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CHAPTER I

Introduction

I

This is a psychological study of Rainer Maria Rilke's life and writings. Beginning with his novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, published in 1910, I explore the relationship between illness and genius in the poet and his work, a subject to which he returned time and again. His letters describing his experiences when he first came to Paris in 1902 reveal that the anxieties which bring Malte, the main character of the novel, close to psychosis, plagued Rilke himself. The letters and *The Notebooks* show that Rilke felt that he was losing his sanity. In the summer of 1903 he wrote to Lou Andreas-Salomé, his old friend, lover, and acknowledged surrogate mother, imploring her to help him, declaring that she alone knew who he was and could tell him what he need and need not fear. Salomé had cut off all communication when he decided to marry in February 1901, but she had also promised that she would help him if he should be in dire need at some time in the future. Answering his appeal, she expressed surprise at the maturity of the gifts and skills revealed by his descriptions of his frightening experiences in Paris. She assured him he was mistaken in believing that he would be destroyed by mental illness. The mastery, artistic cunning, and understanding which his letters disclosed clearly distinguished him from the helpless victims of illness with whom he was identifying himself. In the first few months of the following year, encouraged by her praise, Rilke began *The Notebooks*, drawing upon the experiences he had described in his letters to

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her. Some passages of this memorable novel differ but little from those anguished letters.

The Notebooks expresses the belief that it might be necessary for “every meaning” to “dissolve like a cloud and fall down like rain,” necessary, that is, to endure something like mental disintegration or dying to be able to “see everything differently.” A poet might have to risk undergoing a process of fragmentation closely resembling the onset of psychosis (we would say “schizophrenia,” but the term was not introduced until 1911, the year after Rilke completed his novel)¹ before his hand would “write words that are not mine,” “that other interpretation.”² Such experiences gave rise to “agony” and “disconsolations”; they were also sources of “most painful insights” and “a negative mold” from which the poet hoped to cast “real still things,” works of art, “that it is serenity and freedom to create and from which, when they exist, reassurance emanates. . . .”³

Obviously these ideas raise questions for anyone writing a study of Rilke and his work, or interested in the psychology of his genius. With such questions in mind and with help from a number of psychologists and psychoanalysts, I attempt to define the nature of the emotional illness which often preoccupied the poet, its complex relation to his genius, its origins in his childhood, and its development.

Studies of creativity have made me wary of the old myth that has “great wits . . . to madness near allied” and poets “mad as the mist and snow.”⁴ Artists often reveal exceptionally strong capacities for organization and control which are absent or weak in insanity. But psychological analyses of the creative process also suggest that there are significant affinities between certain kinds of mental illness and talent or genius in art and science. In subsequent chapters I refer to a number of these findings, for example, Anton Ehrenzweig’s argument in *The Hidden Order of Art* concerning the striking similarities and essential differences between Picasso’s painting and Joyce’s writing and schizophrenic art and language. His comparative analysis applies, as well, to *The Notebooks*, with its fragmentary form, its dreamlike scenes and images, and its portrayal of a breakdown in mental integration and in the ability to differentiate self from world and fantasy from reality.⁵

Writing to Lou in the summer of 1903, Rilke expressed the fear that he “would belong irretrievably to the lost if some passer-by merely looked at me and half unconsciously counted me with them” (*Letters*

1:111). He felt that a stranger's unspoken judgment could change him into an outcast, a dehumanized, broken thing, empty of mind and feeling, living on dust. Imagining that he was in danger of becoming one of "those who no longer hear their wills going in the noise" of the city, he thought he understood the fear that seemed to have "grown" "over" Parisians who were "beginning to read things differently from the way they were meant" (*Letters* 1:110–11). As his sense of self, distinctive identity, and autonomy became painfully uncertain and the "noise" of the city threatened to engulf him, he began to doubt his ability to distinguish fantasy from objective reality.

Writing the novel for which these experiences provided raw material helped the poet to master them and thus to defend himself against the illness that was threatening to destroy his sanity. In retrospect he believed the book was "something like an underpinning" for all the work that followed. It had opened up "a whole octave" of poetry in him. As a result of his writing *The Notebooks*, "everything reaches farther up" and "almost all songs are possible" (*Letters* 1:361).

Having received a commission to write a monograph on Auguste Rodin, Rilke came to Paris late in August 1902 to meet the sculptor. His two essays on the Frenchman (published in 1903 and 1907 as parts 1 and 2 of a book entitled *Rodin*) study Rodin's decompositions and reconstructions of the physical world and illuminate his fascination with Rodin's art at the time he was having the fantasies of disintegration described in the letters and in *The Notebooks*. In this sculpture he discovered that the "artist has the right to make one thing out of many and a world out of the smallest part of a thing."⁶ This model licensed, inspired, and shaped his fictional evocations of the fantasies which had been so frightening to him. Thus, a sculptor became his "master" during the years in which his writing matured and established his place among leading modern writers with the completion of the *New Poems* (1907 and 1908) and *The Notebooks* (1910), though Rodin's personal hold on Rilke began to decline after a temporary rupture in the relationship in May 1906. This part of the story is told in chapter 8.

Rodin's example may have helped Rilke to discover, or at least to accept, the fragmentary form of his novel, the fractured personality of his central character, and the apparent incoherence of a life presented "as if one found disordered papers in a drawer" (*Letters* 1:362). A similar influence on *The Notebooks* was Paul Cézanne, whose painting also pro-

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vided inspiration and guidance for some of the *New Poems*. In 1924 Rilke wrote that “from 1906 on” Cézanne’s painting was his “most forceful model” (*Letters* 2:334). The precise nature of this influence is delineated in a number of letters, including the eloquent ones written to the poet’s wife, Clara, in October 1907 when Rilke saw the Cézannes on exhibition in the Salon d’Automne. Picasso painted *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* in 1907, and Braque was doing cubist landscapes in 1908. But I have not seen any evidence that Rilke was aware of their work that early. He may have known about some of the new ideas in science and psychology which were inspiring a revolution in painting and sculpture as they radically changed conceptions of nature and the mind—relativity theory, quantum physics, non-Euclidean geometry, and the psychology of the unconscious. All made it necessary to “learn to see” (Malte’s phrase) the world and self as they had never been seen or dreamt of in earlier times. These new ideas dismembered nature, converted solid matter into volatile, moving energy, demolished the old Newtonian assumption that the behavior of individual entities was as predictable as clockwork, formulated new relationships between space and time and between the spectator and what he or she sees, and proposed that a large part of the mind was a mass of seemingly chaotic unconscious energies, emotions, and ideas, shaping conscious thought and precariously restrained by fragile defenses from engulfing it. A number of passages in *The Notebooks* raise the possibility that Rilke had a vague awareness of some of the new theories in physics, mathematics, and psychology when he wrote his novel. But I know of no compelling evidence from his letters, from biographies, or from recollections of friends and acquaintances which shows that at this time he had any precise knowledge of the revolutionary ideas in these disciplines.⁷

It would be absurd to classify Rilke as a schizophrenic, but the anxieties and fantasies we find in his writings about his first year in Paris closely resemble some of those characteristic of this disease. According to Harold Searles, a widely respected authority on this form of mental illness, the schizophrenic “feels that his body is not his.”⁸ Parts of it separate themselves and act autonomously. Alien personalities and objects invade him and are experienced as “foreign bodies within his personality,” which threaten to devour or to annihilate him.⁹ He may be sucked in,

enveloped, or obliterated by the personality, mind, or will of another person, or by some animated part of his environment. (In a similar experience, as a boy, looking at himself in a mirror, Malte feels engulfed by a suffocating, inescapable mask and costume.) Relationships with other people threaten to obliterate all traces of his own face and to replace it with one responsive to their needs, closely resembling theirs. In this fantasy the face is felt to be synonymous with the sense of self. In *The Nonhuman Environment*, Searles analyzes the motives for the desire to turn oneself into a dehumanized object and the inclination to turn other people into such objects, tendencies which appear frequently in *The Notebooks*.

Studies of closely related forms of narcissistic and borderline illness by Heinz Kohut, R. D. Laing, and D. W. Winnicott have enlarged my understanding of what Rilke was going through when he first came to Paris. Like the poet at this time, like Malte, their patients felt so ill-defined and uncertain of their differentiation from the world and from other people that mere contact with others often threatened to transform them into helpless responses or imitations. Sustained relationships could be engulfing. The contours of the body, the basis gradually discovered in infancy for one's sense of one's separate self, failed to hold against an impinging, invading, or "imploding" world. One defense against engulfment or invasion is "schizoid," splitting into a "true" inner core of the self and a false, compliant, imitative outer self or selves, which shield the inner self against the dangers of alteration or annihilation by others or by an impinging environment.

In Rilke such defenses were crippling, but they also became creative. In subsequent chapters I discuss the self-protective, self-concealing personas which Rilke developed and consider their origins in his childhood. In this part of my commentary I refer to Winnicott's and Laing's concepts of the false self in schizoid illness and Winnicott's argument that this has a healthy counterpart, the socially compliant facades which protect the inner core of the self in the experience of most mentally healthy people. Rilke's conceptions of face and mask seem to have evolved out of intervals of illness. But Rilke, like Nietzsche, was convinced that masking protects the gifted artist's cultivation and nurturing of his or her depth, power, and art from intrusion, distraction, and adulteration. The poet's writings, like Nietzsche's and Kierkegaard's, may be seen as

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masks which conceal as much as they reveal. They fulfilled “the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found” which Winnicott observed in artists.¹⁰

Rilke’s illness also became creative in another way. As the hard reality of things around him invades his body and drives him out of it, Malte tries to defend himself by passing his fingers over his face in an effort to reestablish his sense of his boundaries. Malte is overwhelmed particularly by the multitude of unbearable phenomena that seem to press in on him. External realities invade, overflow, drown, and suffocate him. Driven out of himself, he is squashed like “a beetle” underfoot (*The Notebooks*, 74). But Rilke’s bouts of boundary loss evolved into an ability to release himself from the trap of separateness and opposition between subject and object in which most of us find ourselves caught by rigid defensiveness. In 1913 he went through an experience in which the boundaries between “inner” and “outer” dissolved as he felt “within him the gentle presence of the stars” (“An Experience,” *WSR*, 36). On this occasion Rilke closed his eyes to keep out of mind the contours of his body, a response which seems to be the opposite of Malte’s reaction to the threat of invasion. At other times he experienced the “inviolable presentness and simultaneity” of everything which in ordinary consciousness comes to us as “mere ‘sequence’ ” (*Letters* 2:342). Distinctions between past, present, and future faded. So did the common sense opposition between the living and the dead, for the dead continue to exist for us and “we are incessantly flowing over and over to those who preceded us, to our origins” (*Letters* 2:373). Such experiences of what Rilke called “das Offne” (“the open”) seem to have grown out of the kinds of fragmentation and boundary loss described in his letters and fiction. Yet they make “normal” ideas and perceptions of time, space, self, and world seem fragmentary in comparison. They must have occurred during intervals of ego strength and health (wholeness, integration) between stretches of barrenness, emotional illness, and depression.

They prepared for and shaped the thinking and imagery of the *Duino Elegies*, and *The Sonnets to Orpheus*. They seemed to the poet to bring an interchange of being between him and the surrounding world, in which metamorphosing world and self were continually re-created, as he tells us, quietly rejoicing, in the first and last sonnets of the second cycle.

Fantasies of engulfment, impingement, and depersonalization, which we find in Rilke’s letters and *The Notebooks*, often lead to defensive isola-

tion. *The Notebooks* demonstrates the dangers of isolation such as Malte's, which feeds the demons of disease it is meant to defend against. Malte's solitude is extreme. He has no relationships in the present time of the novel. This was not true of Rilke. But the poet was almost obsessively devoted to an ideal of solitude, as his letters, fiction, and poetry show. If psychological infirmities were an acknowledged source of his need to be alone, nineteenth-century thinkers, such as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, strongly supported his belief that solitude was a necessary condition for creative work. His contemporary and fellow native of Prague, Franz Kafka, equally influenced by these philosophers, emphasized the same theme in his diaries and letters.

Rilke was often with other people. He complained that being with them did him little good and much harm, shutting off the sources of his poetry. Beginning with the "boundlessly frightful pains of childhood," solitude had given him "all that was greatest" (*Letters* 2:106-7). Yet the severe anxieties which isolation fostered often led him to seek company and to lose the poet in himself among friends and acquaintances. His relationships with Lou Andreas-Salomé and Auguste Rodin, which I interpret in chapters 5 and 8, reveal the psychodynamics of his dependence on others in its most extreme forms.

The insights of Harold Searles, Heinz Kohut, R. D. Laing, D. W. Winnicott, and Arnold Modell have helped me to elucidate Rilke's dependence on Salomé and Rodin and his extravagant idealization of these two surrogate parents.¹¹ If we can trust his memory, his extreme neediness in both relationships was due largely to his mother's and father's failings, which are amply described in his letters, fiction, and poetry. He feared that he had inherited his mother's disconnectedness and unreality. He complained bitterly about Phia Rilke's dishonesty with herself, narcissistic self-absorption, blindness to his real qualities, and inability to love him for what he was. His father's failure to fulfill his aspirations to a career as an army officer weighed heavily on René during his childhood. The poet was haunted by Josef's emotional constriction, his expectation that his son would vicariously fulfill his own frustrated ambitions, his disappointment at René's leaving military school and rejecting a military career, and his anxiety about the poet's unwillingness to find a job which would protect him, his wife, and daughter from shameful poverty and give them a respectable place in society. But Rilke was able to see or imagine generosity and an incli-

nation to love in his father, struggling against such narrow-minded anxiety and rigidity.

Psychoanalysts who have studied narcissistic illness theorize that the kinds of failures in mothering and fathering which Rilke attributed to his parents often leave the psyche severely impaired. As an adult a child of such parents may look for surrogates who will provide the empathetically responsive maternal “mirroring” required to strengthen a sense of self which remains weak because the individual did not receive adequate “mirroring” in early childhood. He may also seek a surrogate who can be invested with the fantastical omnipotence ascribed to parents by small children, because of their need, in their sense of their own helplessness and fragility, to participate, through identification, in such power. Having failed as a child to internalize idealized parents who calm anxiety, foster the tolerance of unsatisfied cravings, provide models and guidance, distinguish reality from fantasy, make possible accommodations with environmental realities, and offer love and admiration, an adult suffering from narcissistic illness may seek such parents in other people, idealizing them so that they can supply these needs, which persist with an infantile intensity. My chapters on Salomé and Rodin show how they fulfilled such needs in Rilke.

Analysts have also written about the ways in which the impairments and injuries characteristic of narcissistic illness can be repaired and healed. This is an important part of my subject. My chapters on Salomé, Clara Rilke, the poet’s father, and Rodin show how, through his relationships with them and through his work, which he called “nothing but a self-treatment of the same sort” as analysis, he mastered the severest forms of his anxieties and developed a remarkable ability to move, sometimes swiftly, sometimes gradually, from fear, despair, and near mental paralysis to the writing of his greatest poems (*Letters* 2:42).

Writing to his wife in April 1903, Rilke defended the distance between them with the argument that his work was the center of his life, which he must find again if he was to be able to make progress toward the realization of his gifts. To do this he said, he must be alone, unwatched, unselfconscious. He must be solitary long enough to enable his loneliness to become “firm and secure again like an untrodden wood that is not afraid of footsteps.” The worst thing that could happen to him was “to become unaccustomed to loneliness” (*Letters* 1:105–6). Though the poet

did rediscover the center of his life in his work recurrently (the long period of sustained creativity between 1906 and 1910, when he wrote many of the *New Poems* and completed *The Notebooks*, was especially gratifying), the problem that he defined in this letter remained very much alive for him until the completion of the *Elegies* and the writing of the *Sonnets* at Muzot in February 1922.

D. W. Winnicott's observations about "the capacity to be alone" seem especially relevant to Rilke. Winnicott sees this capacity as "one of the most important signs of maturity in emotional development." He argues that from "this position everything is creative."¹² In chapter 9 I take a close look at Winnicott's ideas on this subject as I discuss Rilke's attainment of his long-sought home in isolation during the winter of 1921–22.

Winnicott suggests that we achieve "the ability to be truly alone" by internalizing an "ego-supportive mother." Such a mother, empathetically responsive to her infant's needs, creates a sense of a "protective environment."¹³ The introjection of this maternal figure may enable one to maintain a strong, if unconscious, sense of such an environment throughout one's life. This is essential to the artist especially because he needs to be able to lapse into the strange and often frightening unintegrated, undifferentiated state of mind in which he is open to normally repressed ideas and feelings and to alien structures of thought. Rilke's letters make it clear that he needed to be alone in order to fall into such a condition, to exist solitary in an imagined cocoon so that he could come apart before coming together again. In this raw, naked, fragmentary state of mind he felt both too vulnerable and too repulsive to be near anyone, except a servant. His attempts to live with mothering women—above all, Lou Andreas-Salomé—usually resulted in painful failure.

Chapter 9 brings to a conclusion my study of the ways in which Rilke attempted, in his fiction, his poetry, and a number of his relationships, to create the benevolent, supportive, protective, mirroring mother he felt Phia had not been for him. From the time that he wrote *The Book of Hours* (1899, 1901, and 1903, revised in 1905), with its prayer that he might be granted a hermaphroditic nature as a mothering male, his works and letters reveal a fascination with the idea that *he* might be both man and woman, mother and son, brother and sister, lover and beloved. The painful memories of his mother's games during the first five years of his life, in which she had converted him into a little girl, a substitute for his sister, who had died before he was born, were put to good use in his

fiction and poetry. In chapter 9 I consider the poems which, beginning with "Turning" (June 1914), show the evolution of an inner beloved woman or female presence. This process culminates in his transformation of Vera Knoop, a young dancer, artist, and musician, the daughter of friends, who had recently died at nineteen, into the inner woman, "almost a girl" ("fast ein Mädchen"), who inspired *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, as the poems, themselves, their dedication, and his letters about them tell us. In the second sonnet he imagines that she has made her bed within his ear and slept there and that her sleep within his "auditory imagination" included the world and brought it within him, allowing him at last to hear the Orphic lyre resounding in his ordinarily "unheard center." (The "auditory imagination" is T. S. Eliot's concept. "Unheard center" ["unerhörte mitte"] comes from the twenty-eighth sonnet of the second cycle, which is clearly about Vera, though she is not named, and which is dedicated to her.) With this figure in the *Sonnets*, with the silent, invisible female friend of the Seventh Duino Elegy, and with the beloved Earth in the Ninth Elegy, whom he imagines yearning to become invisible within him, Rilke brought to perfection his efforts to give vivid, compelling life and form to the loving, "mirroring" maternal figure, present in *The Notebooks* and in so many of his poems. In the young woman, "almost a girl," of the *Sonnets* this mental presence found a disguise which concealed its real, felt meaning from the poet as well as his readers.

By giving such evocative, if disguised, forms of existence to the beloved maternal figure within him he was able to convert narcissistic illness into creative narcissism and to find in his isolation at Muzot the wholeness and fertile, potent self-sufficiency that made it possible for him to complete the *Elegies* and to write the *Sonnets*. The writing of the *Sonnets* and the final *Elegies* brought the psychological processes which I have described to completion.

Although a number of biographies have been published, only one earlier book has answered the need for a psychological study of this great poet—Erich Simenauer's *Rainer Maria Rilke: Legende und Mythos*, published in 1953 and never translated into English. I am indebted to Simenauer for his perceptive readings of Rilke's works and his letters. But his book is limited by its narrow reliance on early Freudian concepts. His "classical" analysis focuses on the consequences of a "fixation" in the "oedipal stage" with its murderous hatred of the father and incen-

tuous longings for the mother. He is concerned with the largely unconscious roles which "id," "ego," and "superego" play in the poet's "oedipus complex," including the ego's responses to the superego and its defenses against the id, such as "repression" and "reaction formation" (unconscious exaggeration of a feeling or wish in consciousness in order to reinforce repression of its opposite). For the most part, Simenauer classifies aspects of the poet's psychology according to the taxonomy of primitive Freudian orthodoxy.

I draw upon the same set of concepts, but, as this introduction makes clear, I also move beyond them to psychological theory and knowledge concerned with the child's pre-oedipal experience and its long-term effects. Discussions of narcissistic, borderline, schizoid, and schizophrenic forms of mental illness and their origins in this earlier period of childhood have been helpful in my study of Rilke's life and writings. My interpretations reflect an interest in works concerned with the formation and development of ego and identity; the evolution of the sense of self, its separation and integration; the experience of "the non-human environment" ("Things" for Rilke) in mental health and illness; the fear of death and the variety of ways in which it may be mastered; the psychology of the creative process; comparisons and contrasts of language and thought in literature and schizophrenic speech and writing; and new conceptions of "identification," "introjection," and "incorporation" which have helped me to elucidate Rilke's conception of relationships between the living and the dead, his notion of the woman within himself, and the ideas about internalization and transformation which form the central "argument" of the seventh and ninth *Duino Elegies*.

Much of the psychological theory and knowledge which I have found helpful postdates the publication of Simenauer's study. I have also benefited from recent biographies of Rilke by Wolfgang Leppmann, Donald Prater, and J. F. Hendry, as well as a wealth of scholarship and commentary written since 1953.¹⁴

How would the poet, himself, have responded to the news that someone had written a psychoanalytic study of his life and work? His conflicting feelings about psychoanalysis are clearly expressed in his letters. Rejecting his wife's advice that he go into analysis, on January 14, 1912, when the first *Duino Elegy* had just come to him, he wrote to the Freudian therapist, Emil Baron von Gebattel, a friend of Lou Andreas-Salomé, expressing the fear that such a system of classification would disturb the

“much higher order” of his imagination (*Letters* 2:43). Ten days later he wrote to Salomé and again to Gebattel, saying that, with the exorcism of his devils, his angels too might leave. A January 20 letter to Salomé acknowledges that the idea of undergoing psychoanalysis occurred to him from time to time. If he found Freud’s writings “uncongenial,” nonetheless, he could “conceive of Gebattel’s using it [psychoanalysis] with discretion and influence” (*Letters* 2:44). In this letter he gives a detailed account of his imprisoning, hypochondriacal misery. But his fear that analysis might result in “a disinfected soul,” “a monstrosity,” a mind like a student notebook page covered with corrections—a fantasy which he acknowledged was “silly” and “false”—kept him from entering treatment (*Letters* 2:44, 43). Repelled and fascinated by the new ideas and therapies of the depth psychologists, suffering often from uncontrollable anxieties and an inability to sustain a loving relationship, a recurrent inability to work, cruel depression, and a sense of his unreality, he sought explanations and therapeutic advice from Salomé, whose growing knowledge of Freudian theory and eccentric devotion to it after 1911 influenced her interpretations of his illness and his writings in her letters to him, their conversations, and her own books, including her study of Rilke (1928), *The Freud Journal of Lou-Andreas Salomé*, which she kept in 1912 and 1913 (*Aus der Schule bei Freud*), and her memoir, *A Look Back at Life* (*Lebensrückblick*).¹⁵

II

In a recent essay on Rilke, “Paris/Childhood: The Fragmented Body in Rilke’s *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*,” published in *Modernity and the Text: Revisions of German Modernism* (1989), Andreas Huyssen observes that “the insights of psychoanalysis have by and large been shunned by Rilke scholars as irrelevant for the literary and aesthetic assessment of the novel.”¹⁶ Most of my book was complete before I discovered Huyssen’s essay, but we draw upon some of the same psychological concepts and share a sense of the ways in which psychoanalytic approaches to literary criticism have changed substantially since the days when all too many reductive, simplistic psychological exegeses of poetry, fiction, and drama provided ample justification for the antagonism of literary scholars and critics. Huyssen also discusses Rilke’s por-

trayal of Malte's reactions to Paris from a sociological perspective, in relation to Walter Benjamin's and Georg Simmel's accounts of the big city's effects on the individual and on modern literature (in Simmel's essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life" and Benjamin's, "Some Motifs in Baudelaire"). This part of Huysen's analysis indicates a direction in which interpretations of Rilke's fiction should be developing. At the end of my review of recent Rilke criticism I shall say more about this approach, in my reflections on Brigitte Bradley's study of *The Notebooks*.

A number of recent commentators on Rilke's work continue to divorce the poetry from the poet's life, as if any attempt to read the *Duino Elegies*, *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, and other great poems by Rilke with understanding enhanced by consideration of his life and by psychoanalytic insights demeans the poetry and deprives it of proper aesthetic appreciation. Some critics, Huysen argues, see Rilke as representing "a modernism of disembodied subjectivity, metaphysical negativity, and textual closure, the classicism of the twentieth century."² Such criticism may develop perceptive readings of individual poems and passages, but it often suppresses much of the emotional and intellectual complexity, vitality, richness, and subtlety of Rilke's work.

One of the strongest statements of antipathy to psychoanalytic and biographical criticism among Rilke scholars is to be found in the foreword to Jacob Steiner's book *Rilkes Duineser Elegien* (1962 and 1969). Steiner goes to the extreme of insisting that the more boldly the biographical "I" of the poet stands out in the "i" of the work, so much the worse is the poetry ("Aber es lässt sich vermuten, dass das biographische Ich des Dichters umso stärker durch das *ich* des Werks hervortritt, je schlechter die Dichtung ist").³ Attacking Simenauer's analysis, Steiner says he forgets that "the private person Rilke is not yet the poet in his productive hours and that . . . from the productive poet to his product there is a distance to be overcome whose breadth, unfathomable depth, and complexity have not been measured up to the present time" ("Aber er vergisst dabei, dass die private Person Rilke noch nicht der Dichter in seinen produktiven Stunden ist und dass auch vom produktiven Dichter zu seinen Produkt ein Abstand zu überwinden ist, dessen Weite, Abgründigkeit und Komplexität bisher nicht ermessen worden sind").⁴

This doctrine foreshadows more sophisticated and carefully argued attempts to define and justify the critical concept of "das lyrische Ich" (the lyric I) in each poem, such as Käte Hamburger's in *Die Logik der*

Dichtung (1968) and Anthony Stephens's in *Rainer Maria Rilke's "Gedichte an die Nacht"* (1972), which are reminiscent of earlier endeavors by the English and American New Critics to analyze the narrative persona in a poem or a work of fiction without reference to the life and personality of the poet or the novelist. Steiner's desire to separate and distance "the productive poet" from the person and his purist Aestheticism in arguing that the reflection in the "I" of the poem of the "private person" in his nonproductive hours makes for a bad poem seem wildly defensive and curiously naive. In her very perceptive study *Transcending Angels: Rainer Maria Rilke's Duino Elegies* (1987), Kathleen Komar finds even Steiner guilty of digressing into the personal and the biographical, when he remarks that a passage in Elegy IV reflects Rilke's relationship with his father (though he immediately qualifies this observation, saying that the relationship between father and son is so fully generalized in these lines of the Elegy that reference to a biography would make no further contribution to an understanding of the poem). Noting that, "as Steiner points out, the passage concerning the father may well have biographical overtones concerning his bureaucratic-military father's questioning of Rilke's poetic vocation," Komar remarks, "the more general implications for the male and female factors of human life provide a more fruitful focus for our discussion of the *Elegies*." The clumsy vagueness of this comment suggests an evasive, skittish response to the personal and psychological dimensions of Rilke's poetry, a response which flaws and limits an otherwise excellent book.

Komar brackets off the poet's life in a three page "Biographical Sketch" that appears as an appendix at the end of her study. Her decision to exclude the life from the rest of her book imposes substantial limitations upon her valuable, detailed analyses of content and form. And the more's the pity. For, her elucidations of verbal nuances, multiple meanings, and the connections among passages and poems which contribute to the integrity of each Elegy and to the coherence and development of the cycle are the work of an exceptionally gifted and knowledgeable interpreter.

Richard Exner and Ingrid Stipa argue that psychoanalytic interpretation is largely irrelevant in reading Rilke's later poetry, in another valuable recent contribution to Rilke criticism: "Das Phänomen der Androgynie des Schaffenprozesses im späten Rilke: Das Beispiel. 'Solang du Selbstgeworfnes fängst . . .,'" (The Phenomenon of the Androgyny

of the Creative Process in Late Rilke: Example, “As long as you catch what you yourself have thrown . . .”), published in *Rainer Maria Rilke*, as part of the “Wege der Forschung” series (1987). Referring to Simenauer’s contrast between the archaic, analyzable, comparatively unformed perceptions of Rilke’s earlier work and the form-giving harmonies of the later poetry, Exner and Stipa conclude that the creative processes responsible for the latter were grounded, to a large extent, in “bewussten Denkvorgänge” (“conscious thought processes”), which these critics see as providing “logische Ausdrucksformen zur Kommunikation” (“logical forms of expression for communication”).⁶ One can find support in Rilke’s work for their hypothesis that poetry should not be read primarily as an expression of the complex and largely unknown psychic life of the poet, for example, in *Sonnet to Orpheus* I.3, which tells us, “Gesang ist Dasein,” “Ein Hauch um nichts” (“Song is existence,” “A breath without purpose or object”). But their choice of a focal example, “As long as you catch what you yourself have thrown . . .,” is unintentionally ironic. This poem suggests that the writing of great poetry is a profoundly mysterious process and experience, in which suddenly the poet becomes the one who catches the ball thrown to him, to his center, by an eternal female partner. In this experience all conscious courage and power, all conscious calculation, are gone, and the poem seems to come from him of its own accord, like a meteor leaving his hands and raging into its own spaces. This is only a partial paraphrase, but it suffices to show that the creative processes the poem envisions are very largely unconscious, unknown, mysterious.⁷

Exner and Stipa maintain that in “Solang du Selbstgeworfnes fängst . . .” Rilke conceives of poetry as arising out of its own logic and language, as if it were largely or entirely disconnected from the poet’s unconscious thought processes. They use the word “poetologische” (“poetological”) to label this purely self-sufficient logic and process. Though their critical methods and concepts are very different from Jacob Steiner’s, their affirmation of rarefied aestheticism, like his, seems strangely naive and psychologically defensive. Like so many other Rilke scholars, they are defending the purity of poems which we all value as great treasures. But the poems do not become less extraordinary if we see them in relation to the poet’s life and with the help of psychoanalytic insights. Exner’s and Stipa’s method of defining the “poetological” processes and results is to identify “lexische Fäden” (“lexical strings” or

“threads”), “lexische Gewebe” (“lexical webs” or “wefts” or “textures”), and “Wortfelder” (“word fields”) in a poem or a series of selected poems. This mode of operations enables them to trace the development of connected themes and closely related words and images through quite a number of poems written in different stages of Rilke’s creative life. And although at times their terminology seems a pseudoscientific jargon, their careful tracings of “lexical strings” or “threads” and “word fields” do accumulate a large, persuasive picture of the developing relationship between Rilke’s evolving sense of himself, his feelings and thoughts about androgyny, and his conception of the poet’s (especially his own) creative processes.⁸

One cannot help being drawn to the argument that this very great poet must have become increasingly self-aware in his shaping of his own work, as he became ever more skillful and knowledgeable. But, if you postulate, as Exner and Stipa do, that the earlier work is shaped by Rilke’s unconscious, as Simenauer and Lou Andreas-Salomé describe it, you will have a hard time making the case that the later work somehow floats completely free of the poet’s psychic depths, as if it had no connection with its antecedents. And if, at times, as in the line from Sonnet I.3, quoted above (“Gesang ist Dasein” [“Song is existence”]), Rilke seems to resemble other purists of modernist Aestheticism, such as Mallarmé, much of his prose and poetry, including the *Duino Elegies*, shows affinities with works of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature, philosophy, and psychology which weigh heavily against such a position. Among the writers and thinkers most important to Rilke were Kleist, Jens Jacobsen, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Freud, and Lou Andreas-Salomé.

I have mentioned Anthony Stephens’s study, *Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Gedichte an die Nacht”* (1972), a nonpsychoanalytic commentary which shows an intelligent openness to a variety of approaches to Rilke’s extraordinarily complex, problematic, and elusive writings. Stephens finds that the “intellectual structures” of the “Gedichte an die Nacht” [Poems to the Night], written in 1913–14, “have their roots determined largely by emotion.” Quoting Rilke’s early definition of his aim in writing poetry—“Bilder zu finden für meine Verwandlungen” (“to find images for my transformations”)—Stephens proposes that “in his later work intellectual structures [of human experience] may function precisely as *im-*

ages.” (Among the structures which seem most important to him in Rilke’s poems is “Gegenständlichkeit,” the radically alien quality and opacity of external objects for the person who feels unrelated to them and feels that he is not at all at home in a world in which he is like a tenant constantly in danger of eviction. Opposed to “Gegenständlichkeit” in Rilke’s thinking and writing is “Weltinnenraum,” a term which Stephens and other critics read as a means of conceptualizing “a feeling of participation and emotional identification with the objects of experience.” In other words, “The concept of ‘Weltinnenraum’ is based on a feeling of the homogeneity of inner and outer worlds and on the absence of any barriers to emotional identification.”⁹ The argument that such concepts function in Rilke’s poetry as images rather than as rational abstractions in logical relationship to one another leads Stephens to the following conclusion: “What determined the succession of Rilke’s ‘Verwandlungen’ (“transformations”) is a psychological question and hence unanswerable within the framework of this book.”¹⁰ That is to say, one should not study the transformations of “Gegenständlichkeit” into “Weltinnenraum” in exclusively logical, metaphysical, or epistemological terms if one wants to give a clear and full analysis of the works which represent and realize them. Such transformations in Rilke’s poetry involve complexities of feeling and thought which need help from psychological insights if we are to understand them.

But I do not want to give the impression that Stephens is an avid supporter of psychoanalytic criticism. He faults both Ulrich Fülleborn and the “Freudian” critics for approaches to Rilke which try to fit poetry to “a priori” assumptions, absolute preconceptions; if “these conditions do not appear to pertain, then the ‘Synthesis a priori’ supplies them in terms of what *ought* to be there if the presuppositions are correct.” Stephens shows that this is the case with Fülleborn, but does not mention any “Freudian” critics specifically, as examples of this failing.¹¹

My interpretations of Rilke’s work in *The Beginning of Terror* resemble Stephens’s questioning approach to the work, his emphasis on the problematic nature of the poetry, his sense of its great complexity, subtlety, and richness, as well as its difficulty and elusiveness, and his belief that, possessed of these qualities, it invites a variety of critical perspectives. *The Beginning of Terror* shuns the kind of prescriptive “a priori” narrowness found in some primitive, reductive psychoanalytic criticism.

For the most perceptive literary critics and psychoanalysts share a sense of the fertile overdetermination of meaning in the metaphors, images, and formal patterns of great poems and other works of art.

In his concluding chapter, “An Approach to Rilke,” Stephens discusses “two opposing tendencies, or attitudes, or techniques” in Rilke’s work, focusing on “the poem as a closed system and the poem as a reaching out beyond the limits of given experience.”¹² Stephens is interested in the interaction between these two tendencies and opposing views of poetry in Rilke’s work, and in the poet’s oscillating emphases, now on the one, now on the other. The former view may be associated with the poet’s inclination, in his studies of Rodin and his letters about Rodin’s sculpture, to magnify art into something that has an absolute value, something, like a god, unapproachable, magical, untouchable, and in its essence incomprehensible. As Stephens points out, Rilke inherited this idealization of the work of art and the artist from the Romantics. In *The Beginning of Terror* I explore this tendency in Rilke’s thought and work at length, especially in my discussion of the poet’s relationship with Rodin (see chapter 8). Describing the opposing tendency, Stephens focuses on Rilke’s lecture, *Moderne Lyrik* (1898), where the poet says that the “specifically modern impulse is . . . to penetrate to the furthest regions of the self and express the result in poetry.” An excerpt from that lecture makes the same point in the poet’s words:

Sehen Sie: seit den ersten Versuchen des Einzelnen, unter der Flut flüchtiger Ereignisse *sich selbst zu finden*, seit dem ersten Bestreben, mitten im Gelärm des Tages hineinzuhorchen bis in die tiefsten Einsamkeiten des eigenen Wesens,— giebt es eine *Moderne Lyrik*.¹³

Look: since the first attempts of the individual, amid the flood of fleeting events, to *find himself*, since the first endeavors, amid the noise of the day, to listen within down to the deepest solitudes of his own being—there [has been] a *Modern Poetry*.

Stephens argues persuasively that this early association of modern poetry with “an exploration of the self and its relation to the world” is an enduring and central concern of Rilke’s writings. In my chapters on *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* and my studies of Rilke’s later poems, including the *Duino Elegies* and *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, with questions

and suggestions arising from the insights of a number of analysts and from Rilke's own writings, I examine this aspect of his work.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 of this book are largely concerned with *The Notebooks*. One of the most valuable recent studies of the novel, Brigitte L. Bradley's "*Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge: Thematisierte Krise des literarischen Selbstverständnisses*" (*The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge: Thematicized Crisis of Literary Self-Understanding*) (1980), reveals close affinities with Andreas Huyssen's attempt to integrate psychological and sociological perspectives on Rilke's work. Bradley argues that Malte's responses to Paris reflect the conflict in Rilke between his early interest in the oppressiveness of the modern urban, technological, industrialized environment, with its crowded living conditions, and his belief that a writer corrupts and degrades his work if he allows it to be shaped by an ideology or by political, sociological, and economic ends.

Bradley argues that a number of passages in *The Notebooks* reflect Rilke's sense of the ways in which the old ideal of individuality, according to which a person could hope to become master of his or her circumstances, rather than be mastered by them, had been undermined by modern methods of mass production and the pervasion of human existence by technology, commercialization, and huge bureaucracies. Bradley points out that in a number of episodes, such as the ones in which Malte encounters the blind seller of cauliflowers and the blind newspaper vendor, Rilke focuses on human figures who may be seen as examples of social problems, "as representative of alienation conditioned by the economic system of production in relation to the sphere of work" ("als repräsentativ für die vom ökonomischen Produktionssystem bedingte Entfremdung dem Arbeitsbereich gegenüber").¹⁴

Bradley analyzes the complex relationship between Malte's responses to these aspects of modern urban life and his efforts to rediscover himself as a writer in his new environment. Malte has broken away from his past life, work, and sense of himself so completely, it seems to him, as he sits in his room, that he is "nothing." "And yet this nothing begins to think and thinks, five flights up, on a gray Paris afternoon, these thoughts" (*The Notebooks*, 22). In his letters Rilke defines Malte's ultimate failure as a writer in terms of his inability to achieve, except in one or two sections of *The Notebooks*, what the poet calls "anonymous work" and

“objective expression,” exemplified by Flaubert’s fiction, Baudelaire’s poems, and Cézanne’s paintings (*Letters* 1:311 and 314–16).

As I have indicated, Bradley discusses Malte’s failure and Rilke’s abandonment of attempts to write prose fiction as reactions to an unsolvable conflict between two opposing sets of aesthetic values. She points to Rilke’s 1898 lecture, *Moderne Lyrik*, mentioned above in my discussion of Stephens’s book, as one means of understanding this conflict. What interests Bradley in that lecture is the poet’s argument that writing or painting which finds its justification in usefulness and which clings to topics and phenomena of current interest or places itself “in the service of ‘political or social factional interests’ ” (“in den Dienst ‘politischer oder sozialer Parteinteressen’ ”) is not art, but journalism.¹⁵ Opposed in Rilke’s mind to such corrupted forms of writing, painting, or sculpture are “autonomous art” and the self-sufficient work. Bradley links these concepts to *Jugendstil* art and the French symbolists, and says that Rilke came into closer contact with the aesthetic ideas of the latter through Rodin, during 1902 and 1903.¹⁶

Bradley finds that Malte’s attempts to describe the blind newspaper vendor reveal the underlying causes of his ultimate failure to achieve a new, clear understanding of himself and his task as a writer. Malte’s accounts of the vendor create a double perspective on that blind man. Reading these passages in *The Notebooks*, one can see him as an exemplary consequence of dehumanizing social and economic conditions, but he can also be seen as a man, “full of resignation” (“ergebungsvoll”), who bears his condition “as a misfortune ordained by fate” (“als ein vom Schicksal verhängtes Unglück”).¹⁷ When, after painful failure, Malte at last feels his portrait of the newspaper vendor successfully portrays the man, he takes this as proof of God’s existence, which places him under “a huge obligation.” And he imagines the Creator takes pleasure from his (Malte’s) belief that his experience in struggling to portray the vendor has taught him “That we should learn to endure everything and never to judge” (*The Notebooks*, 211). Bradley observes that Malte’s conclusions curiously alienate his work (the portrait) from himself. In this respect he reveals a latent affinity with his subject, the vendor, who is obviously alienated from his task, selling newspapers which he cannot read.

Bradley also sees a connection between an earlier episode, in which Malte’s father forces himself to endure the terrifying visit of a ghost

without questioning, and Malte's belief that his success in doing the portrait of the vendor at last has taught him to endure everything without ever judging or questioning, as the vendor, too, suffers his fate. Retreating from "the position of social and ideological criticism into which he has ventured," Malte seems frightened by this "function of the writer" into which he has been drawn ("... Malte vor der gesellschafts- und ideologiekritischen Position, in die er sich begeben hat, zurückschreckt bzw. dass er sich mit einer sogarteten Funktion des Schriftstellers nicht identifizieren kann").¹⁸ Incapable of developing such critical perceptions in his work, he seems unable to realize the power which comes, as he has understood, from "no longer being anybody's son" (*The Notebooks*, 189). If we accept Bradley's connections, we can follow her argument that he is unable to free himself from attitudes and behavior obviously learned from his father. Here, as elsewhere, her essay reflects an attempt to integrate sociological and psychological insights.

Bradley sees Rilke abandoning prose fiction for poetry because in the latter he could resolve the conflict between opposing sets of values which ultimately keeps Malte from redefining and re-creating himself as a writer. Freed from the "goal-directed semantics of everyday or commonplace idiom" in an "economically-minded society," Rilke could make his poetry "an affirmation" of his concept of "autonomous art" ("von der zweckgerichteten Semantik des Alltagsidioms. . . eine Bejahung der autonomen Kunst").¹⁹

Some of Rilke's later poems do show an interest in social, political, and economic matters, but these are usually of secondary importance, at best. A salient example is Sonnet II.19, which implicitly attacks bourgeois, capitalist society for its obsession with money and its neglect of the poor. But even in that poem, the poet is not primarily interested in the blind beggar because of the social, economic, and political failures which he represents. He sees the beggar as "the silent one" ("der Schweigende"), standing in the breathing pauses of pampered money, his hand held out by fate. And the poet wishes that someone seeing this "luminous, miserable, endlessly destructible" hand ("hell, elend, unendlich zerstörbar") might, in wonder, praise its endurance in song which only a god could hear.²⁰

Although Bradley's analysis of *The Notebooks* offers a very partial and limited reading of Malte's efforts to achieve a clear understanding of his task as a writer as he responds to his new environment, I have given

it this lengthy summary in my review of recent criticism because I believe that it serves as a valuable theoretical complement to my own exploration of the novel's psychodynamics. It also points the way toward the kind of complex, sophisticated discussion of Rilke's work, in literary criticism with historical and sociological dimensions, which still needs to be done. And it provides an encouraging counterbalance to Egon Schwarz's heavy-handed attempt, in *Das verschluckte Schluchzen: Poesie und Politik bei Rainer Maria Rilke* (The Swallowed Sobbing: Poetry and Politics in Rainer Maria Rilke's Writings) (1972),²¹ to interpret Rilke's work and thought in terms of the admiration for Mussolini which the poet expressed in correspondence with the Duchess Aurelia Gallarati-Scotti, and other expressions of the poet's ideas and attitudes which Schwarz sees as repellently right-wing.