

RAINER MARIA RILKE

The Evolution Of a Poet

It seems an unlikely story. An unhappy, somewhat affected young man from turn-of-the-century Prague begins his career as a highly imitative versifier. By dint of hard work and ascetic discipline, he becomes a poet, indeed the foremost European poet of his generation. He dies in 1926, but for the next 60 years, poets from all over the world—from Boris Pasternak in Russia to Randall Jarrell in America—claim him as their inspiration and model. This man, Rainer Maria Rilke (born in 1875), becomes known as the poet's poet of the 20th century. Here, Jeffery Paine tells how Rilke transformed himself and, so doing, helped chart the course of modern poetry.

by Jeffery M. Paine

Ask the question—or perhaps merely overhear it, for it's already asked frequently—who is the 20th century's greatest poet, and you will inevitably hear a variety of responses. W. B. Yeats is probably named most often, T. S. Eliot perhaps second, but a whole anthology of names eventually gets proposed.

Alter the question somewhat, however, to who is the greatest poet in a language other than English, and for the past 25 years in America and England there has been a nearly unanimous consensus.

Ten years ago, the London *Times Literary Supplement* called Rainer Maria Rilke "one of the greatest poets of all times." And during the past decade Rilke's reputation has, if anything, grown unabated.

In the United States, whole doctoral dissertations have investigated Rilke's influence on such poets as Theodore Roethke, Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath. Among poets themselves, Rilke seems firmly seated on a pedestal—a model of what the poet should be.

Yet, paradoxically, until the excellent, recent translations by Stephen Mitchell, only one volume of poetry, Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, was available in a decent, generally respected English translation (by J. B. Leishman and

A sketch of the 25-year-old Rilke in Moscow. The artist, Leonid Pasternak, was the father of the noted novelist Boris Pasternak. Rilke later described Russia as "the homeland of my instinctual being."



Stephen Spender); and regardless what other claims are made for it, no one can claim it is much longer than 30 pages.*

Rilke's English readers have fed their admiration on two prose works—a half-autobiographical novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, and Rilke's published *Letters*—and while both may be masterpieces of their kind, it is more the image of Rilke himself in them that has so tantalized and beguiled other writers. In the history of poetry, perhaps no one else's personality ever exerted quite the influence Rilke's did and does. It seems to be for this century what the anonymous troubador's was for the Middle Ages—the proper persona for a poet. Rilke's life sometimes appears to be the answer itself to what, for many poets of this century, has become a most vexing question.

That question is, of course, what remains to be written?

Even as the poet's tools—rhyme, meter, simile—came one by one to seem superfluous, so likewise did the poetical subjects—nature's gran-

*Stephen Mitchell has translated *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke* (1982), *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1983), and, most recently, the *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1985).

deur, the morals of experience, lovers' exquisite emotions—become obsolete, old hat. The question of what could suffice as a new matter for poetry forms the point of departure for nearly every poet we call modern. In "Of Modern Poetry," Wallace Stevens stated the problem succinctly:

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
 What will suffice. It has not always had
 To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
 Was in the script.

Then the theatre was changed
 To something else. Its past was a souvenir.

It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
 It has to face the men of the time and to meet
 The women of the time. It has to think about war
 And it has to find what will suffice. It has
 To construct a new stage. . . .

Part of Rilke's appeal to other writers, his haunting image, is that his attempts to conduct his life in a novel, unique way seemed to create that new stage—a stage, a way of life, in which the "poetic" would materialize almost automatically. Here, T. S. Eliot, a fastidious prim clerk in an office, or W. B. Yeats, with his grandiose old-fashioned themes of magic and Irish rebel nationalism, offer little help.

Rilke's life, by contrast, can be taken almost as an argument: Only conduct yourself in a certain way—purely, ascetically, attentively—and the prose objects of the world will swim into your vision already half-formed into poetry.

In a well-known poem, Rilke describes an ancient Greek statue of Apollo objectively, impersonally, but the last line abruptly alters into a personal command: *Du musst Dein Leben ändern* ("You must change your life"). In other words, truly observe the statue, and it will compel you to alter your existence. Many of Rilke's followers have preferred reading this message in reverse: If they changed their lives, then their observations might on their own heighten into poetry.

So, here is a simple, appealing answer to how to make art when it has all been made. Rilke, of course, did not originate this doctrine of artistic metamorphosis. Yeats generalized that all writers developed, via their art, into "a new species of man." Yet unlike any writer before him, Rilke was

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the first to leave a detailed record of exactly how he tutored himself into being a different person, a person who could "see" things that he could subsequently write about. By providing this example, Rilke became—in the minds of many admirers—the very definition of a poet.

Yet something is tricky here: That poetry demands not only a labor at one's desk but also a labor away from it creates, at the very least, a terrible strain. Rilke's capacities as a writer may have enlarged continually, but in America those poets who most wanted to emulate him—among them John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath—all met unhappy ends, coming at last to despondency, diminution of ability, increases in alcohol consumed, or death by their own hand, until suicide is now considered an occupational hazard in poetry.

We need to take a closer look at Rilke's life, at exactly how he transformed his experience, to understand why the result—which could have been perilously bleak—in his case proved to be fruitful.

'Early Pain and Bitter Experience'

Anyone who met Rainer Maria Rilke in the latter years of his life may have felt he was shaking hands with European culture in human form. Every sentence Rilke spoke sounded filtered through layers of reflection, prisms of meaning, screens of nuances, till everything gross or mundane was eloquently discarded. Rilke appeared not to come from anywhere so much as to represent the essence of everywhere. In one five-year period he changed his residence 25 times, mainly among the various chateaux and palaces that soft-voiced countesses or sophisticated princesses would place at his disposal. Name almost any European language—English, French, Italian, Swedish, Russian, Danish—and Rilke had done translations from them. From old Count Tolstoy on, almost every major writer and artist on the continent—Auguste Rodin, Paul Valéry, Paul Klee, Thomas Mann, Sergei Diaghilev, Herman Hesse, André Gide, Boris Pasternak—seemed at one point intimately involved with Rilke. Rilke was among the very first to recognize Franz Kafka's writing; to recognize Pablo Picasso as a great painter; to acknowledge Marcel Proust as a great writer.

Where did this rare and ultimate flower of civilization come from?

From conditions close to misery. From, to be more precise, a dismal, negligible background in the declining Austro-Hungarian empire; from a just barely "middle-class" flat in Prague where the air was claustrophobic from a marriage gone bad, from economies and frustrations, from cheap little pretensions.

In that flat, on December 4, 1875, a mismatched couple obtained a new weapon with which to fight and spite each other: A son, baptized René Maria, was born to them. (Only much later, after he began to remake himself, would he change René to Rainer.) The new father, Josef Rilke, was already a failure, a minor railway official whose discontented dreams all pointed backward to when, for a brief spell of glory, he had served in



A photograph of Lou Andreas-Salomé (1861–1937), Rilke's mistress and spiritual counselor. Thirteen years the poet's senior, she had earlier been a close friend of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and later became a student of Sigmund Freud.

the army. So from the father's viewpoint, the son would naturally grow up to be a soldier.

Thirteen years younger than her husband, the new mother, Phia, considered herself a sensitive soul, far superior to her contemptible husband. To say that she was pretentious is to understate matters. She was the kind of person who, before company arrived, would secretly siphon *vin ordinaire* into expensive, resplendently labeled wine bottles. She adored going to the theater, and adored that more glorious theater, the Catholic Church. But theatrically the most delicious were her own self-dramatizations. She apparently had no compunction against raising the baby in girl's clothing, almost as a girl, to substitute for an earlier daughter who had died in infancy.

To be paraded in girlie frocks hardly makes the ideal preparation for military school. At school, young Rilke had neither the stamina nor adaptability to be anything but tormented and tortured by schoolmates who found the little sissy a perfect butt for their often brutal pranks. If a child may be posited with having a nature or character of his own, Josef and Phia Rilke managed to violate their son's at every point. Summing up Rilke's youth, his biographer E. M. Butler cited the analogy of a pearl produced by the stimulus of a disease.

Rilke did suffer an unhappy upbringing; actually, for a future poet it had a lot to recommend it. Alternately fawned over and ignored by his mother, he migrated, not surprisingly, into a rich, solitary world of fantasies. Lacking familial respect, he felt no compulsion to accept the conven-

tional formulas of the good and true and right.

Painful discrepancies and his own suffering made what his mother and father and teachers pretended to believe seem hollow. The staples of childhood—home, acceptance of social norms, and Christianity—Rilke later simply dismissed: “Who can enter a doll’s house on which the doors and walls are only painted?”

Now a perceptive and especially brilliant man, if he rigorously shuns family and property and country and organized religion, may well stray into discovering something new. George Bernard Shaw once called the fatal error of poets their seeking comfort in families and fireside. Into this error, if it is one, Rilke scarcely lapsed at all.

By the time he was 19, it was probably inevitable that Rilke would become a poet and, equally inevitable, a bad one. A year later, in 1896, he responded to a poll asking “What made you a writer?” with the answer “Early pain and bitter experience.” He must transmute the torment left over from childhood, alchemically, into art or else seemingly it would destroy him. This gave him a reason to write but scarcely anything to write about. For he dared not to touch, not for years yet, that open sore of memories over which the scar tissue was only then forming.

Instead, at 19, he selected any—every—pretty subject, so long as it was sentimental and safely derivative. He dashed off his poems rapidly, facily, this man who would later devote a decade to a single poem. He gushed whole volumes about loving, as virgins sometimes like to do, this same Rilke who later described love as the most difficult work possible. Which writers did he then imitate? Anyone he happened to read. In many cases, as with the Danish writer Jens Peter Jacobsen or the Russians, “imitation” is a gentle word; *plagiarism* more accurate. But one might precisely say that he seemed to confuse himself with his models.

A Philosopher-Mistress

Halfheartedly, Rilke enrolled as a student at a Prague university, only to find the coursework unendurably dull. To remedy the situation, he would move, in 1896, to Munich, to become again a halfhearted student and to be bored by his studies there. He remained officially enrolled only to satisfy a provision in his uncle’s will, which left him a modest stipend. Unofficially, of course, Rilke devoted himself, with wholehearted ferocity, to writing imitative poetry.

That Rilke’s earliest poetry was so bad provided the only slim hint that it might one day be good. For though he gave himself heart and soul to imitation, he wasn’t very successful at it. He was rather like an inept draftsman who can’t pull it off even when using tracing paper. Or, put differently, although he could imitate other writers, he could not learn from them. His latent talent was, for the moment, preserved and protected in a cocoon of literary ignorance. A few years later he would discover the type of artist that could help and instruct him—not writers, but visual

artists whose sculptures and paintings taught him how to write.

That Rilke learned almost nothing from the literature of his time may be counted good fortune, since that literature hummed with home truths and illuminating morals. Rilke never mastered this knack of applying ethical judgments to conduct; if he had, given his extreme introspection, his imagination might have become stunted through self-judgment by moral platitude. Lacking the ethical glue, his varied experiments in conduct—for at 19 he was a derivative in everyday matters as in writing—did not stick. Although he later dressed with fastidious formality, he then padded about in sandals, a kind of proto-hippy.

What Rilke needed to steady him, or at least what he found, was a philosopher-mistress. Moving to Munich and then to Berlin, the 22-year-old Rilke met, and soon became the lover of, Lou Andreas-Salomé. Although a writer herself, Lou Salomé left behind no major work that preserves her memory; rather her reputation as a remarkable woman floats like a rumor or ghost among the famous names—Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Thomas Mann—with which hers, as friend or lover, was once linked. In 1897, when she met Rilke, she already had behind her Nietzsche's passionate admiration. Nietzsche had said, "Lou is by far the *smartest* person I ever knew," an assessment perhaps best illustrated by the fact that she had rejected all of his advances.

Before he knew Lou, Rilke had in various flirtations exchanged sugary endearments; it was quite another matter to hear lispings past your lover's lips the tenets of Nietzschean philosophy. Rilke had previously enjoyed frittering time away in congenial editorial offices or coffeehouses; Nietzsche preached solitude away from the herd. Rilke had written great quantities of poetry with great ease; Nietzsche said one should value the most difficult. Guided by a Nietzschean mistress, Rilke tempered his facile enthusiasms and uncontrolled exultations, all that romanticized cloudiness of his early youth. The poet's transformation had begun.

Snubbed by Tolstoy

Yet no erotically charged liaison contains at its libidinal center *Also sprach Zarathustra*, not even this one. To experience, when hardly more than a homely youth, sexual acceptance by an intelligent, amorously expert, mature woman gave him a special confidence in the possibilities of actual life. As though he were a new man, he changed his name—from René to Rainer—and altered his handwriting into an elegant, graceful script reminiscent of Lou's. Many years later he was to write her, "If I belonged to you for some years it was because you represented absolute reality for me for the first time. . . . The world lost its clouded aspect, the flowing together and dissolving, so typical of my first poor verses. . . because I was fortunate enough to meet you."

There was the incidental matter that Lou also had a husband. He seemed just that—an incidental matter. Their friends nicknamed him

"Lou-mann." Certainly Lou-mann, or rather Professor Andreas, raised no objection when Rilke accompanied them on their Russian trip in 1899; nor any objection the next year when Lou and Rilke undertook a longer journey to Russia, this time leaving him behind. It was on this second journey that occurred their infamous meeting with Tolstoy at the novelist's estate, Yasnaya Polyana.

In letters written at the time, Rilke stage-lit that meeting in a rosy, melodramatic glow: Tolstoy "immediately recognized" them, greeted them warmly, was "utterly concerned" for them; and turning his back on his family and his meal, Tolstoy whisked them off on an intimate ramble, placing that exclusive hour "in our hands like an unhopd-for gift." This diplomatic description tactfully obscured the fact that Rilke and Lou had burst in uninvited on Tolstoy, who failed to recognize them, who didn't even offer them a cup of coffee, but left them trailing after him as he hobbled off on his cane into the windy day.

Passing through Wedlock

Rilke brooded over this rebuff for 20 years, indeed brooded quite skillfully: Tragedy turned into comedy. Rilke eventually saw his encounter with Tolstoy as a kind of farce, the crude comedy of living divorced from art. For himself Rilke determined that, regardless of the sacrifices, he would never turn into such a blustering, all-too-human figure once he quit his writing desk.

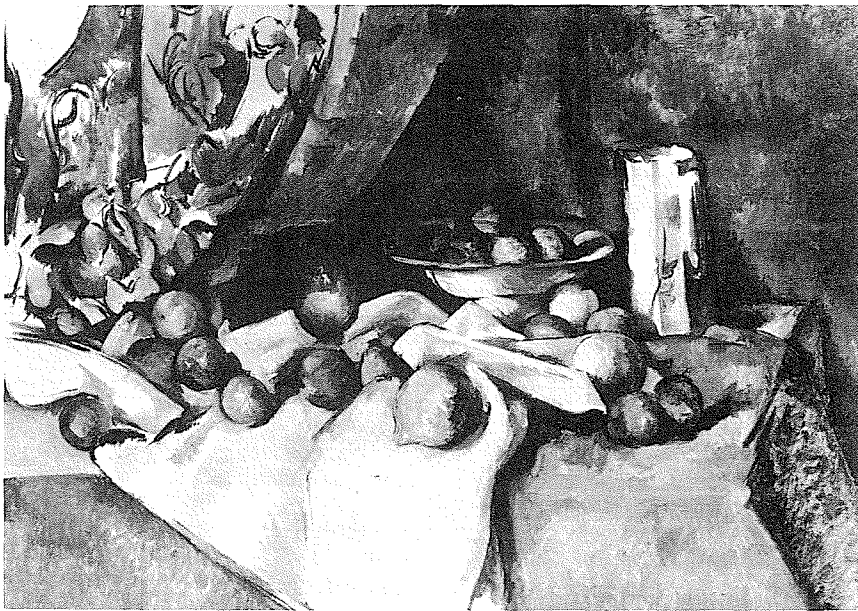
Aside from the mishap with Tolstoy, pre-revolutionary Russia enchanted Rilke. Russia became his symbol of a wholeness and intimacy not yet trivialized into the pragmatic hodgepodge characteristic of Western cities. "Russian people," Rilke wrote in a letter, "seem to live fragments of endlessly long and powerful life spans, and even if they linger in them only a moment, there still lie over these minutes the dimensions of gigantic intentions and unhurried developments . . ." Many critics have pointed out, however, that Rilke's spiritual peasants—glimpsed, as it were, from the speeding train compartment of a six-month visit—seem all too cleanly shaven of the narrow suspiciousness, vice, and idleness that provoked such dismay among Russian writers, including Tolstoy. But Rilke's Russia is one-sided in the way Blake's Golgonooza or Yeats's Byzantium are one-sided. Russia became, in his *The Book of Hours* (1905), more a metaphor for idealized life than a geographical country—and indeed, so idealized that Rilke wrote the book's poetical, mystical generalities not as Rilke but masked in the persona of a Russian monk.

After his Russian journey came the one event in Rilke's life that he never sought to transform into literature. That event was his marriage. In 1901 Rilke married a young sculptress, Clara Westhoff, whom he had met at a return-to-nature artist colony near Bremen. Judged solely by their letters, it would seem Rilke and Clara married in order to write each other passionately about the weather. Searching for a more likely explanation,

others have noted, for example, that Clara was pregnant. (A daughter, Ruth, was born seven months later.) Another theory has Rilke on the rebound from an unrequited passion for painter Paula Modersohn-Becker. (Whereas Rilke mailed Paula Becker the works of his favorite author, he sent Clara Westhoff a sample package of Quaker Oats with the tip that a Do-All pot from a firm in California would make the risk of burning the oatmeal almost negligible.) The more likely truth is that young men, and young women, too, generally marry. Another familiar truth is that the best way to ascertain you don't want to get married is to get married.

Clara possessed a wan resemblance to the great Lou, and Rilke knew how to prepare simple meals. On more fragile foundations than this, others have made apparent successes of their marriage. But a wife, a baby daughter, the financial burden of "a quiet house of my own," and so many new cares and responsibilities all had a way of interrupting his letter writing—which was a nuisance, in fact unacceptable.

Sensing the danger to his writing, Rilke started backing out of wedlock and doing it in a most Rilkean way: He redefined the institution. Marriage meant "two people protecting one another's solitude," which is how some less imaginative folk have defined divorce. Entering marriage, Rilke seemed modest and ineffectual, asking of life only to live it in a cottage with a little wife and daughter. Exiting marriage, he displayed a



Still Life with Apples (1895-98) by Paul Cézanne. Rilke admired Cézanne's solitary work habits and the "limitless objectivity" of his paintings.

determination and firmness—though he expressed it rather delicately as solicitude for Clara and Ruth—to let his family starve rather than to let himself in for poetry-killing drudgery.

The rationale by which Rilke backed out of the marriage worked only too well. Despite carrying around an address book that eventually would contain 1,200 names, henceforth solitude would be his *modus vivendi*; henceforth “people” would represent the false way. “Then if people chance to be present [he wrote to Lou Andreas-Salomé], they offer me the relief of being able to be more or less the person they take me for, without being too particular about my really existing. How often does it not happen that I step out of my room somehow like a chaos, and outside, someone being aware of me, find a poise that is actually his, and the next moment, to my amazement, am expressing well-formed things, while just before everything in my entire consciousness was utterly amorphous. . . . In this sense people will always be the false way for me. . . .” The above reasoning, lacking venom, lacking any hostility, may exhibit one of the rarer grounds for separation. Yet, if he exiled his wife and baby almost blithely, he committed himself equally to exile, harder, more ascetic.

Rodin's Lessons

In separating, Clara provided her husband with something the marriage never had: a direction. She had told Rilke about her former teacher, a sculptor working in a new and important style, and Rilke now made Paris his destination, to write a monograph on this sculptor. Both the city and the man, Paris and Auguste Rodin, were to affect Rilke immensely. Once there, Rilke's character was too exposed, too entirely empathetic, not to identify with all that the underside of Paris coughed up in an endless, terrible stream before his vision: the living wrecks, battered and miserable, the diseased, the paralyzed and the terrorized, so much poverty, the sooty ugliness, all the tics and spasms of human existence out of control.

This horror formed an excellent objective corollary for the quite different horror he had long felt within himself. Paris was a stimulant unequaled before. So much more flooded before Rilke to note, to reckon with—the streets ran toward him “viscid with humanity”—until their morbid and fascinating contents drowned that earlier genteel mysticism of the pseudo-Russian monk. “For the terrible thing,” Rilke's fictional persona in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910) says of Paris, is “that I did recognize it. I recognize everything here, and that is why it goes right into me: It is at home in me.” He would situate the beginnings of this, his only novel, in Paris. And one of its key sentences is “I am learning to see.” Before Paris, Rilke's poetry, diaries, and letters sound as though reality were, for him, a fairy-tale-like dream of elusive wispiness. Paris, the “terrible city,” cured him of that. Reality acquired a harder edge.

Rilke had originally sought out Rodin as the subject for a monograph, but he soon raised the prolific sculptor to the status of oracle. In his letters,

Two figures from Auguste Rodin's Gates of Hell sketches, drawn during the early 1880s. Rilke came to Paris in 1902 to write a monograph about the sculptor, whom he hailed as the perfect artist.



Rilke's salutations alone record his progress through awe, first addressing Rodin as "*Honoré maître*," then advancing to "*Mon cher maître*," next escalating to "*Mon cher grand maître*," and finally exploding to "*Mon grand ami et cher maître*."

Any relationship between them was destined, perhaps, to be unbalanced: When they met, Rodin was 62 and Rilke 27; Rodin long famous and Rilke almost unknown; Rodin's sculptures lay sprawling all around Rilke while Rilke's German poetry remained incomprehensible and invisible to Rodin. Things, nevertheless, went swimmingly at first, with Rilke employed as an unpaid secretary, handling Rodin's correspondence. But Rilke's combination of idolizing, punctilio, and exquisite sensibility was not exactly unobtrusive, and, on the slightest pretext, Rodin dismissed him. It was humiliating, of course, with its troubling echoes of the Tolstoy fiasco, yet Rilke had already learned the lessons he needed from Rodin.

Not surprisingly, these were quite Rilkean lessons. Rodin told him, "*Il faut avoir une femme*." Obviously the statement did not nor could not mean—since Rilke was then breaking up his marriage—"It is necessary to have a woman." Rilke rather took its implication to be that daily necessity, represented by wives and housekeeping, should simply take care of itself, should be, in other words, an adjunct to art. (As an adjunct to art, his own

marriage to Clara Westhoff never required the vulgar finality of abrupt divorce; rather he simply transformed it into another artistic adjunct, letters and correspondence, which gradually petered out.) Great men put everything into their art, Rilke concluded, till their lives become "stunted like an organ they no longer need."

Although this conclusion ignored that for Rodin, with his vigor, work overflowed to enrich relationships, it was the conclusion Rilke needed. Up to then, Rilke had remained the young poet stamping his feet, waiting for inspiration to switch on the urge to write. Rodin was the demonstration that toil could, indeed should, take over for inspiration. Rilke determined to shut himself up daily to work, no matter what the external circumstances, and to make the appropriate gestures when work seemed impossible. Without this decision, the *New Poems* (1907–08) and *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* could not have been accomplished.

This decision would increase the loneliness, the ascetic withdrawal, the strain of hyperconsciousness. Still, it somehow suited him for whom words were possible and relationships often unmanageable. When Rilke later lamented to his publisher's wife that his destiny was to have none, that his fate was to have no fate, he was essentially relating a success story.

Rilke learned another, more technical lesson from Rodin's sculptures, from the way they emphasized surface texture (the *modelé*) over composition or pose, a lesson that Rilke translated and generalized into a dictum: Things are more important than ideas. To *see* the thing, rather than representing emotion or an idea, was how Rodin cracked the old aesthetic mold—or so Rilke thought. With this for his inspiration, he began formulating his fundamental task.

Rilke defined this task in relation to a world that was becoming, he believed, in one sense, less visible: The perceived architecture of the everyday was ceasing to correspond to what intimately, personally mattered. The more commonplace or wholesale-manufactured the surface around one becomes, the greater the need is to look deeply, intensely in order for the viewer to have any genuine response. In the *New Poems*, the key to experience seems contained in the act of seeing. For its most famous poem, "The Panther," Rilke appears to have stared at the cage at the Paris zoo until he could empathize with the animal's inner being:

His vision, from the constantly passing bars,
has grown so weary that it cannot hold
anything else. It seems to him there are
a thousand bars; and behind the bars, no world.

As he paces in cramped circles, over and over,
the movement of his powerful soft strides
is like a ritual dance around a center
in which a mighty will stands paralyzed.

Only at times, the curtain of the pupils
 lifts, quietly—.An image enters in,
 rushes down through the tensed, arrested muscles,
 plunges into the heart and is gone.

In the *New Poems* Rilke endeavored to re-see things (“all things without exception”), to experience them so intensely, to master them so thoroughly that internal human complexities would become visible in them.

With the completion of the *New Poems*, Rilke graduated from his apprenticeship. His work habits, his sense of purpose, his approach to subjects, even the image of himself developed in writing the *New Poems*—all point toward *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* and beyond to his masterpiece, the *Duino Elegies* (1923).

Of the two works, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* is the easier in which to discern Rilke’s own shape. *The Notebooks* might even pass for a *Bildungsroman*, the fictional education of, in this case, someone not fictional. Parts of *The Notebooks*, though, aren’t a *Roman*, or novel, at all but Rilke’s rummaging through and reflecting about odd old volumes, arcane legends recorded to corroborate or objectify his elusive insights. The obscure nuns and noblewomen he read about, who had loved in spite of absence and indifference: Their unrequited love suggested an independence of “the other” that gave, in photographic negative, his own distaste for dailiness and commitment in intimate relationships.

The *Duino Elegies* begins where the *Bildung* ends:

We arrange it [our home among objects]. It breaks down.
 We rearrange it, then break down ourselves.

The *Elegies* gains its uncanny power because it studies the everyday, the familiar, to rearrange it unfamiliarly. If someone conjured a very modern pencil—one guided by a hand concerned only with ambition, easy comforts, and self-centered triumphs—sketching what a person is, then what the *Elegies* does is to erase that outline and return man to other contexts, to stranger and larger purposes. Religions often taught that mortals had two homes, one earthly, one divine. In the *Duino Elegies*, that “second home,” however, becomes only a visionary refocusing, a visual realignment of the first.

Rilke became increasingly anti-Christian; still his poetry resembles that of a person who has forgotten the name of God but is determined to rediscover the relevant experiences, this time without using any kind of bible. Exploration of the joy, love, and suffering that once were directed toward the divinity now took the place of divinity. Wallace Stevens believed modern poetry should provide the pleasures of faith in an age of unbelief. Rilke’s attempt was more radical, increasingly denuding his po-

etry of any belief even as he attempted to create experiences that would have once been classified as holy.

The *Elegies* was begun in 1912, at his friend Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis's Castle Duino—begun in a storm of inspiration. It was finished at an isolated chateau in Switzerland in 1922—finished equally in a fury of writing. Having labored so hard and long, or not labored (World War I sickened him beyond writing), he completed the *Elegies* only to discover that he had been given something more, a "bonus." In the release of finishing, Rilke dashed off 59 sonnets within a month almost without effort. Unlike the *Elegies*, the *Sonnets to Orpheus* is full of generalized affirmations, rather like his early poetry, but with a maturer insight and skill gained while laboring over the *Elegies*.

A Solitary Pinnacle

As for Rilke's own life—well, the skeleton in the closet may be indicated by the clothes in the closet. As a young poet Rilke had roamed about, a contemporary wrote, "wearing an old-world frock coat, black cravat, and broad-brimmed hat, clasping a long stemmed iris and smiling, oblivious of the passersby, a forlorn smile into ineffable horizons." Now in his maturity, he dressed camouflaged, as did Eliot and Valéry, in the subfusc pomp of the conservative businessman. As with his prosody, so with his haberdashery: Rilke had put on modernism.

Yet Rilke outfitted himself immaculately, and was mannered impeccably, to cover an existence unconventional in the extreme. He never settled in one place, never settled down with another person. Although, as his fame grew, he was feted and indulged everywhere, his life went bereft of that basic comfort of a middle ground, cosy and reassuring and dulling, in which a job, fixed residence, wife, and regular schedules might have insulated him.

Even with his numerous lovers, the place Rilke liked best to meet these women, the ideal rendezvous, was in a letter. (Letters made an excellent medium for Rilke, because in them an event and interpretation of the event are the same, just as intimacy and distance are one.) Yet this very aloneness, his aloofness, helps accounts for the originality in his perceptions. He had jerkily uprooted himself from regular patterns, so that upon quite ordinary objects his attention, like some x-ray lantern or alien eye, lighted entirely new perspectives.

Rilke knew that such a mode of existence as his led, often as not, straight to psychoanalysis. Incapable of holding a job, incapable of sustaining a love relationship, prone to anxiety and depression, with abundant outcroppings of psychosomatic symptoms—he was a psychiatrist's pin-up. Yet long before he had heard of Freud, Rilke declared that it scarcely mattered whether one were happy. And after his major works were achieved, Rilke was, from a Freudian viewpoint, no more "cured" than at the onset: *Functioning*—to measure it by intimate relationships, pro-

longed work, or healthy habits—was for him as intermittent and haphazard as ever. But then Rilke never wished to be cured. The pleasing simplification, the gratifying control of disruptive and embarrassing characteristics, might help immensely in daily life but might also leave him with a disinfected soul no better for writing. His well-known phrasing of this was that to drive out his devils might drive out his angels, too.

Rilke refused psychotherapy on the grounds that it was appropriate only "if I were truly serious about *not writing any more*." Besides, Rilke was already transformed, transformed the way he had wanted: changed from the awkward boy in Prague, from the novitiate-lover of Lou Salomé, from the wispy sentimentalist who married Clara Westhoff, from the flowery disciple of Rodin, and changed—to alter one of Rilke's metaphors—into the most elaborate, gilded, efficient dictating machine for recording poetry ever invented.

So little, so very little, was left over after and apart from the work, and that little bit, this little biography, paraded about as a kind of caricature of the work. Rilke's maturity, in this regard, resembles that of another solitary pinnacle, Henry James. Both men made the most charming of hosts and guests, so a hundred sources definitely agree, and yet both were finally, slightly grotesque. Henry James performing a daily task, such as asking for directions, would enmesh it in such an inadvertent parody of the Jamesian style that not even Max Beerbohm could have improved on it. Rainer Maria Rilke, complaining to a lady companion of her driving too fast, ennobled his complaint with such charged loftiness that she had difficulty deciphering what he meant at all.

This travesty life, which had become a second-rate paraphrase of his work, caused a perhaps natural sequence of reactions in the poet Paul Valéry, who was at first dismayed at Rilke's monstrous, gorgeous solitude, then subsequently amazed at the prodigies it was producing.

Rilke died of leukemia on December 29, 1926, at age 51, in a sanatorium near Geneva. He had become, in his last years, more humorous, more accepting, more visionary, full of projects and plans, and in the end surprised—as Henry James had been—that a consciousness grown so extremely rich seemed to be facing extinction.
