of the ageing actress Eleanora Duse. Departs for Spain in October first visiting Toledo, and then moving down to the South, to Ronda.
- 1913 Returns to Paris in February to work on poems which will become the cycle ‘Poems to the Night’. Spends the summer travelling in Germany. Meets the Expressionist Franz Werfel, and reads the poetry of Georg Heym, leading him to write an essay ‘About the Young Poet’. In September he visits a psychoanalytic congress with Lou and meets Freud. From mid-October in Paris. Publishes *The Life of the Virgin Mary*, written early during his Duino visit.
- 1914 Receives letter from divorced pianist Magda von Hattingberg, which initiates a correspondence in which Rilke believes he has discovered his soul mate, his ‘Benvenuta’ (welcome one), but a meeting ends in disappointment. After a period of self-analysis he writes the poem ‘Turning-Point’ on 20 June, which signals a fresh energy and a new aesthetic beginning. Reads Georg Trakl, Franz Kafka and Friedrich Hölderlin. Outbreak of War. Writes his ‘Five Songs’ under the influence of the first days of war, but only a few weeks later does not want to see them reproduced. Meets the painter Lou Albert-Lasard, who seems to be a kindred spirit in a very nationalistic time. Alongside poems of existential lament such as ‘Exposed on the Mountains of the Heart’, he writes love poems to her (‘Lulu’), with whom he will maintain a relationship until Autumn 1916. In dire financial straits, moves into the lodgings where she is staying. December in Berlin and thence to Munich where he will remain until 1919. Meets the painter Paul Klee and many writers including the wealthy writer and patron Hertha König, who buys him Pablo Picasso’s painting *The Acrobats* (*Les Saltimbanques*), to remind him of the atmosphere of Paris.
- 1915 Summer and autumn as the guest of Hertha König. In Autumn he writes the fourth *Elegy*. The 40-year-old Rilke receives his ‘call up’ on 24 November, and, despite the intervention of many friends on his behalf, is sent to a barracks in Vienna, where he suffers during training and is soon moved to the Austrian war archive.

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- 1916 Meetings with Rudolf Kassner, Stefan Zweig, Karl Kraus, Oskar Kokoschka. May–June in Rodaun as Hofmannsthal's neighbour, where Lou Albert-Lasard paints her famous portrait of him. On 9 June released from the army. Returns to Munich in July.
- 1917 Munich from May to June. October revolution. Translates from the Renaissance French poet: *The Twenty Four Sonnets of Louise Labé*.
- 1918 Munich. Meets Ernst Toller, Oskar Maria Graf, Alfred Wolfenstein. Watches the events of the November Revolution with great approval.
- 1919 Deeply shocked by murder of the Socialist leader Kurt Eisner, First Minister President of the Free State of Bavaria. Flees the 'White Terror' leaving Munich and Germany for the last time. Journey to Switzerland where he renews his acquaintance with the painter Baladine Klossowska ('Merline') and her sons. Embarks on reading tour, and writes the speculative essay 'Primal Sound'. Meets Nanny Wunderly-Volkart, who becomes a close friend and correspondent. Surrenders his old Austrian passport for a Czech one, which allows him to visit Marie von Thurn und Taxis in Venice. Begins love affair with Merline, with whom he visits the Swiss canton of Valais.
- 1921 Journey through Switzerland. Preface to *Mitsou*, drawings by the young Balthusz Klossowski (later Balthus), Merline's son. Writes 'The Testament' (published 1974), a document of (self-)recrimination about the demands of art and the need for companionship. Still unable to work on the *Elegies*, he turns to translation of Paul Valéry's poem 'The Graveyard by the Sea' ('Le cimetière marin'). Corresponds in French with Merline who has been in Berlin and on her return they hunt for lodgings and discover the run-down Château de Muzot near the town of Sierre in the Rhône Valley of northern Switzerland, which he will buy in 1922. Merline returns to Berlin in November having rendered it habitable for him.
- 1922 In February, with a 'hurricane in the spirit', he finishes the *Duino Elegies*, which had been begun in winter 1911/12 in Duino, and writes *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, dedicated to Wera Ockama Knoop, a young dancer from Munich whom Rilke had known as

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- a child but who had died, also the fictive ‘Letter from the Young Worker’. His daughter Ruth marries Carl Sieber on 12 May.
- 1923 Travels in Switzerland. Translations of Valéry. Reads Proust. Merline returns to Switzerland. Symptoms of illness appear which, despite some respites, will trouble him until his death. In December visits the sanatorium in Valmont. *Duino Elegies* and *The Sonnets to Orpheus* appear.
- 1924 Sojourns in the clinic at Valmont at the beginning and end of the year. Poems in French, culminating in the collections *Orchards* and *The Valaisian Quatrains*. Late poems in German too such as ‘Early Spring’, ‘A Walk’, ‘Gong’. Begins a correspondence of poems and letters with the young poet Erika Mitterer (which will appear as *Correspondence in Poems* in 1950) and which will continue until the year of his death. Many visitors, including Paul Valéry and a last visit from Clara Rilke.
- 1925 January–August in Paris meeting many writers, including Paul Valéry and André Gide. On returning to Muzot Rilke writes his will in October including his famous ‘Epitaph’. His translation of Valéry appears. In December he returns to the Valmont sanatorium.
- 1926 Spends January–May in the sanatorium. Important correspondence with the Russian poet Boris Pasternak, who is in exile in Paris, and also with the Russian poet Marina Zwetajewa-Efron, the dedicatee of his last elegy. His French collections appear in Paris to good reviews. Summer travelling and visiting friends. Last meeting with Valéry in September. On his return he does not remain in Muzot, having also injured himself on the thorn of a rose in his garden. On 30 November he returns to Valmont. Mid-December writes his last poem ‘Come you, you last one . . .’ in his notebook. Dies of leukaemia on 29 December.
- 1927 2 January: funeral in Raron (Valais).



## ABBREVIATIONS, REFERENCES AND TRANSLATIONS

The following abbreviations have been used throughout this volume to refer to works and letters by Rilke and a standard reference work:

KA	Manfred Engel, Ulrich Fülleborn, Dorothea Lauterbach, Horst Nalewski, August Stahl (eds.), Rainer Maria Rilke, <i>Werke: Kommentierte Ausgabe in vier Bänden mit einem Supplementband</i> (Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig: Insel, 1996)
SW	Rainer Maria Rilke, <i>Sämtliche Werke</i> , ed. Ernst Zinn, 7 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1987–97)
B	Rainer Maria Rilke, <i>Briefe in zwei Bänden</i> , ed. Horst Nalewski (Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig: Insel, 1991)
RHB	Manfred Engel (ed.), <i>Rilke-Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Wirkung</i> (Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler, 2004)
<i>Notebooks</i>	Rainer Maria Rilke, <i>The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge</i> , trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage, 1985).

References to these volumes will be given in the form: KA I, 49; SW III, 11; B I, 251; RHB, p. 2; *Notebooks*, p. 56. References to other bibliographical items will be provided in full in a note on the first mention, and in abbreviated form thereafter.

Quotations are generally given only in English, except where a particular linguistic or formal point is being made, or when a reader who has German might particularly benefit from having the original. In these cases the translation usually precedes the original but from time to time the order is reversed for the sake of clarity or precision. The translations used for *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* are those of Stephen Mitchell (see above). There is no standard edition of Rilke in English. Contributors have therefore used a range of different English translations of the other works, depending on the individual poems cited, and in order to best represent the particular point being made. These, and any adaptations to them, are all acknowledged in

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the notes to the individual contributions. Some contributors have provided new translations. Unless otherwise specified, all other translations are by the author of the contribution. Rilke's own frequent use of ellipsis will be reproduced as it appears in his work; an ellipsis with square brackets [...] indicates an editorial omission.