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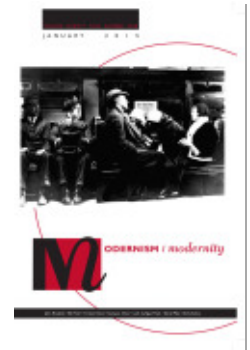
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## Rilke's Landscape of the Heart: On *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*

Rochelle Tobias

Rilke received the galley proofs for *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* in March 1910 and in anticipation of the page proofs that were to follow, he wrote his editor Anton Kippenberg, "Please let me indicate in the page proofs where the first volume should end. Determine it yourself if possible, or, in case of doubt, give me two places to choose from."<sup>1</sup> Rilke's suggestion that the editor could himself decide where to divide the novel has been interpreted as a sign that the division was an afterthought of little significance for the novel.<sup>2</sup> This view has largely dominated in Rilke scholarship. With few exceptions, critics have concentrated on the thematic concerns that organize various portions of the *Notebooks*, which otherwise would appear to have no organizing principle.<sup>3</sup> Such an approach is not surprising given the nature of this work, which presents itself as a collection of reflections, observations, and notes (in a word: *Aufzeichnungen*) written at random or when the author was inspired to record his impressions. (The fiction of the novel is that it is the jottings of a Danish writer of noble birth who moves to Paris to write, though he is unable to produce anything but his *Aufzeichnungen*.)

Yet the division of the *Notebooks* into two books is not incidental. It places at the heart of the work a caesura that enables it to continue, albeit along a different path without Malte's here-and-now as its point of orientation or anchor. If the first half of the novel is devoted to Malte's efforts at learning to see, the second is devoted to his efforts at learning to love. If the first records his adventures in Paris—where he lives in destitute poverty—the second records the adventures of others in a distant past and, at times, distant places. If the first focuses on Malte's experiences

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668 as a writer whose authority is threatened at every turn, the second considers models of writing that are immune to the threat of the loss of authority. The list of opposing attributes could be continued, but suffice it to say that the distinction between the first and second books is clear, consistent, and thorough. Yet this distinction is hardly addressed in the secondary literature.

This neglect is unfortunate, as it obscures the efforts Rilke made in this work and in his late poetry more generally to sketch a model of poetic sovereignty that no longer revolves around the autonomous individual. The *Notebooks* conclude with a tribute not to Orphic but to Sapphic poetry, which comes about through the poet's surrender to his or her death to be born anew in a world without subject or object, a world that is boundless. In Rilkean terms, one could say that Sapphic poetry consists in the willingness of the poet to fall without cease into the vortex of being that she herself opens through her writing. (Heidegger will call this vortex the "Zug des ganzen Bezuges" ["the traction of the attraction"] in his 1946 essay "Wozu Dichter?")<sup>4</sup> The first half of the *Notebooks* is significant in that it traces Malte's efforts to keep death at bay and to remain standing upright in the face of forces larger than himself, even if they come from his interior. But only in the second half does he learn the pleasure of falling, as formulated in the tenth and final *Duino Elegy*, where good fortune or happiness—the German word *Glück* denotes both—is said to fall like rain in the spring:

Aber erweckten sie uns, die unendlich Toten, ein Gleichnis,  
 siehe, sie zeigten vielleicht auf die Kätzchen der leeren  
 Hasel, die hängenden, oder  
 meinten den Regen, der fällt auf dunkles Erdreich im Frühjahr. —

Und wir, die an *steigendes* Glück  
 denken, empfänden die Rührung,  
 die uns beinahe bestürzt,  
 wenn ein Glückliches *fällt*.<sup>5</sup>

[But if the endlessly dead awakened a symbol in us,  
 perhaps they would point to the catkins hanging from the bare  
 branches of the hazel-trees, or  
 would evoke the raindrops that fall onto the dark earth in springtime.—

And we, who have always thought  
 of happiness as *rising*, would feel  
 the emotion that almost overwhelms us  
 whenever a happy thing *falls*.<sup>6</sup>]

## Fearing the Unknown

Throughout the first half of the novel Malte is overcome with fear, and while this fear has no specific object, it could be labeled a fear of death, which confronts him at every turn. Malte's Paris is one in which beggars with mangled limbs approach him as if they had been expecting him for some time, and strangers take his customary seat in a café only to collapse before his eyes. The horrors he confronts in Paris are not unlike those Rilke experienced in 1902, when he arrived in the city to write a study of Rodin, for which he received a modest commission. (This was his sole source of income at the time.) Many of Malte's descriptions of Paris are in fact taken from Rilke's letters with only slight modification, and the date that opens the *Notebooks*, "September 11th, rue Toullier," alludes to Rilke's first address in Paris—11, rue Toullier.<sup>7</sup>

Yet for all the emphasis on Paris the *Notebooks* do not fit easily in the category of city literature. If anything, the urban landscape provides Malte with an occasion to reflect on his own mortality and suffering as embodied in the urban poor or made manifest in public fixtures (e.g., hospitals, libraries, a demolished apartment house, etc.). Käte Hamburger thus refers to Malte as a "phenomenologist of suffering" who is more interested in the knowledge he can derive from the travails of others than any existential involvement in their situation.<sup>8</sup> Ulrich Fülleborn argues in a similar vein that the dangers Malte is exposed to in Paris lead him to question the ontological constitution of the human being.<sup>9</sup> It is hardly surprising then that the anxiety Malte suffers in Paris is the same as the terror that gripped him in his youth at his family's country estate.<sup>10</sup> In both places Malte encounters the shadow or specter of his own death, which he supposedly bears within himself. He is confronted with visions of his insides turned inside out, which perhaps accounts for the strange references to bodily fluids (pus, mucus, spit, urine, etc.) throughout the novel's first half.<sup>11</sup>

A telling scene in this regard occurs at the Salpêtrière where Malte has been summoned to undergo electro-shock therapy. As soon as Malte sees the other patients in the waiting room, he assumes his summons is a sign: "It was, so to speak, the first official confirmation that I belonged to the outcasts [*die Fortgeworfenen*]" (55; KA, III: 492). If a mere glance at the other patients can convince Malte that he has joined their ranks, it is because they literally constitute "outcasts," beings that have been tossed or cast out, as becomes evident in Malte's catalogue of his fellow patients, who all appear to be overflowing or spilling out of themselves. There is a man "with a red, *swollen* neck" (56), a sobbing child, a woman whose "eyelids were constantly *overflowing*" (56), and finally a girl whose "mouth hung open, so you could see the white, *slimy* gums with their stunted teeth" (56). These comments are consistent with Malte's descriptions of the outcasts elsewhere. In one passage he refers to them as "husks of men that fate has *spewed out*," and to underscore their liquid nature immediately adds, "*Wet* with the *spittle* of fate, they stick to a wall, a lamp-post, a billboard, or they *trickle* slowly down the street, leaving a dark, filthy trail behind them" (40; my italics). As a residue that fate has spit out, the outcasts transgress the borders of the body and expand in all directions at once. It is this aspect that inspires Malte's fear, which is less a fear of

670 infection than one of immensity or size. Malte is convinced that the body is a vessel for something larger than itself that once exposed will quickly outgrow or outsize it.

It is no wonder then that sitting in the waiting room at the Salpêtrière he is transported back to his childhood when he was seized with terror at what he called “das Große” (KA, III: 497), the Big Thing or even Bigness itself. The name, however crude, is surprisingly apt since the one feature of this object is that it is always bigger than Malte no matter how large he gets.

For the first time in many, many years, it was there again. What had filled me with my first, deep horror [*Entsetzen*], when I was a child and lay in bed with a fever: the Big Thing [*das Große*]. That’s what I had always called it. . . And now it was there again. . . Now it was growing out of me like a tumor, like a second head, and was a part of me, although it certainly couldn’t belong to me, because it was so big. It was there like a large dead animal which, while it was alive, used to be my hand or my arm. . . My heart had to beat harder to pump the blood into the Big Thing: there was barely enough blood. . . The Big Thing swelled and grew over my face like a warm bluish boil, and grew over my mouth, and already my last eye was hidden by its shadows. (61–62; KA, III: 497)

The unmistakable motif in this passage is that of pregnancy and birth. Malte gives birth to an entity connected to him by an umbilical cord that pumps ever more blood into it. Insofar as the Big Thing emerges from his body, Malte is forced to recognize it as a part of himself. At the same time the growth fills him with “deep horror [*Entsetzen*]” because it deposes him (in German, *entsetzt ihn*) as master of his body, his limbs. He therefore describes the Big Thing as a second head, which is to say a second mind, as well as a distorted if not grotesque version of his own body: “It was there like a large dead animal which, while it was alive, used to be my hand or my arm.” Limbs that Malte once considered to be subject to his will slip from his grasp and in slipping they confront him as his opposite, i.e., something animal as opposed to human, something dead as opposed to alive.

Among the most famous passages in Rilke’s letters is one in which he claims that death is not the opposite but the hidden side of life, which no amount of thought can ever illuminate: “Just like the moon, life surely has a side that is perpetually turned away from us and which is not its counter-part but its complement toward perfection, toward consummation, toward the really sound and full sphere and orb of being.”<sup>12</sup> In “Wozu Dichter?” Heidegger criticizes Rilke for approaching being in quantitative terms as the sum of two halves or sides that, taken together, constitute the whole of being.<sup>13</sup> Yet as he himself admits, the significance of Rilke’s letter does not lie in its depiction of life as a globe or sphere with a side turned away from us like the moon, which is never visible in its entirety. Rather the significance of the letter lies in its attempt to conceive of death as something positive or, to quote Rilke, “to read the word ‘death’ without negation” (*das Wort “Tod” ohne Negation zu lesen*).<sup>14</sup>

From the *Book of Hours* onwards, Rilke struggles to affirm death’s presence in life as a force we regularly encounter, even if it escapes our comprehension. The final cycle in the *Book of Hours*, the “Book of Poverty and Death,” was written in 1903, just a

year before Rilke began work on *Malte Laurids Brigge*. The parallels between the two works could not be more pronounced. Take for instance the following lines from the “Book of Poverty and Death,” lines which anticipate the metaphors Malte will use in the *Notebooks* to explore the relation of life and death:

Denn wir sind nur die Schale und das Blatt.  
Der große Tod, den jeder in sich hat,  
das ist die Frucht, um die sich alles dreht. (KA, I: 236)

[For we are only hull and leaf.  
The large death, which each of us carries within,  
is the fruit around which everything turns.]

While Rilke may represent death here as the hidden fruit and axis around which all life revolves, he was also aware that the matter could be approached from the reverse direction—from the outside, as it were. In the *Duino Elegies* he insists that we introduce death as a negative force into the world in dividing being, which is otherwise continuous, into a set of objects. We disrupt the boundlessness of being in setting things apart and turning them into objects that stand opposite as well as opposed to us. Thus in the Eighth Elegy, he declares, “This is what fate means: to be opposite, / to be opposite and nothing else, forever [*Dieses heißt Schicksal: gegenüber sein / und nichts als das und immer gegenüber*],” in lines that conspicuously play on the German word for object *Gegenstand*, which literally means that which stands opposite.<sup>15</sup> But death is also a reserve we harbor within ourselves and to the extent that we carry it, we are the bearers of something larger than ourselves. Whether this inner reserve can be a source of strength is the central question of the text.

Malte takes up this issue in the eighth entry in the novel, which is also the first in which he remembers an incident from the past, though it is unclear whether he witnessed it himself. Malte’s grandfather’s death could just as well be the stuff of legend, which is what Malte needs to counter the anonymity of modern death, which was the subject of the previous entry. In a somewhat predictable critique of modernity, Malte complains that death has become a mass-produced phenomenon, churned out in hospitals, where patients die in a manner fitting their disease rather than their person. The story of Malte’s paternal grandfather is supposed to attest to a time when one could still have a “death of one’s own” or put otherwise, when death could still be a work, an accomplishment.

Malte assures us that the Chamberlain Christoph Detlev Brigge died in a manner befitting a nobleman, which is to say with a certain largesse. His struggle takes over two months and during this period all life ceases in the village where the Brigge family had ruled for generations. And yet for all of Malte’s emphasis on the grandeur of his grandfather’s death, it would be hard to say that the episode confirms the Chamberlain’s power as lord and master of the village. In death the grandfather yields to a force larger than himself, which becomes apparent as Malte describes the almost comical swelling of his body: “He lay on the floor in the middle of the room, enormously swelling out of

672 his blue uniform. At first [the servants] had tried to lay him on the bed, but . . . the bed . . . turned out to be too small" (12). It is not the Chamberlain who grows and swells in this period but his death, which pours out of him and assumes the role of sovereign, as the grandfather himself is dispossessed. Malte consequently invents the compound noun "Christoph Detlev's death" to refer to the force that terrorizes the village for ten weeks, "like a king who is called the Terrible, afterward and for all time" (15). Death is a terrifying king because it exposes every individual as a hull or shell for a force that cannot be contained once it begins to take effect in the world.

In a provocative reading of the novel Winfried Eckel asserts that Malte's experiences are organized around two opposing principles that are dialectically related.<sup>16</sup> The first is identified with Malte's paternal family and consists in the drawing of boundaries to reaffirm the identity of the self. The second is associated with Malte's maternal family, the Brahe's, and consists in the transgressing of boundaries to dissolve the self. For Eckel the Chamberlain's death exemplifies the former principle, though not without paradox. The Chamberlain asserts himself in dying to the extent that he appropriates that which is absolutely other than himself: his death, his negation.<sup>17</sup> The Brahe principle operates in an equally paradoxical, if reverse fashion. The death of Malte's maternal grandfather is not represented in the novel—Malte mentions it only in passing twice—but the omission is significant given what we do know about Count Brahe's view of death: "The passing of time had absolutely no meaning for him; death was a minor incident which he completely ignored; people whom he had once installed in his memory continued to exist, and the fact that they had died did not alter that in the least" (31). If the Chamberlain lays claim in dying to what is other than himself, the Count surrenders in dying completely to the other with the result that he never has to face "his own" death. He loses anything proper, anything that is uniquely his, in abandoning himself to the other before death has a chance to overtake him. However supple this interpretive model may be, it is predicated upon a distinction between self and other that the novel consistently undermines. The apparent other in the first book is always something in Malte himself. One could even say it is his death, albeit with the caveat that death is not the opposite of life for Rilke; it is not a negation of presence.

Malte first glimpses the supposed other he carries within himself in an episode from his childhood that has all the hallmarks of trauma. Indeed, it would not be far-fetched to say that the incident resembles the Lacanian mirror stage except that it does not culminate in the formation of an ideal ego.<sup>18</sup> Malte recalls that he once stole into the attic at the family's country home where he found a wardrobe full of costumes and shawls which he draped himself in while watching himself in a mirror, itself composed of "irregular pieces of green glass" (103). In the course of admiring himself, he accidentally trips on a shawl and knocks over a table with porcelain trinkets on it which fall to the floor and break. But more disturbing still is the sight of "a perfume bottle that had broken into a thousand tiny fragments, from which the remnant of some ancient essence [*Essenz*] had *spurted out* that now formed a stain with a very repugnant physiognomy" (106, my italics). The "ancient essence" flowing from the bottle is reminiscent of the bodily fluids that oozed from the pores of the outcasts in Paris.

Here, however, the secretions take a particular form. They spread out before Malte as a “repulsive physiognomy,” a face of sorts, in which he is forced to recognize himself as something archaic that cannot be contained any longer. This is by no means the only scene in the novel in which Malte confronts himself as an opponent or adversary, but it is one of the few in which he identifies himself as a blot or stain: the stain of an ancient essence that cannot be erased.

The other place where Malte refers to himself in this fashion occurs shortly after he witnesses a man die in a Paris *crémérie* that he regularly visits. Malte at least believes the man has died because of a “bond” (50) he feels with him—a bond based on nothing but the intuition that he and this stranger are in fact the same person. The intuition enables him to claim that he knows what is happening in this man, as if it were happening in himself: “Yes, he knew that he was now withdrawing from everything in the world, not merely from human beings” (51). Lest this seem a casual remark, Malte reiterates it a few moments later, albeit with a slight change in syntax that profoundly alters the dynamics of the situation. “I tell myself: ‘Nothing has happened,’ and yet I was able to understand this man just because inside me too something is taking place that is beginning to withdraw and separate me from everything” (52). In recalling what he witnessed, Malte is able to distance himself from the scene since he now assumes the role of narrator, as indicated by the phrase “I tell myself” that prefaces his comment. The formulaic utterance places the man’s withdrawal from the world in a frame that protects Malte from being drawn (or withdrawn) from his own time and place. Indeed the moment Malte says “I,” he establishes his time and place as an “instance of discourse” in Benveniste’s vocabulary, a subject in language.<sup>19</sup> Malte turns to writing with the same hope that it will bolster him. Yet here too he finds that writing withdraws him from the world and from himself as the author and narrator of his own experience: “For the time being I can still write all this down. . . . But the day will come when my hand will be distant, and if I tell it to write, it will write words that are not mine . . . This time, I will be written. I am the impression that will transform itself” (52–53).

Blanchot interprets this passage as the conclusion of the novel, though it occurs early in the work, since it anticipates the day when Malte will cease to write and persist merely as a recorded impression.<sup>20</sup> No other passage announces as clearly Malte’s eventual disappearance as a living writer and reemergence as a dead letter—a blot or stain, as it were. To the extent that we read Malte’s writing in a book, it is tempting to say that this day has already come and Malte exists henceforth only as a written impression.<sup>21</sup> Yet the truth of Malte’s statement is not primarily temporal; his utterance is not borne out in time. Rather, even as he writes he finds himself written by another hand, which is not so much the hand of another as his own hand which has, as it were, become something other. It is worth recalling that Malte compared the Big Thing to “a large dead animal which, while it was alive, used to be my hand or my arm” (61).

Malte had a nearly identical experience in childhood and, not surprisingly, the episode occurred while he was trying his hand at art—specifically the art of drawing (or, in German, *Zeichnen*). He was in other words engaged in an act that anticipates his later preoccupation with sketches, reflections, and notes (*Aufzeichnungen*). According



674 to Malte, on this one evening he was drawing a picture of soldiers in battle, which was his favorite theme at the time, when his crayon suddenly fell to the floor and rolled under the table. With the disappearance of his crayon, the scene rapidly turns from the quaint to the phantasmagoric, as did the scene in the attic, when Malte tripped on the shawls in which he draped himself. Here, however, the experience is not primarily visual. Malte relies instead on his sense of touch as he crawls under the table and has to adjust to the darkness:

My eyes . . . could not perceive anything at all under the table, where blackness seemed so dense that I was afraid I would knock against it . . . [I] was about to call Mademoiselle and ask her to bring the lamp for me, when I noticed that to my involuntarily adapted eyes, the darkness was gradually growing more transparent. . . . I recognized my own outspread hand moving down there all alone, like some strange crab, exploring the ground. I watched it, I remember, almost with curiosity. (93–94)

Whether it is true that Malte regarded his hand “almost with curiosity” at the time of this episode or only in retrospect is impossible to determine here. What is, however, apparent is that he invokes the metaphor of drowning to describe his experience under the table. The metaphor is written all over the passage but is especially prominent in Malte’s comment that his hand moved “like some strange crab, exploring the ground” in this nether region. The implicit references to drowning suggest that what is traumatic about this episode is not the darkness per se, but the sensation of being pulled down by a force one is powerless to resist.

This becomes apparent when Malte spots another hand crawling toward him:

It came groping in a similar fashion from the other side, and the two outspread hands blindly moved toward each other. My curiosity was not yet satisfied, but suddenly it was gone and there was only horror. I felt that one of the hands belonged to me and that it was about to enter into something it could never return from. With all the authority [*Recht*] I had over it, I stopped it, held it flat, and slowly pulled it back to me, without taking my eyes off the other one, which kept on groping. I realized that it wouldn’t stop, and I don’t know how I got up again. (94; KA, III: 520)

Elsewhere in the *Notebooks*, Malte will lament that our two hands never act in concert with each other and thus invariably cancel each other out. Here, however, the threat is not the division but the unity of two hands. Malte fears that the hands will form a compact against him and will literally and figuratively overturn him by pulling him down, possibly to the bottom of the sea. Hence with all the authority (“*Recht*”) he can muster he drags one hand back. Yet as the phrase “mit allem *Recht*” suggests, his authority extends only to *die rechte Hand*. The left hand remains below in a region Malte can never illuminate—neither with his visual nor his verbal sketches, his *Zeichnungen* or *Aufzeichnungen*.

Virtually every encounter Malte has in Paris follows this pattern. He sees someone or something that inspires terror in him, since he cannot disengage himself from this person or object, as it embodies a force inside him. His response in every case is the

same. He rushes back to his room to write in the hope that writing will make him master of the situation. Comments like, "One must take some action against fear" (7) and "I have taken action against fear. I sat up all night and wrote" (16), abound in the first half of the novel and their inclusion would suggest that even if Malte did not overcome his fear, he succeeded in giving it form, in capturing it in his notebooks.

There is, however, another possibility for interpreting Malte's writing which Malte himself states in the passage that begins with the words, "For the time being, I can still write all this down . . . But the day will come when my hand will be distant, and if I tell it to write, it will write words that are not mine" (52). The passage continues, "The time of that other interpretation will dawn, when there shall not be left one word upon another, and every meaning will dissolve like a cloud and fall down like rain" (52–53). While Malte may refer to "the time of that other interpretation" with foreboding, he also conceives it as a new day, when the words he writes will no longer be fixed to the page and will instead dissolve like clouds bursting with rain. Of note is the reversal of imagery that transpires in this passage. The secretions that previously terrified Malte are transformed here into rain, that is, into an outpouring that promises not death but life, a new beginning. The passage is in this regard a precursor to the closing stanzas of the *Duino Elegies*, where "a happy thing [*Glückliches*]" is said to fall like rain in the spring. Malte himself seems to recognize the promise of this moment when he says, "Just one step, and my misery would turn into bliss. But I can't take that step; I have fallen and I can't pick myself up" (53). Paradoxically, it is Malte's fear of falling that leads him to fall into the depths of his fear. Only in the second half of the novel will he discover in these depths the possibility of a life not constrained by death or, put otherwise, a life that no longer faces death as its opposite.

### Loving the Unknown

This life belongs to women in love and such women are either mystics or poets, according to Malte. Sometimes they are both and sometimes they transcend these categories, as is the case with Malte's aunt Abelone, with whom he would appear to have had intimate relations. He at least suggests as much, though even this remains unclear, as does so much else concerning Abelone, including her strange name, which Rilke apparently found in J. P. Jacobsen's novel *Frau Marie Grubbe*.<sup>22</sup> But the name could also be a Danish version of Apollonia, as George Schoolfield speculates, or a play on the name of the French philosopher Abelard, which would not be inappropriate given that Malte later mentions Héloïse as an exemplary female lover and writer.<sup>23</sup> Whatever the origins of Abelone's name, it is her voice that stands out. She sings in a manner that recalls Orpheus, for she moves heaven and earth with her song:

Abelone had one good quality: she sang. That is to say, there were times when she sang. There was a strong, imperturbable music in her. If it is true that angels are male, you could say that there was something male in her voice: a radiant, celestial maleness. (125)

676 Malte's emphasis on the masculinity of Abelone's voice may strike one as odd, especially given his assertion a few pages later that in Abelone he "loved all women" (127), which may be the most banal observation in the novel. Abelone's masculinity, however, is central to Malte's efforts to establish her as an Orphic figure who, in singing, comes to inhabit the earth and the heavens.

In Rilke's version of the Orpheus myth, the Greek hero's dismemberment at the hands of the Maenads was not the conclusion but the apotheosis of his career as a poet whose song was of such elemental power that it could change the course of rivers. In effect, Rilke collapses the myths of Orpheus and Dionysus in order to claim that the poet's dismemberment enables him to permeate all living forms, earthly or celestial. In a recent study Patrick Greaney has shown that Rilke was an avid reader of Nietzsche and especially the *Birth of Tragedy*, in which Nietzsche argues that Dionysus, following his mutilation, lives on in all things.<sup>24</sup> Rilke's emphasis on the dispersal of the poet's seed would suggest that he modeled his figure of Orpheus after Dionysus. Take for instance the closing lines of the *Book of Hours* in which he depicts Francis of Assisi as a proto-Orphic figure who in dying spreads his seed, which in German also means his semen: "his seed sang / in creeks, his seed sang in trees" (*sein Samen rann / in Bächen, in den Bäumen sang sein Samen*; KA, I: 252). And in the *Sonnets to Orpheus* he celebrates the singer's dismemberment:

Schließlich zerschlugen sie dich, von der Rache gehetzt,  
Während dein Klang noch in Löwen und Felsen verweilte  
Und in den Bäumen und Vögeln. Dort singst du noch jetzt. (KA, II:253)

[They tore you to pieces at last, in a frenzy  
while your sound lingered on in lions and rocks,  
and in trees and birds. You still sing there.<sup>25</sup>]

In *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, however, Rilke offers an alternative theory of the origin of poetry that is unique in his work. He turns not to Orpheus but to Sappho for a model of poetry based on infinite longing and the infinite extension of the body. In other words, he develops the idea that poetry is based on the expansion of the body rather than its mutilation and scattering.

Malte names an astonishing number of female poets and mystics in the second half of the novel, often in long lists, but the three principle figures are Bettina von Arnim, Sappho, and Abelone. Each is an exemplar of intransitive love, a concept he introduces in reference to Abelone: "I know that she longed to purify her love of anything transitive" (249). Such a love is the source of poetry for Malte. Poetry has neither mother nor father, but it does have a source in an impulse that does not belong to any one individual and cannot be satisfied in any object. Malte must therefore seek out women who by any conventional measure were unlucky in love and turn their apparent misfortune into the greatest fortune—for them and for us.

In Bettina von Arnim, he finds such a case. Her passionate letters to Goethe never elicited a commensurate response in part because they exceeded their addressee:

This strange Bettina created space with all her letters, a world of vastly enlarged dimensions. From the beginning she spread herself out through everything, as if she had already passed beyond her death. Everywhere, she deeply entered into existence, became part of it, and whatever happened to her had from all eternity been contained in nature. (205)

Bettina's great strength as a writer is that she lets herself fall into the space she creates with every successive word she puts down on the page. She "spreads herself out" through the whole of existence, as Malte puts it, which would at first make it seem that in writing Bettina von Arnim becomes one with nature; she metamorphoses into birds, stars, and trees. A closer look at the passage, however, reveals the reverse is the case. Nature metamorphoses through Bettina's writing into a landscape of the heart inasmuch as her writing projects her interior as an exterior space ("a world of vastly enlarged dimensions") in which death is no longer the limit but the center. This is why Malte can declare that Bettina "passe[s] beyond her death." Her letters are literally outpourings in which she turns or casts out her death so that she may pass through it and return from it, as if her future were her past and her past a future in the waiting.

Malte pays tribute to this almost visceral kind of writing elsewhere in the text, most notably in a passage concerning the traditionally feminine handicraft of lace-making. As a child one of his favorite pastimes was to roll out the lace that his mother collected on a spool that seemed to hold an inexhaustible supply of fabric. Malte's thoughts turn to the women who made these various pieces and for no apparent reason he blurts out, "The[se] women . . . have certainly gone to heaven" (137). His mother responds, "To heaven? I think they are completely in these laces. Each one, looked at in the right way, can become an eternal bliss [*ewige Seligkeit*]" (136–37; KA, III: 552). While the association of women and weaving is a familiar trope from Homer to Freud, the passage pushes the motif in a new direction. It asks what it means to *be* "completely in these laces," which are themselves made, produced, crafted.

The crux of the question is to what degree poetry in its original meaning as production can be the basis for life. The answer lies partially in the way poetry is experienced, in finding "the right way" to look at it. Malte and his mother begin as detached observers "watch[ing] the designs unroll," but they are gradually drawn into the scenes in front of them. "We stepped outside into the long track of the Valenciennes, and it was an early morning in winter. . . . And we pushed through the snowy thicket of the Binche and came to places where no one had ever been" (137). The two can be transported to "places where no one had ever been" because they yield entirely to art. They abandon the security of their positions outside the work and let themselves fall so they can be "completely in these laces," like the women who made them ages ago. This was not a risk Malte was willing to take in Paris, as he himself admits in the passage previously cited regarding his writing, "Just one step, and my misery would turn into bliss. But I can't take that step" (53). Here, however, Malte and his mother take this step. They leave everything behind and discover in its stead the "eternal bliss" of a world in which they no longer have to face death because they have already surrendered to it. Death is the condition for their immersion, if not submersion, in this world in which the love of long deceased lace-makers continues to unfold as various landscapes, just as Bettina continues "to spread herself out through everything" in her letters to Goethe.

678 The tragedy of women in love, according to Malte, is that their longing is always curtailed. They are forced to submit to an individual when their desire is to be infinite:

The woman who loves always surpasses the man she loves...Her self-surrender wants to be infinite: this is her happiness. But the nameless suffering of her love has always been that she is required to limit this self-surrender. (207)

Malte's blanket statements about women would be annoying, were they principally concerned with the plight of women in romantic relationships. Yet even a remark such as this one manages to pivot from a commentary on women to a reflection on the genre of the lament, *Klage*, or elegy, as is evident in the lines immediately following it: "There is no other lament that has ever been lamented by women. . . . It is as recognizable as a bird-call" (207). At first glance Malte would appear to attribute the lament to a desire that has no other outlet; women who cannot surrender themselves infinitely in love surrender themselves infinitely in song according to the classic pattern of compensation. But Malte also turns this argument on its head by insisting that women in love are devoted to life, not fate, which he defines as the complex patterns and designs evident in structures like compensation. Seen in this light, the lament is not an outgrowth but a rejection of fate, in particular the fate of having to surrender to a single individual or love object, when one wants to be infinite. Infinity can be achieved for Malte only in poetic works, understood as the outpouring or unfolding of a life no longer constrained by death.

It is often asked why the *Notebooks* conclude with a series of meditations on love and especially the love of God, when the work otherwise is not concerned with religion. The shift is all the more conspicuous as it first appears in Malte's reflections on Sappho, who could hardly be accused of longing for the God of monotheism. Yet, as the passages on Sappho show, it is all but impossible to speak of love without assigning it a general aim or direction. Malte says of Sappho:

Perhaps even among the girls formed by her there were some who didn't understand: how at the height of her activity she lamented, not for one man who had left her embrace empty, but for the no longer possible one who had grown vast enough for her love. (242)

Sappho's love can be infinite because it is not directed at anyone save a figure who is "no longer possible," as Malte puts it. The insertion of this phrase would at first make it seem that there was once a man or woman worthy of Sappho's love who had since disappeared. Yet a closer look at the statement reveals that it is not the choice of suitors but the nature of Sappho's love that effectively destroys the possibility of a commensurate response. Were Sappho to resign herself to a single individual, she would compromise her love, which seeks the whole of life, not an isolated object. But equally importantly she would compromise herself. She would put herself in the position of a subject who longs for someone apart from her and in so doing mark herself as finite. Curiously it is the same fear that prevents Abelone from "direct[ing] toward God the calories of her magnificent emotion" (249). Malte does not shy away from treating this

existential dilemma as, among other things, a grammatical problem: “[Sappho] despised the thought that of two people one had to be the lover and one the beloved” (242). The observation, however, immediately raises the question whether there could ever be a language appropriate for a love that transcends subject and object and is purified of “anything transitive.”

The *Notebooks* conclude with two instances of such speech. One is a *Lied*, or song, which constitutes the only verse poem in the work.<sup>26</sup> The other is the parable of the Prodigal Son, which is the only entry that proudly proclaims its status as fiction. If literature can exceed the distinction between subject and object, it is not because it has a grammar of its own, but because it can explore absence in a manner that does not make it the opposite of presence. In Rilkean terms, one might say literature makes it possible “to read the word ‘death’ without negation.”

The poem is introduced as Malte recounts meeting a Danish singer at a party in Venice. Although the singer does not resemble Abelone, she immediately reminds Malte of her, because the two would appear to have the same voice. The singer sings in a voice that is “strong, full, and yet not heavy” (248), which is reminiscent of Malte’s description of Abelone’s voice as earthy and masculine and at the same time celestial. Perhaps for this reason Malte prefaces his account by saying, “One more time during these last years I felt your presence and understood you, Abelone, unexpectedly, after I had long stopped thinking of you” (243). In this one nameless figure, all the female lovers of the novel merge to sing a song of a lost beloved who returns as the plenitude of nature. The final stanza of the poem reads:

Du machst mich allein. Dich einzig kann ich vertauschen.  
Eine Weile bist du, dann wieder ist es das Rauschen,  
oder es ist ein Duft ohne Rest.  
Ach, in den Armen habe ich sie alle verloren  
du nur, du wirst immer wieder geboren:  
weil ich niemals dich anhielt, halt ich dich fest. (KA, III: 628)

When you leave me alone, you are part of the world for me.  
You change into all things: you enter the sound of the sea  
or the scent of flowers in the evening air.  
My arms have held them and lost them, again and again.  
You, only, are always reborn; and the moment when  
I let go of you, I hold on to you everywhere. (249)

The poem hinges on the paradox that a beloved who has departed can nonetheless return in a manner more immediate than had he or she stayed in the same place. For the poem is concerned not with the memory of the beloved but with his transformation from an isolated individual to a presence or force that permeates the landscape. Hence the speaker can assert in the first line that the beloved who leaves her also comes back as the whistling of the wind (“das Rauschen”) or the scent of a flower (“ein Duft”). And in the final line she can likewise proclaim that because “I let go of you, I hold on to you everywhere.” Freed of the constraints of being an individual—that is, an entity

680 divided from everything else—the beloved can be reborn as various phenomena in nature in a process that could continue *ad infinitum*.

Nature, however, is not a given for Rilke. It has to be created, and the one means he sees for doing so is through writing itself. In writing, the poet externalizes the impersonal force he bears within himself and in so doing fashions a world that is not governed by a subject but instead represents the self as an ever-expanding and ever-evolving space. The parable of the prodigal son that concludes the novel is, among other things, a parable for the accomplishment of such a world, which Rilke described in one essay as an “island of the heart” (*KA*, IV: 648); the description anticipated his later famous formulation, “*der Weltinnenraum*,” the world’s inner space. Critics have generally interpreted the concluding story in allegorical terms, which is not surprising given that the biblical text is almost universally read as a parable for God’s mercy. Yet there has been little consensus on whether the story is an allegory of Malte’s survival or death, that is, whether he succeeds in becoming a poet or ceases to write, as anticipated in the first book.

Rilke’s contradictory pronouncements regarding the novel have no doubt contributed to the confusion concerning the orientation of this tale. In one letter he declares, “Poor Malte starts so deep in misery and, in a strict sense, reaches to eternal bliss.”<sup>27</sup> More often than not, however, he insists that the hero is caught in a downward spiral, from which Rilke himself had difficulty recovering.<sup>28</sup> Following the completion of the novel, he suffered a writer’s block that lasted some twelve years.

More disturbing still is the question of who narrates this tale, especially if it is an allegory of Malte’s demise or, alternatively, his ascent. Judith Ryan’s observation that the narrative passages in the novel constitute hypothetical instances of story-telling—i.e., instances in which Malte narrates a story by describing how another storyteller would do so—only partially answers this question, for even when the narration is hypothetical Malte still has to be present to imagine how another, more capable storyteller would handle the same material.<sup>29</sup> The first-person narrator in the concluding episode no doubt engages in this practice, sometimes overtly as when he states, “Those who have told the story try at this point to remind us of the house as it was then. . . . It is reported that one of [the dogs] let out a howl” (259). Yet it remains unclear whether the narrator is Malte or another who takes his place, another who is written into the story to make up for the absent writer (i.e., Malte) who has in the interim merged with his text.

The parable of the Prodigal Son included in the novel follows the biblical text only in its broadest outlines. Like the parable in Luke, it is a story of departure and return, though the return is inconclusive since it is more a formal requirement of the material than an inner necessity. According to the narrator, the parable is “the legend of a man who didn’t want to be loved” because of the constraints the love of others placed on him (251). He could either delight his adoring family by fulfilling their expectations or disappoint them terribly by refusing to reciprocate their affections. To avoid this burden, he leaves home, though in the course of his travels he soon discovers the constraints of the opposing position, that of the lover. Initially he fears that he may impinge on the freedom of another in “his infinite desire for possession” (254), but gradually this fear

turns to despair as he becomes convinced that he will never be loved with the same intensity he devotes to his beloved: "He had lost hope of ever meeting the woman whose love could pierce him" (255). His repeated disappointment in this arena leads him to foreswear all companionship and turn to God. In the course of this pursuit he is reminded of his childhood and how incomplete it was, and the thought compels him to return home, as would be expected of any prodigal son.

Here, however, the story breaks with the biblical text and not simply because the son refuses the embrace of his family which is more than willing to forgive his every trespass. Rather in refusing their embrace, he also rejects a model of love based on divine mercy and the power to absolve in favor of another model that would appear to be unyielding, if not merciless. This model is formulated in the final lines of the text, which have often been read as a sign that Malte's appeal for love is never answered. The lines read, "He was now terribly difficult to love, and he felt that only One would be capable of it. But he was not yet willing [*Der aber wollte noch nicht*]" (260, *KA*, III: 635). The capitalization of the pronoun "One" has led more than one critic to infer that the figure unwilling to love is God himself. But the lines could be read in another manner that would be more consistent with the novel's exploration of a love that is not divided between subject and object. According to this reading, the One unwilling to love is no different than the one terribly difficult to love, the Prodigal Son himself. Grammar dictates that these two positions be held apart, but the novel turns this requirement to its advantage by presenting lover and beloved as hypothetical positions, opposing poles in an unfulfilled relation. Malte is "terribly difficult to love" because like Sappho, Bettina, and Abelone before him he is "not yet willing" to love anyone except a "no longer possible [lover] who had grown vast enough for [his] love" (242). In pursuing this impossible figure he "spreads himself out through everything"; he pours himself out into his notebooks to become an "impression that will transform itself" and a text that is the world or landscape of his heart. The legend of the Prodigal Son is an allegory of Malte's transformation into his notebooks or *Aufzeichnungen* where he persists as a lover like Sappho straining after the infinite. In an unpublished poem from 1906 titled "Vom Verlorenen Sohn" (The Prodigal Son), Rilke writes:

Jetzt aber laß mich, König, und geruh,  
 Wie Du mich einstmals nahmst, mich fortzugeben.  
 Du fragst an wen? – An alles. An mein Leben. – (*KA*, I:365)

[But let me be now, King. As you once deigned  
 to take me in, so now deign to let me go.  
 To whom, you ask. – To everything. To my life. –<sup>30</sup>]



682 **Notes**

1. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Jane Bannard Greene and M. D. Herter Norton, 2 vols. (New York: Norton, 1945–48), I:360. Translation modified slightly. For the original letter, see Rilke, *Briefe in zwei Bänden*, ed. Horst Nalewski (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1991), I:340. The English edition of the letters will hereafter be referred to as *Letters* in the notes; Nalewski's edition of Rilke's letters in the original will be referred to as *Briefe*.

2. Anthony Stephens, *Rilkes Malte Laurids Brigge: Strukturanalyse des erzählerischen Bewußtseins* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1974), 26.

3. The novel is frequently divided into three thematic clusters: Malte's experiences in Paris, his memories of his childhood, and his account of the diverse material he has read. Rilke himself identified these groups in a letter to his Polish translator Witold Hulewicz from November 1925 (*Letters*, II: 371; *Briefe*, II: 372). Winfried Eckel suggests that the division of the novel into two books may be more important than it appears given what he views as the novel's dialectical structure. See W. Eckel, *Wendung: Zum Prozeß der poetischen Reflexion im Werk Rilkes* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1994), 70–75. Maurice Blanchot also highlights the division of the text into two parts and suggests that the mystery of the work is that it continues after its fictional author, Malte, dies or descends into madness in the first book. See M. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. and intro. by Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 130–32. Andreas Huyssen also points to the differences between the novel's two books, albeit in critical terms, since for him the novel moves from a decidedly modern preoccupation with the urban homeless and poor to a romantic identification with grand lovers from the past. A. Huyssen, *Modernity and the Text: Revisions of German Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 123.

4. Martin Heidegger, "Wozu Dichter?" in *Holzwege*, 6th ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1980), 279. The English translation is from Heidegger, "Why Poets?," in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 212.

5. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duineser Elegien*, in Rilke, *Werke: Kommentierte Ausgabe in vier Bänden mit einem Supplementband*, ed. Manfred Engel et al., 4 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1996), II: 234. This edition will be referred to hereafter parenthetically in the text and in the notes as KA.

6. Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Tenth Elegy," in *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell, intro. by Robert Hass (1982; reprint, New York: Vintage, 1989), 211.

7. See in particular Rilke's letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé, dated 18 July 1903, which contains many of the same urban motifs and observations that appear in the first book of the novel. Several paragraphs in the letter discussing a man with a nervous twitch are reproduced almost verbatim in the novel. The original German letter is printed in *Rainer Maria Rilke / Lou Andreas-Salomé: Briefwechsel*, ed. Ernst Pfeiffer, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1975), 65–75. An English translation is included in *Rainer Maria Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé: The Correspondence*, trans. Edward Snow and Michael Winkler (New York: Norton, 2006), 50–57.

8. Käte Hamburger, *Rilke: Eine Einführung* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, 1976), 77.

9. Ulrich Fülleborn, "Form und Sinn der *Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*: Rilkes Prosa-buch und der moderne Roman," in *Deutsche Romantheorien: Beiträge zu einer historischen Poetik des Romans in Deutschland*, ed. and intro. by Reinhold Grimm (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum Verlag, 1968), 256.

10. Käte Hamburger was the first critic to point out the striking parallels between Malte's experience of anxiety in his youth and as an adult. See Hamburger, *Rilke: Eine Einführung*, 72. Andreas Huyssen has likewise remarked, "Memories of childhood past and urban present are rather uncannily intertwined in Malte's psyche, with one exacerbating the other. The text thus suggests a fundamental affinity between the haunting psychic aspects of Malte's early childhood experience and the disrupting fragmenting perceptions of the modern city. See A. Huyssen, "The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge," in *The Cambridge Companion to Rilke*, eds. Karen Leeder and Robert Vilain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 76.

11. Malte gets lost in a carnival crowd that he describes as a "viscous flood of humanity"; he then amplifies the liquid metaphor by stating that "laughter oozed from their mouths like pus from an open

wound." In Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. Stephen Mitchell, intro. by William H. Gass (1982; reprint, New York: Vintage, 1985), 48. The work will hereafter be cited parenthetically in the text and in the notes. Malte also attempts to illustrate fear by saying, "Like a beetle that someone has stepped on, you *gush out* of yourself" (74; my italics).

12. Rilke, Letter to Margot Sizzo, 6 January 1923, in *Letters*, II: 316. The German original reads, "Wie der Mond, so hat gewiß das Leben eine uns dauernd abgewendete Seite, die *nicht* sein Gegenteil ist, sondern seine Ergänzung zur Vollkommenheit, zur Vollzähligkeit, zu der wirklichen heilen und vollen Sphäre und Kugel des *Seins*," in *Briefe*, II: 268.

13. See Heidegger, "Wozu Dichter?," 298; in English translation, "Why Poets?," 226–27.

14. Rilke, *Letters*, II: 316; *Briefe*, II: 268.

15. Rilke, "The Eighth Elegy," in *Selected Poetry*, 193; German original in *KA*, II: 225.

16. Eckel, *Wendung*, 72–77.

17. Eckel, *Wendung*, 74.

18. Eleanor Honig Skoller interprets the episode as "a prime example (before the fact) of Lacan's mirror-stage" and adds, "[Malte] is thrust into the Imaginary—the realm of the specular—where what he sees is irreducibly separate from what he is and what he is is irrevocably connected to what he sees." See E. H. Skoller, "Threads in Three Sections: A Reading of the Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge," in *SubStance* 10, no. 3 (1981): 16.

19. See Emile Benveniste, "The Nature of Pronouns" and "Subjectivity in Language," in *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elisabeth Meek (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971), 217–22 and 223–30, respectively. In both essays Benveniste discusses the deictic function of the first-person, singular pronoun, which refers to the very discourse in which it is introduced.

20. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 131. Blanchot also examines the passage as the hidden center of the novel, which, according to him, Rilke inserted early in the work to see if the text could continue after its hero's death.

21. The inclusion of an editor's occasional notes in the novel only contributes to the fiction that there was once a writer named Malte Laurids Brigge who died and whose papers have been published posthumously. Rilke himself described the novel as the proverbial manuscript found in the attic in a letter to Manon zu Solms-Laubach from 11 April 1910: "It is only as if one found disordered papers in a drawer and just happened for the present to find no more and had to be content" (*Letters*, I: 364). In a first draft of the opening of the novel, Rilke played up the editor function. A first-person narrator recalls the time he spent with Malte, who has since disappeared, and expresses his commitment to writing down the remarkable stories that his departed friend told him. See *KA*, III: 639.

22. The editors of *Kommentierte Ausgabe* suggest this possibility, though it is by no means conclusive. See *KA*, III: 956.

23. George C. Schoolfield, "Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge," in *A Companion to the Works of Rilke*, eds. Erika A. Metzger and Michael M. Metzger (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 2001), 182.

24. Patrick Greaney, *Untimely Beggar: Poverty and Power from Baudelaire to Benjamin* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 95–99. For Nietzsche's thoughts on Dionysus's dismemberment and dispersal, see the tenth chapter in the *Birth of Tragedy* and especially the passage following passage:

In truth, however, the hero is the suffering Dionysus of the Mysteries, the god experiencing in himself the agonies of individuation, of whom wonderful myths tell that as a boy he was torn to pieces by the Titans and now is worshipped in this state as Zagreus. Thus it is intimated that his dismemberment, the properly Dionysian *suffering*, is like a transformation into air, water, earth and fire.

Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. with commentary by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), 73.

25. Rilke, Sonnet I: 26, in *Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. with intro. by David Young (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan Poetry in Translation, 1987), 53.

26. The song is a single poem but Malte separates it into two parts which follow each other in close succession.

684 27. Rilke, letter to Anton Kippenberg, 25 March 1910, in *Letters*, I: 361.

28. See, for instance, Rilke's letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé from 28 December 1911. Rilke writes:

Can you understand that after this book [*Malte Laurids Brigge*] I have been left behind just like a survivor, helpless in my inmost soul, no longer to be used? The nearer I came to the end of writing it, the more strongly did I feel that it would be an indescribable division, a high watershed, as I kept telling myself; but now, it turns out that all the water has flowed off toward the old side, and I am going down into an aridity [*und ich in eine Dürre heruntergeh*] that will not change. And if it were merely that: but the other fellow, the one who went under [*der Andere, der Untergegangene*], has somehow used me up, carried on the immense expenditure of his going under [*Untergang*] with the strength and materials of my life, there is nothing that was not in his hands, in his heart, he appropriated everything with the intensity of his despair; scarcely does a thing seem new to me before I discover the break in it, the rough place where he tore himself off.

*Letters*, II: 32–33 and *Briefe* I: 368. Rilke frequently refers in his letters to Malte's *Untergang* (demise, destruction, or descent).

29. Judith Ryan, "Hypothetisches Erzählen: Zur Funktion von Phantasie und Eimbildung in Rilkes 'Malte Laurids Brigge,'" in *Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. Rüdiger Görner (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1987), 245–84.

30. My translation.