Bert Schreurs

**Rilke, Rainer Maria (1875-1926)**

Rilke was a pre-eminent German-speaking poet of the beginning of the twentieth century. His early poetical works were still conventional and bathed in neo-romantic sentimentality. In *Das Stundenbuch (The Book of Hours,* 1899-1903) he found his own voice, praising a pantheistic god as the immanent principle of life in all things. Under the influence of the sculptor Rodin and the painter Cézanne he wrote *Neue Gedichte (New Poems,* 1902-1907), his so-called "thing poems", in which he tried to view the essence of a thing, turning it into a symbol for an unknown inner reality. His disturbing experience of human misery in Paris was reflected in *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge (The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge,* 1904-1910). After completing this novel, which took the form of a diary, he fell into a deep crisis, as he came to doubt whether at all the poetic word could disclose reality. Regaining that belief, Rilke in later years tried to preserve the lyrical expressiveness of poetry and the visible forms of things, for example in his *Duineser Elegien (Duino Elegies*, 1912-1922), in which he addressed a numinous angel as a symbol for the ineffable. In his final works, which include *Die Sonette an Orpheus (The Sonnets to Orpheus,* 1922) he tried to spiritualize the world through the poetic word.

Rilke was born in Prague, which at that time belonged to Austria-Hungary. He had the Austrian nationality and like his contemporary Franz Kafka he was a member of the town's German-speaking minority. In 1895 he started studying literature, history of art and philosophy in Prague and continued his studies in Munich. His early poetical works do not surpass the level of conventional, epigonic poetry and wallow in neo-romantic sentimentality. Even the short work of prose *Die Weise von Liebe und Tod des Cornets Christoph Rilke (The Lay of the Love and Death of Cornet Christoph Rilke,* 1899), which generations of Rilke-readers would adore, is deeply indebted to Jugendstil, the German variant of Art Nouveau.

In 1899 and 1900 Rilke visited Russia twice, where he met Tolstoi. His Russian experience was reflected in *The Book of Hours*, which was inspired on the Catholic breviary. In this work the poet found his own voice and put it in the mouth of a Russian monk and icon painter. This lyrical I addresses a pantheistic god, who in an endless stream of metaphors and comparisons is praised as the immanent principle of life in all things. *The Book of Hours* should however not be considered as a piece of religious confessional poetry, but rather as an attempt at emotional fusion of the lyrical I with the world.

In 1900 Rilke joined the artists' colony of Worpswede in northern Germany, where he met the sculptress Clara Westhoff. They married in 1901 and soon their daughter Ruth was born. As they were however not able to support themselves, the household was dissolved. In 1902 Rilke left for Paris with the intention of writing a monograph on the French sculptor Rodin, for whom he would work as a private secretary from 1905 till 1906. The acquaintance with Rodin marked a turning point in the poet's artistic development: "Il faut travailler toujours" (You should always work), the master impressed on him. This sustained work ethic resulted in the *New Poems*. In this work the romantic fusion of the lyrical I with the outer world, that was still characteristic of *The Book of Hours*, gives way to a new artistic procedure: "I am learning to see", says Malte Laurids Brigge, the poet's alter ego. What he is learning to see, is the mysterious nature of things, which he can no longer thoughtlessly identify with. From this new way of seeing, that bears comparison with Husserl's phenomenological "Wesensschau" (intuition of essences), famous poems like "Der Panther" (The Panther)emerge. Animals and human archetypes, land- and cityscapes, works of art and mythological figures are thus viewed in their essence. These poems are by no means realistic descriptions, but rather attempts of the poet to recognize his own alterity in the irreducible otherness of things. In this way the outer world no longer appears as an emanation, but rather as a symbol or "chiffre" of the subject.

In 1907 Rilke repeatedly visited the Paris 'Salon d'Automne', where he was overwhelmed by the works of Paul Cézanne. In these postimpressionist paintings he found his ideal of "das sachliche Sagen" (the thingly utterance), i.e. the radical transformation of reality into art, realised. Cézanne would thus become the great inspirator of *Der Neuen Gedichte anderer Teil (The New Poems' Other Part,* 1907-1908). If Paris brought Rilke to mastery, it also distressed him by its human misery. This disturbing experience of the modern metropolis was reflected in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, a novel in the form of a diary.

After completing the *Malte*, Rilke fell into a deep crisis that challenged his artistic credo: both the sentimental lyricism of his early work and the "thing-poems" of his Paris period were still based on the belief that the poetic word can disclose reality and bridge the gap between subject and world. Now, however, it dawned on him that the meaningfulness of language is highly precarious and always threatened by loss of meaning. This insight he shared with the young generation of artists of the early twentieth century. But whereas the expressionists and abstractionists would deform and fragment language as well as reality and create images of their existential fear and self-alienation out of those fragments, Rilke tried to preserve both the lyrical expression of the subject and the visible form of things. This is the poetic intention of his *Duino Elegies*. The angel whom they address has little in common with the biblical messenger, but rather serves as a symbol for the ineffable. Faced with a numinous cosmos the poet considered it his ultimate task to "say the things", which meant to him: to offer a last refuge to the visible materialisations of human feeling by means of a poetic transformation into the inner self.

In *The Sonnets to Orpheus* and the rest of his late work Rilke tried to practise this transformational expression. The mythical singer Orpheus, to whom the entire nature listened, symbolizes this interiorization and spiritualization of the world through the poetic word.

**List of works**

*Complete works:*

Rilke, R.M. (1976) *Sämtliche Werke. Werkausgabe*, Frankfurt am Main: Insel.

*Major works:*

The Book of Images (1902)

Auguste Rodin (1903)

The Lay of the Love and Death of Cornet Christoph Rilke (1904)

The Book of Hours (1905)

New Poems (1907)

The New Poems' Other Part (1908)

The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge (1910)

The Sonnets to Orpheus (1923)

Duino Elegies (1923)

**Further Reading**

Engel, M. and Lauterbach, D. (ed.) (2004) *Rilke-Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, Stuttgart: Metzler.

Leeder, K. and Vilain, R. (ed.) (2010) *The Cambridge Companion to Rilke*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Paratextual Material**

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Photo of Rilke:

<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ARainer_Maria_Rilke%2C_1900.jpg>

Videos:

From the film "Awakenings":

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_hBuiGkm1E>

Mark Adams PhD on Rilke:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ot3nwPFpY60>

"Every angel is terrifying": The 2nd Duino Elegy of Rilke

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ri0mFVK4i-c>