THE RILKE ALPHABET

translated by Andrew Hamilton

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ABBREVIATIONS

All works are by Rainer Maria Rilke unless otherwise noted.

AAP	*Ahead of All Parting*: *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke*
ALT	*Briefe* (1980)
ANI	Rilke and Anita Forrer, *Briefwechsel*
BOI	*The Book of Images*
BSF	*Briefe an die Schweizer Freunde*
BZP	*Briefe zur Politik*
GB	*Gesammelte Briefe*
HAT	Rilke and Magda von Hattingberg, *Briefwechsel mit Magda von Hattingberg*
NAL	*Briefe* (1991)
JBL	*Selected Works, Volume 2: Poetry*
KA	*Werke*
LOL	*Letters on Life*
LOU	Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Briefwechsel*
LYP	*Letters to a Young Poet*
MLB	*The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*
NP	*New Poems*
POR	*The Poetry of Rilke*
SID	*Briefe an Sidonie Nádherný von Borutin*
SIZ	*Briefe an Gräfin Sizzo*
SW	*Sämtliche Werke*

TAX Rilke and Marie von Thurn und Taxis, *Briefwechsel*
UP *Uncollected Poems*
WUN *Briefe an Nanny Wunderly-Volkart*

PREFACE: "THE WHOLE DICTATION OF EXISTENCE"

"Diktat des Daseins"

> The longer I live, the more urgent it seems to me to endure and transcribe the whole dictation of existence [*das ganze Diktat des Daseins*] up to its end, for it might just be the case that only the very last sentence contains that small and possibly inconspicuous word which transforms into magnificent sense everything we had struggled to learn and everything we had failed to understand.[1]

Rilke wrote these words to Ilse Erdmann on December 21, 1913, close to the end of a year during which he had met Sigmund Freud in person, spent more time with Lou Andreas-Salomé, and drafted a poem that he would not complete for another decade as the first of the Duino elegies. By writing down "the whole dictation of existence," Rilke hopes to register those experiences that we normally go through without noticing. Do not overlook anything, pay attention to everything, spell it all out up to the most minuscule and negligible word and letter: That is Rilke's aesthetic motto and his guide for life. In order not to miss anything or get distracted in the task of living mindfully and honestly, the poet must not decide in advance between important and unimportant things. He has to write in the conviction that each experience and every word possesses a value all its own.

Rilke's ambition to copy down the entire "dictation of existence" rests in an animistic thought, as if the greater universe finds in us humans its diligent secretaries, whose lowly service can find the key to the universe's hidden meaning as long as we don't miss a word. Poetry becomes the record of the universe, and one of the countless words in this great and faithful transcription might reveal the universe's hidden meaning to us. The language of poetry does not turn away from the world toward a greater, transcendent Meaning but opens up the world, and opens us *to* the immanence of the world, in which we live. This is Rilke's ambition: to write attentively about the world in the hope that our lives, as we are already living them, might be transformed "into magnificent sense."

This book honors Rilke's call to copy down the dictation of existence. *The Rilke Alphabet* presents twenty-six words that cast new light on Rilke's oeuvre (including his poetry, prose, and letters) from unexpected angles. Some of the chapters examine what scholars and critics have "struggled to learn," to adapt Rilke's term for our often reflexive tendency to resolve any challenge by relying on secondhand opinions and commonplaces, while other chapters open our eyes and ears to what many readers have "failed to understand."[2] Many readers have not yet grasped Rilke's poetry because they have elevated his poetry above life and search for "a magnificent sense" and inspiration in books of Rilke's verses instead of grasping that Rilke's poetry, even when addressing flamingos, angels, and hydrangeas, presses us *more deeply into life*. Rilke copies down the dictation of existence as "the secretary of the invisible" (in his own memorable phrase), yet each one of the words examined here shows that this secretary knows us humans to be physical, mortal beings at once blessed and trapped in our human bodies with desires, longings, and fears.

This work takes its origin in many years of study and in a deeply *sensory* experience of reading Rilke. It shows but two things. First, it shows that Rilke, the poet who among modern poets most insistently and convincingly promises salvation and even redemption *within* our disenchanted, secular modernity (and not in another religion or ideology, not even that of "art"), had a body. Second, it also demonstrates that when it comes to poetry and life, a single word may change everything. One word may upend your sense of yourself and end your world in its entirety. One single word. That is poetry's insistence, and it is the reason why we tend to turn to poetry, Rilke's in many cases, at moments of transition, or when due to a calamity or loss it seems that one way of being in the world has ended

for us. But a single word may also console and provide salvation, and turn everything "we had struggled to learn and everything we had failed to understand" into "magnificent sense."

The twenty-six words that were taken from Rilke's writings open up the veins of Rilke's work, from which existence pours out, fierce and fervid, red and pulsing. They challenge the prevalent picture of Rilke as a poet of transcendence (also often called, simplistically, "love," "romanticism," "mysticism," "belief," or "art," or what some critics define as poetic language referring to itself). Not all of these twenty-six words are commonly discussed in critical works on Rilke. (Some have been repressed by scholars and critics for years; others have been sanitized or willfully misunderstood.) Some of them may make us cringe. Cringe we must—Rilke used these words to "transcribe the whole dictation" for *all* of existence and to mine each word's potential to transform into sense those parts of our lives we tend to overlook by relying on social conventions that define how we love and live, or on systems of belief that promise to bestow transcendent meaning (a greater cause; an ideal) on our actions. These twenty-six words attest to Rilke's bold balancing of our euphoria for the radical openness and immanence of life (as we may experience it, if we are blessed, in love, which for Rilke always includes physical love) with our despair in the face of the equally radical openness that defines our relationship to death. Each of these words reminds us that we are suspended in life between two radically open moments: for Rilke the experience of being reborn in love and the capacity to know death as part of life.

The following chapters trace and explain the strange logic by which poetry wrests from ordinary language, from the words we all use all the time, extraordinary meaning. That meaning is shaped in its relation to other words found in Rilke's work, including his prose and letters, which I consider here as much an essential part of his oeuvre as his poetry, following Rilke's own instructions in his last will and testament. Like small coves or tiny shells sheltering another sense amid the vast sea that is Rilke's language, these words deepen the meaning of Rilke's oeuvre for us today. They have resisted Rilke's drive toward sublimation (an ultimately failed attempt to turn desire into art, as outlined in several of the chapters here). They mark the places where his work bears witness to those haunting and hallucinatory, sublime and devastating experiences and sensations in life for which there are no words. They are motes of

reality embedded in a lyrical work that throw into relief nothing less than the possibility of living fully under modern conditions with all of our world's often very entertaining distractions and temptations to be inauthentic. Even when we think we know so much about it, life constantly surprises us with the richness of its highs and the devastation of its losses. The words examined here remind us that life cannot be grasped or fully understood but that life can be experienced only as the interruption of what we, with the aid of science, religion, reason, faith, and politics, call "life." Paradoxically, life seems impossible to grasp at these moments of its interruptions even though we also feel *most* alive during those apparently timeless, ex-static, and abyssal moments of bliss and loss. The twenty-six words examined here stand in relation to Rilke's oeuvre in the same way as such experiences stand in relation to our daily lives. They interrupt Rilke's work with the force that is the unique capacity of poetry to turn words against themselves and make them speak for more than what they refer to. Misfits, truants, outliers: That is what those words are. They are the stuff of poetry.

Some of the words selected here seem to disturb the Rilkean "completeness" and "perfection," which Robert Musil identified as a rare, distinguishing trait of Rilke's work in his eulogy in January 1927, a few short weeks after Rilke's exceedingly painful death from complications from too-late-diagnosed leukemia on December 29, 1926.[3] The later critic Paul de Man, as editor of Rilke's poetry in French translation, considered Rilke's capacity for turning words against their literal meaning without letting them slip fully into metaphor the great, if paradoxical, "promise" of Rilke's poetry.[4] In his assertion of Rilke's perfection, Musil also recognized to what a remarkable degree Rilke devoted himself to the irritating factors in our existence: "And there is one great poem that cannot forget the unrest, inconsistency, and fragmentary nature of life [. . .] That is Rilke's poem."[5] The words examined here disrupt the surface perfection of Rilke's poetry. They promise not transcendence but immanence unrivaled in modern poetry, real toads, à la Marianne Moore, notwithstanding. A few of the words examined here offer new insight into Rilke's (sometimes short-lived) political commitments and personal predilections. True to Rilke's imperative not to divide life a priori, before living, into what's important and what's insignificant, these words chronicle the eruption of the contingencies of life into his work. Some of these words simply document what scholars pointedly and fastidiously overlooked for

decades, and what even many fans of Rilke's poetry occasionally forget: that Rilke had a body. They attest to Rilke's commitment to endure in the face of life, in order to copy it all down.

I encountered these twenty-six words during a period of two years spent reading all of Rilke's works—all of his poems, all of his prose, and as many as possible of his boundless correspondence totaling more than fourteen thousand letters.[6] These words struck me, during a difficult personal time triggered by a loss I couldn't put into words, as keys to Rilke's insistence that we can be *pressed into* life more deeply, and that poetry, far from being an esoteric commentary *on* life, is one of the paths *into* a life that we often forget in the business of living. These words are placed into the largest possible context that I explored with students in teaching Rilke for many years at New York University, following the methods of philology. I examine these words in the belief that each entry elucidates a distinct and valuable direction in Rilke's thought, a particular structure of his poetic method, a different way of dealing with a motif, or a controversy sparked by Rilke's work. The chapters function as free-standing essays. They revise commonly held notions about Rilke by explaining that he is a poet of immanence—a poet of life as it is lived, not as it is reflected philosophically or as art.

By "immanence" in this context I mean Rilke's insistence that we do not accept or reject existence, we *live* it. To put it differently: Life lives us, and whatever we think of it comes only later and at an inevitable remove. In Rilke's only novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, the narrator confesses that he places life above knowledge, experience above reading, even when our hard-gained knowledge would shelter us from suffering: "I am sometimes surprised at how readily I give up everything that was expected in favor of the real, even when it is terrible."[7] *The Rilke Alphabet* follows the sequence of the European alphabet, where no single letter is more important than any other. It makes the claim of elucidating, adumbrating, deepening Rilke's writing in twenty-six words by cataloging those splinters of language that refract our existence like prisms through which we can for a moment grasp "the real," which we are after all.

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a
for Ashanti

How do Africans feature and fare in Rilke's work? A group of men, women, and children from West Africa (most likely today's Ghana) were put on display like animals in the Jardin d'Acclimatation in Paris, where Rilke saw (or, as it turns out, didn't see) them in the spring of 1902. Before that there had been similar shows of individuals and groups of people from the African continent in 1896 in Vienna and shortly afterward in Budapest: A village full of Africans from the Gold Coast (today's Ghana) alongside antelopes, parrots, and flamingos, put on show for predominantly white Europeans. These wildly popular human exhibitions, which toured Europe from around 1875 until the third decade of the twentieth century (and also occurred in the United States, including at the Bronx Zoo), were also a fashionable topic in literary circles. Prior to Rilke, another Austrian writer named Peter Altenberg—whom Rilke praised as "the first herald of modern Vienna"[1] in 1898—published a book of prose poems dedicated to the "African men of paradise" titled *Ashantee*.[2] With abyssal irony Altenberg, whose love affair with an African woman had been thoroughly caricatured and ridiculed, with racist overtones, in the Viennese press, exposed his own weaknesses as well as the racism and bigotry of his milieu.

Rilke's "The Ashanti" is more subdued than Altenberg's charged prose. But this poem is as problematic (and "disconcertingly obtuse"[3]) as it is

important in his oeuvre. The fact that it is so rarely discussed in the boundless secondary literature leads one to suspect that most critics would prefer to disavow this racist moment in Rilke altogether. But ignoring "The Ashanti" will not solve the problem. "The Ashanti" represents an important point in Rilke's body of work because it deals with the poet's—and thus our—ability and willingness to perceive another person on his or her own terms. It is also a link between the sentimental poems in *The Book of Images,* where it first appeared in 1902, and the "objective" thing poems in *New Poems* of 1907 and 1908 for which Rilke is so rightly renowned. I consider "The Ashanti" here in light of Rilke's wish to approach the world as a poet, honestly and without judgment.

In a letter dated October 19, 1907, Rilke explains that to pick and choose from what is given (that is, in this case, to excuse "The Ashanti" as an embarrassing and youthful faux pas, since this poem doesn't fit with our image of Rilke) would constitute a sin for any artist:

> First, artistic contemplation must have so thoroughly conditioned itself to see what is there, even in the ugly and the seemingly repulsive, which, like everything that exists, counts. It is not permitted for the artist to pick and choose, nor to turn away from any part of existence: a single rejection at any time expels him from the condition of grace, makes him a sinner, through and through. [. . .] To turn yourself towards the leper and share the warmth of your body with him, down to the warmth of the heart in a night of love: this must be a part of the artist's existence, as the striving for a new blessedness.[4]

Blessed is the artist who refuses to turn away from "existence." Yet this is just what Rilke does in "The Ashanti" (and what the critics have done in turn): He turns away, he fails to look, he privileges the animals and hardly leaves room in his text for the humans right in front of him. The poem piles up seven consecutive negations, whose objects are born of Europe's racist images that attribute to the Africans a lascivious sexuality, a raw violence, an authentic nature.

> No vision of far-off countries,
> no feeling of brown women who
> dance out of their falling garments.

No wild unheard-of melodies.
No songs which issued from the blood,
and no blood which screamed out from the depths.

No brown girls who stretched out
velvety in tropical exhaustion;
no eyes which blazed like weapons,

and the mouth broad with laughter.
And a bizarre agreement
with the light-skinned humans' vanity.[5]

Keine Vision von fremden Ländern,
kein Gefühl von braunen Frauen, die
tanzen aus den fallenden Gewändern.

Keine wilde fremde Melodie.
Keine Lieder, die vom Blute stammten,
und kein Blut, das aus den Tiefen schrie.

Keine braunen Mädchen, die sich samten
breiteten in Tropenmüdigkeit;
keine Augen, die wie Waffen flammten,

und die Munde zum Gelächter breit.
Und ein wunderliches Sich-verstehen
mit der hellen Menschen Eitelkeit.[6]

With the blood that screams out "from the depths," Rilke evokes both the Europeans' image of Africa and the violence done to Africans by European weapons, past and future. Likewise, Rilke's figure of the "brown women" operates on two levels: By dancing "out of their falling garments" they act out the erotic, orientalist fantasies of Europeans, to fantasies with deep roots in the German tradition. As early as Friedrich Hölderlin's poem "Remembrance" of 1803 (where Hölderlin refers to the Mediterranean people) there appear in the gaze of the German poet "brown women . . . on silken surfaces." Hölderlin's poem, according to a commentary by Martin Heidegger, is about "becoming familiar with one's own" through contact with the foreign.[7] Rilke's poem is about the same experience. Yet Rilke's projections onto the Africans fall apart at the

moment when the Africans laugh in the Europeans' face. Instead of being able to distinguish himself dialectically in the encounter with the other, and thus define himself, Rilke encounters the Africans' willingness and desire to interact with the "light people." The Europeans' "vanity," enshrined in a Hegelian notion of the dialectic of self and other shared by poets from Hölderlin to Rilke, consists of Europeans looking at Africans only for the purpose of defining themselves, of perceiving the Africans not on their own terms but as other.

At the same time that Rilke, in the letter quoted above, forbids the artist to "turn away from any part of existence," he wanted to turn away in his poem: "It made me shudder seeing that."[8] At the center of the poem is Rilke's fear of being seen. And in this poem to be seen means to be defined. It is not the Africans who are exposed in this poem but the poet himself, who cannot abide by the tenets of his own aesthetics.

In *The Book of Images* Rilke explains his fear of seeing the Ashanti. This fear comes from the recognition that the Ashanti are active in being seen and themselves want to see. The Ashanti disappoint Rilke and partly defeat his project of finding oneself through close and patient observation of the world. Strangely enough, however, his aesthetic triumphs in this disappointment. The way Rilke sees the Africans is determined by the Africans themselves. Since they cannot be seen by the poet in the way he wants to, the Ashanti become just what Rilke, as he writes in his letters, wishes to see in all of existence—that which is seen unfiltered, without "selection," "turning away," and "rejection."[9]

The artist must "overcome" himself in order to see the Ashanti. He must rein in his "vanity"; he must not judge everything from a distance, but rather should see the various parts of the world from their own perspective and on their own terms (and so for a short time exchange his own perspective for another's experience of the world). The Ashanti enter Rilke's vision as beings with their own wishes, desires, vanity, and projections who do not distinguish between themselves and the "light people": In the words of the letter cited at this chapter's beginning, they "count." These qualities attest to their humanity: the expectation that they will be seen by others, and that they see.

Allowing Africans displayed in the zoo "to count" means, for Rilke, not to show them in his poem. And by disappearing from his poem, they escape, at least in part, from Europe's racist imagination. Their absence

in the poem attests to their inaccessibility as a theme for the poem, and this absence, paradoxically, attests to their humanity.

The verses quoted above are followed by a freestanding line:

> And it made me shudder seeing that.[10]
> Und mir war so bange hinzusehen.[11]

In the poem's concluding stanza, Rilke confesses his fondness for animals: "O how much truer are the animals" ("*O wie sind die Tiere so viel treuer*").[12]

In the book titled *Ashantee*, Altenberg's narrator urges one of the two children he has taken to the Prater (Vienna's amusement park and zoo) to also look at the animals: "There is no shame in dreaming from the point of view of an animal."[13] Rilke first dreamed from an animal's point of view in *New Poems*: His efforts to inhabit the perspective of flamingos, parrots, gazelles, cats, and panthers made Rilke a completely "modern poet." In "The Ashanti" Rilke dreams of animals that offer the poet a sealed inner life:

> O how much truer are the animals
> that pace up and down in steel grids,
> unrelated to the antics of the new
> alien things which they don't understand.
> And they burn like a silent fire
> softly out and subside into themselves,
> indifferent to the new adventure
> and with their fierce instinct all alone.[14]

The animals are true only to themselves. They do not depend on us; rather, they are—as the end of the poem puts it—"with their fierce instinct all alone." The instinct of the Africans—in the rhetorical figure of negation and the image of their "blood"—cries out against that. The brutal and inhumane exhibition of the Ashanti in a zoo sets free their humanity. Rilke recognizes that man uses his consciousness to set himself apart from his animal nature and seeks a relation to the world and himself that was there all along but still must be discovered. He prefers animals, because they do not incorporate the poet into their world, and thus can be viewed as objects. The Ashanti, on the other hand, form a connection

with the poet by sharing their wish to be recognized and defined by their observer.

This insight hardly exculpates Rilke for the racism he shared with most Europeans of his time. He wants to keep his aesthetic project in a space that remains outside of politics and ethics, since in those fields it is necessary to make judgments or "pick and choose" from what there is. This idealized space, where no picking and choosing is permitted but into which everything enters unfiltered, is disturbed by the insistent presence of the Ashanti—in Rilke's poem the image of their mouths wide open with laughter. Yet this is precisely the meaning of that pre-ethical, transcendent space: that all that exists is permitted there. The poem about the Africans exhibited in a zoolike setting enacts Rilke's poetic principles, although it describes the poet at a moment where this all-encompassing vision fails.

Without mentioning "The Ashanti," the critic Paul de Man once described Rilke's method as follows: It is "the reversal of the traditional priority, which located the depth of meaning in a referent conceived as an object or a consciousness of which the language is a more or less faithful reflection."[15] In "The Ashanti," Rilke carries out this reversal of referent and meaning by not letting the Ashanti themselves appear and presenting only their inaccessibility—and therefore also their resistance to any rhetorical or imaginative appropriation. The Ashanti are figures in Rilke's language and not actual, embodied referents. De Man characterizes Rilke's devaluing of meaning (that is, of reference) as a form of "liberation": "On the level of poetic language, this renunciation corresponds to the loss of a primacy of meaning located within the referent and it allows for the new rhetoric of Rilke's 'figure.' "[16] De Man says nothing about the ethical and political meaning of this "loss . . . of meaning located within the referent." As soon as Rilke has freed himself from the convention that ties meaning to an actual object (de Man's "referent"), he can present the Ashanti without portraying them as "genuine" Africans. If he had stuck with a conception of meaning as equivalent to reference, it would have been impossible for the Ashanti to be represented on their own terms, apart from the semantics of a racist Europe.

Rilke's decision not to describe the Ashanti, and instead to show how they share (and therefore disappoint or block) the poet's expectations, projections, and "vanity," corresponds to the liberation of "meaning located within the referent." Does that mean that Rilke denies the

Ashanti their actual existence and turns them into the mere product of discourse, into mere figments of his imagination? Of course. But even so, in this dialectical poem the Africans escape the racist European imagination that had landed them in the zoo in actuality. In Rilke's poem, they win the autonomy of vanity, which they do not have in the Jardin d'Acclimatation, where (as Rilke's ironic subtitle also states) they are supposed to fit in and "acclimate" to the climate of Europe. Their mouths are prepared not only for laughter, but also for speech.

Rilke's poem is not postcolonial, nor is it a protest poem. Such interpretations would keep the Ashanti prisoners in the European imagination, as if their humanity and freedom depended on the judgment, politics, perception, and goodwill of Europeans and of a European poet. Africans had already featured as performers in a mass spectacle in Rilke's early and all-but-forgotten "Visions of Christ" from 1896, in which he dryly describes an African entertainer who forgets his part because of a primitive homesickness:

> And yonder, as if rooted to the spot
> A black man stood who should have bellowed, but
> Became enraptured of a coconut.[17]

How is it possible to free such a figure from the pernicious web of European racist projections?

De Man emphasizes that the "urgency" of Rilke's promise of a transcendent level of meaning (above the political reality in which these humans are prisoners in a zoo) cannot be separated from the "equally urgent, and equally poetic, need of retracting it at the very instant [Rilke] seems to be on the point of offering it to us."[18] Rilke's fear of looking directly at the Ashanti constitutes this simultaneous promise and retraction. At the linguistic level, Rilke's fear at being looked at by the Ashanti is the fear of losing his protective layer of poetic self-consciousness. Its second, literal meaning is the frisson experienced by a light-skinned European on a Sunday afternoon at the zoo before the cheap replica of an African village with a few Africans dressed to look exotic, other, strange. Rilke's fear is that the Ashanti will recognize his gaze in a way different from how animals behave. Rilke can promise transcendence and retract it at the same time, because his fear is simultaneously the metaphorical fear of the poet and the literal fear of the

visitor to the zoo. By speaking to both the figurative and literal levels at once, this poem can simultaneously show (and thus make a spectacle out of) and not show (and thus grant meaning to) the Ashanti.

On March 8, 1907, Rilke explains in a letter how the patient observation of the outside world allows an artist's internal vision to develop independently. The potential of "The Ashanti" may be found in this directive on how to unleash one's creativity:

> To look at something is such a wonderful thing of which we still know so little. When we look at something, we are turned completely toward the outside by this activity. But just when we are most turned toward the outside like that, things seem to take place within us that have longed for an unobserved moment, and while they unfold within us, whole and strangely anonymous, *without us*, their significance begins to take shape in the external object in the form of a strong, convincing, indeed their only possible name. And by means of this name we contentedly and respectfully recognize what is happening inside us without ourselves touching upon it. We understand it only quietly, entirely from a distance, under the sign of a thing that had just been alien and in the next instant is alienated from us again.[19]

When we observe something very patiently and closely, "strangely anonymous" things take place inside us. A new knowledge forms in us and overtakes us, since we can name this new awareness only with a "possible name" from "without." What does that mean? That something is changed by Rilke's "The Ashanti," something "inside us" but without our conscious control: a new (in)sight, which cannot fix or recognize, approve or condemn, the meaning of what is seen before it is seen—in this case Rilke's meaningful poem about Africans in the zoo. Here emerges a new concept of the everyday, which Rilke thinks of as "part of everything else," but which could, at any moment, become no longer "everyday," no longer a "part of everything else." This notion of the everyday and what is right in front of us as the potential for completely new meaning exists in every single one of Rilke's poems. In "The Ashanti" this potential is the possibility of seeing the Africans as humans, which means not regarding them as "other" but rather, based on our

understanding that they are "alienated from us again," seeing them, like all humans, as unique and yet part of the everyday at once.

The Ashanti block or interrupt Rilke's artistic project of "blessed contemplation." They mark the limit of the European imagination, which retreats from the task of recognizing other humans as such. Rilke addresses this limit in a later poem:

> For there is a boundary to looking
> [. . .]
> Work of the eyes is done, now
> Go and do heart-work.[20]

In the Jardin d'Acclimatation such "heart-work" would be the beginning of empathy and recognition, which would compel one to turn away. And that would be the beginning of the end of such inhumane exhibitions of people like animals. Rilke turns away, but the political intervention does not follow.

Rilke's project of artistic self-overcoming and of finding the right way of seeing, of a practice of *seeing* as a step past the "boundary to looking" from the "work of the eyes" to "heart-work," encounters the Ashanti. This encounter challenges the racist European view of the world, which locks people in actual and metaphoric cages and recognizes the meaning of these people *only*, blindly, in relation to Europe. The Ashanti throw Rilke's poem and project off course. They shamefully interrupt the stanzas and cause his rhythm to falter: In the original Greek meaning of the word, the Ashanti are Rilke's stumbling block, his *skandalon*, his scandal.

b
for Buddha

Can Rilke's writings, from the perennially popular and often-cited *Letters to a Young Poet* to the hard-won consolations of *Duino Elegies*, offer a guide to life?

In 1907 the Viennese bookseller Hugo Heller began a survey, the results of which were published by Hermann Bahr in a paperback volume entitled *Books for Real Life* (*Die Bücher zum wirklichen Leben*) that in a very short time sold forty thousand copies, an appreciable figure. In addition to bankers, philosophers, and politicians, famous authors listed the books that might be "indispensable [. . .] necessities for existence" for young people.[1] In his foreword, Hermann Bahr said of Heller's survey: "The question asked here is not about books, but rather about the future. What we think of it, what we want it to look like, what kind of belief we have in it."[2] Although it was only 1907, two participants in the survey cited Rilke's poetry, even if it did "not find a large audience" in the present, as a "major work of the future."[3] In his contribution to the book, Rilke wrote: "My relationship to books is not without an aspect of imprisonment, and it can happen that in a large library I find myself as if I had fallen into the hands of a powerful enemy force, against which any resistance by an individual would be useless."[4]

This is certainly an understandable response. The sheer mass of books to grapple with can cause even motivated and fast readers to break into a

sweat. This response seems so much more honest than the famous passage from Rilke's novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, so beloved by young poets and haughtily titled "Bibliothèque Nationale," in which the narrator writes with childlike (feigned) pride: "I am sitting here and have a poet. What a fate. [. . .] But just imagine my fate: I, perhaps the shabbiest of all these readers, and a foreigner: I have a poet. Even though I am poor."[5] In the novel, the euphoria doesn't last long. The library's august reading room can only briefly support the illusion of equality among its visitors. The passage ends with the narrator trying without success to lose himself in the fantasy of his future life as a poet, in which he has an old country house to call home, looks out onto a gentle green garden, and apart from a comfortable armchair owns nothing but flowers, a loyal dog, "and a strong walking-stick for the stony paths. And nothing else."[6] It is a fantasy of the writer as a perfectly self-sufficient creature that offsets the poet's "poverty" for a few minutes. The destitute Malte cannot find a home in the Bibliothèque Nationale and must be content with much less than a country house: "But life has turned out differently, God knows why. My old furniture is rotting in the barn where I left it, and I myself, yes, my God, I have no roof over me, and it is raining into my eyes."[7] Eventually the Paris rain rinses the nostalgia for such rural kitsch, to which Malte clings for a while, out of Rilke's narrator's eyes and mind. Rilke's language grows harsher over the course of the novel, and the thought first formed in the formidable library that one could feel truly at home in the work of another poet, or "have" another poet as a metaphoric soul mate, muse, guardian angel, or mentor, collapses. The disillusioned Malte learns that one cannot be truly at home in a country house, least of all by oneself.

Rilke's admission of the overwhelming power of books anticipates what he writes in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* after the detour into "a quiet house in the mountains" with its solid middle-class and respectable "mahogany desk" and its "potbellied dresser at the back of his bedroom."[8] That is, Rilke admits that dealing with books can sometimes be torture. That the sheer mass of books already written can demoralize the budding poet, rather than offer him a comfortable home in the grand library. That one often has no chance against so many books. That one must find that stony path alone. Yet this admission of anxiety also reveals the great influence books can have: If books can be so threatening, they must also have the potential to help in real life. In his response to the bestselling

survey *Books for Real Life*, Rilke suggests that the path to real life is the path away from books. He puts the text behind him and deliberately misunderstands the title of Heller's survey. For Rilke, "books for real life" does not mean books that give advice *about* life, but rather books that lead *into* life. The Danish author Jens Peter Jacobsen, who features prominently in Rilke's famous *Letters to a Young Poet*, "opened" such a "path" for Rilke: "To the same degree that books have made an impression on me, they also point me beyond them into nature" and "support me in my inner certainty that even the quietest and most inaccessible parts of us have a sensual counterpoint in nature. The only task is to find it."[9] The way to himself, and to what seems "most inaccessible" in his own nature, is opened to Rilke as soon as he puts away books written by others. On August 2, 1904, he writes in a letter: "In the end there are only two or three things I would trust myself to write about, and there are probably no books that make the list."[10] Another passage in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* reads: "thus it became clear to me that I was never a real reader."[11]

Between the short-lived magic of the library scene in his only novel and his recommendation in the response to *Books for Real Life*, Rilke seeks to learn his way *in* life from books, without turning away from life. How does one achieve a balance between the stultifying anxiety of "falling into the hands of a powerful enemy force" in the library—that is, of surrendering to another's ideas—and the illusory belief that one can "own" and assimilate another poet to improve oneself? Where is the path between letting go and holding on; how does one free oneself from the influence of others without becoming spiritually adrift and without any guiding stars, or, in Rilke's terms, "poor"?

Rilke charted a path for even the most critical of his readers. In the midst of a devastating, war-hungry age, the conservative German poet Gottfried Benn, in notebooks written between 1936 and 1940, cited the final line of Rilke's poem "Requiem for Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth," written for a young man who took his life at age nineteen, as a tough motto for a generation headed into disaster: "Who talks of victory? To endure is all."[12]

But it was not only fellow poets to whom Rilke showed the right path. Even during his lifetime he did not resist the "temptation" to give comfort to less prominent, directionless souls. In 1920 he wrote: "Oh love, there are so many people who expect something of me, I no longer know

what—help, advice (from me, who finds himself so helpless in the face of everything important in life!) and even though I can see that they are lost, that they are deceiving themselves,—I am tempted to share a few of my experiences with them, and offer them a few fruits of my solitude."[13]

Rilke's ambition to share his works as "fruits of [his] solitude" landed his work in the self-help section of today's booksellers. In many difficult situations, a Rilke quote offers support and guidance. (I have relied on Rilke's words when I've found myself speechless in the face of loss.) Rilke is often thought to have done more than other poets did for other generations, which had been largely to sweeten their well-earned leisure time with pleasant rhymes. But in spite of the uses of Rilke's words on calendars, on coffee mugs, in poetry blogs, and in Hollywood movies, it does not matter if people read the right books for the wrong reasons or listen to the right poets for the wrong reasons, as long as they read the right books and listen to the right poets. But how well does Rilke truly fit alongside Deepak Chopra and Rumi in the New Age section? Is the poet whom W. H. Auden famously called the "Santa Claus of loneliness" a fitting prophet for our age?

Times change. Gottfried Benn's war-torn generation had picked Rilke's steely "Who talks of victory? To endure is all" as a motto and sidelined Rilke's other works, the allegedly effete stuff with unicorns, fragrant hydrangeas, and especially the angels. In the 1960s, other poets protested against this partial appropriation of some of Rilke's lines by hard-boiled types like Benn. Paul Celan, who had grown up reading Rilke in his hometown of Czernowitz before his world was engulfed and destroyed by the Second World War and then the Holocaust, during which his parents were murdered by Germans, found the lines chosen by Benn less than inspiring.[14] Celan implicitly accused Benn of having used these lines of Rilke's to bury the debate about who in Germany had been raving about "victory" and who was really entitled to speak of "enduring." "Enduring" and "surviving" were no longer "all" for Celan and many of his readers. For Celan, what mattered was the responsibility to remember what the cost of survival had been. And Rilke's "to endure" included for Celan also the endurance of those persecuted by the Germans in an unspeakable fashion, and not only the endurance of the Germans as Benn had understood the term. In the 1970s, as a younger generation of German readers tried to escape from the regulated lifestyles of their respective countries, East and West Germany, and come to terms with the legacy of

vast crimes committed by their family members, Rilke experienced a second renaissance in the English-speaking world alongside Hermann Hesse and Carl Jung. During this period another line of Rilke's became the motto of a generation. It was the famous final line of his enigmatic poem about a fragment of a Greek statue, "Archaic Torso of Apollo": "You have to change your life."[15]

I believe that today, when some of the liberationist impulses of the 1960s have settled into institutions and a new generation seeks meaning in ways not even conceivable only decades ago, there is another line that takes on relevance and meaning. This line hovers between resignation and control, melancholy and sovereignty, and captures the zeitgeist: "All of life is lived" ("*Alles Leben wird gelebt*").[16]

"All of life is lived." This line from *The Book of Hours* may speak the most directly to the mood of our times, because it makes a place for life as something yet to be imagined, instead of giving the subject complete decision-making power and control over his own being. To put it differently: Precisely the thing that we do not understand, that we cannot grasp intellectually, that we do not want to face and suppress from our lives, ultimately forces its way back and, even if in a different form, is lived. This line essentially comes down to: Live every moment in full consciousness that you are alive.

The apparent tautology "All of life is lived" connects seamlessly to such Buddhist teachings as the *Dhammapada* of Buddha, which says more or less that "the *dhamma* is the *dhamma* because of the *dhamma*." Glenn Wallis explains that this "means something like: 'The teaching is the proper way of living because of the way things are.' And, unlike in theistic traditions, 'the way things are' is, in the Buddhist view, readily observable, here and now, to anyone who would develop precisely the skill to discern it. The *dhamma*, as teaching, is precisely the means to this skill."[17]

Compare this to Rilke's thinking, in a letter:

> Most people have no idea how beautiful the world is, or how much majesty there is in even the smallest things, in a random flower, a pebble, a piece of tree bark, or a birch leaf. Grown-up people, who are busy with various things and worries and who torment themselves with trivial concerns, completely lose sight of this abundance [. . .] And yet the greatest beauty of all would be if all people [. . .] would not lose the ability to take the same intense delight in a birch

> leaf, the feather of a peacock, or the hopping of a crow as in a majestic mountain range or a glorious palace. What is small is just as inherently not small as what is great is in itself great. The world is shot through with a great and eternal beauty, which touches equally all that is great as what is small; for in the most important and essential matters there is no injustice on earth.[18]

One should not be distracted by Rilke's use of the term "beauty." In a typically subtle transformation of a concept into its opposite, Rilke would consider it "the greatest beauty of all" if people did not take *beauty* as the only valid way of perceiving the world. But it's not simply that the world *would be* beautiful if people stopped prejudging what is beautiful and what is not. The world *is* beautiful in this way. It's only that people do not see that, and thus prevent this beauty. Like his predecessors Baudelaire and Rimbaud, Rilke challenges a prevailing tenet in the European aesthetic tradition, which takes the world and divides it into the beautiful, ugly, sublime, important, and meaningless. He wants to reach a kind of thinking or, more precisely, a sensory experience, that—like Buddhist teaching—allows for everything on equal terms. "Who still believes," Rilke writes, "that art can portray the beautiful which has an opposite (this little term 'beautiful' belongs to a concept of taste). Art is the passion for the whole. Its result: equanimity and the equal participation of everything."[19]

Does this mean that Rilke's writings are correctly placed in the self-help section, next to Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet*, paperback editions of *The Teachings of the Buddha*, meditation manuals, and celebrities reading sections of the *Dhammapada*? It may seem that the booksellers are correct and that the way to Rilke passes through Eastern thought. But in fact Rilke's path no more leads to Buddhism (which, like all teachings, he rejected) than Buddhism leads to Buddhism, as long as we understand "Rilke" and "Buddhism" as teachings instead of results, as knowledge and not as everyday practice. The path, that is, the teaching, does not lead away from life, nor run through it, but *is* life: "All of life is lived." In light of the striking similarity between the central teaching of Buddhism, that the way things are can be experienced directly, and Rilke's "passion for the whole," the connection between Rilke and the Buddha is well worth exploring.

A year after Rilke's response to the survey for *Books for Real Life*, Clara Rilke sent her husband a copy of a new and widely celebrated German edition of *The Teachings of Gotama Buddha*. Does the Buddha put Rilke on the right path? Karl Eugen Neumann's 1902 German translation, the first full edition of the Buddha's teachings in any European language, had quickly become a bestseller.[20] Many important authors who had first encountered Indian philosophy in the works of philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer found this edition indispensible. Thomas Mann "carried with him the *Teachings of Gotama Buddha* in the translation by Karl Eugen Neuman [. . .] safely through all the stations of [his] wanderings," including his move to the United States, and counted this work "among the great translations of world literature."[21] Hermann Hesse mentioned Neumann's translation in his essay in *Books for Real Life* as an important contribution, since "recent research has not yet produced any [other] truly classical work." George Bernard Shaw likened the translation to Luther's translation of Scripture: "I can say that in placing a complete translation of the Buddhist canonical scriptures within the reach of the German people you are rendering as great a public service as that of the first publishers of Luther's translation of the Bible, and I hope your enterprise will be adequately rewarded." Hugo von Hofmannsthal attributed great importance to the book, which appeared "at the moment of a world-historical crisis—which was not a spiritual crisis, unless it were also a crisis of language"; once Edmund Husserl began reading Neumann's translation, he "could not, in spite of other more important work, tear [himself] away." For the founder of phenomenology, in "this time of the collapse of our culture which is being degenerated by superficiality [. . .] this coming-to-see the Indian way of transcending the world" constituted "an important experience."[22] Rilke, in contrast to these effusive appreciations of the Buddha's writings, thanks his wife for giving him the Buddha's writings in a letter and immediately explains why he, unlike his contemporaries Mann, Hesse, Hofmannsthal, Shaw, and Husserl, who took the book enthusiastically as a spiritual and cultural "great experience," will not read the teachings of the Buddha:

> I opened the book, and already several of the first words I glimpsed made me shudder [. . .] Why do I experience this new gesture of hesitation, which puts you off so much?—It may be that I do it for

> the sake of Malte Laurids, whom I have been neglecting for too long.[23]

After this initial shudder over "several of the first words [he] glimpsed," Rilke closed his edition of *The Teachings of Gotama Buddha* and, presumably, forgot it. Rilke then explains how he must defend his projects against any rivals for his attention, including any powerful author, any teacher, and his wife. When he writes that leafing through the Buddha's texts makes him shudder, this gesture is the uncanny shudder of *recognition*. Rilke feels that he has been called upon to write his own Buddha book. Of course, Rilke rejects other influences at this moment in his life: for example *Goethe's Correspondence with a Child*, "this strong, imploring testimony against" Goethe, or ultimately Auguste Rodin as an overbearing and unfair teacher. But while Rilke at least briefly engages with Goethe's text to deflect the precursor's influence, he pushes Buddha out of his mind without opening the book again. He reads Goethe, "while Buddha is made to wait. Please don't judge me. Please, let me be and have faith. Don't ask anything else of me, not even in spirit."[24] He engages with everything, especially Goethe, just long enough to move it out of the way. Only Buddha is not given a chance.

But it is hard to be more Buddhist than this, for we do not learn the way from the teachers who point it out to us, but rather by walking it ourselves—in Rilke's case, by writing himself.[25] "Don't judge me," writes Rilke, and implores his former spouse, "let me be": I can rely on nothing but myself.

"Let me be," in the letter to Clara, also means: Let me go. Let me be on my way. Rilke was well on the way to becoming a master, even while he was still working as a secretary for the great sculptor Rodin. He then had a falling-out with Rodin—on a petty pretext, but also because on the way to Rodin he had "mistakenly" glimpsed his own path as going beyond all masters, gurus, and analysts to himself as a poet who, full of "passion for the whole," made no more distinction between life and teachings. Rilke doesn't need to read *The Teachings of Gotama Buddha*: Wherever it might take him, Rilke—and we can't ask any more of him than this, "not even in spirit"—has been there all along.

"It is best to simply take notice of some things that will no longer change, without either lamenting these facts or even judging them."[26] This plea not to judge underlies Rilke's confession in *The Notebooks of*

Malte Laurids Brigge that he was "never a real reader." It also constitutes the first step toward contemplation as a Buddhist practice.

Three years before Clara had sent her husband the Buddha book, the young and still unknown Rilke lived for a short spell in Meudon, near Paris, in a tiny cottage on the estate of Rodin, from whom Rilke hoped to learn how to live an artist's life. The grounds were filled with Rodin's works, which Rilke watched being created in the large workshop every day. From his window he looked upon a massive sculpture, *Buddha at Rest*, in Rodin's garden.

> After dinner I soon take leave, and am in my little cottage at 8:30 at the latest. In front of me I see the wide sky blooming with stars, and down below the window the gravel path rises up a small hill to where a statue of Buddha rests in fanatic reticence and expends the unspeakable completeness of his gesture under the skies of day and night in quiet withdrawal. C'est le centre du monde, I said to Rodin. And then he looks at one so kindly, so much like a true friend. That is very beautiful, and a great deal.[27]

Rilke is unusually stable during his brief sojourn as Rodin's secretary. He recognized himself in the Buddha statue. But whenever Rilke uses "so" as an adverb ("so kindly"), he is usually not being quite honest. And to be sure, instead of remaining in "fanatic reticence" as Rodin's student, he draws on his own "quiet withdrawal" and the distance from the Buddha (and of course from Rodin) to find the strength to express the "unspeakable completeness" of life and death, heaven and earth, inner and outer worlds. (Ultimately Rodin fired Rilke for contacting one of his wealthy clients under his own, rather than Rodin's, name.) Rilke, living in a little cottage in the shadow of the master and across from his Buddha statue, explains to the great and famous man, the unexcelled creator, Rodin: Every evening, after I have left you, when I am alone with myself, I behold the center of the world.

Rilke tries to communicate from within the center of his existence, without either betraying it or wrapping it in silence. In his poetry Rilke strives for the balance between the interiority of an object and the consciousness of the poet and reader, which necessarily remains external to the object. On the linguistic level this effort often takes the form of a series of rhetorical inversions, which flood the poem's point of departure

(the original referent, or the poem's apparent "theme" and central figure) with a series of new figures and thereby, like countless layers of thick glaze, eventually make it unrecognizable. The resulting poems begin with images and often expansive metaphors, which are then superseded to make these metaphors disappear in the texture of more metaphors, meta-metaphors, if you will, and a newly formed language.

In Rilke's *New Poems* there are three such poems about the Buddha. They focus on physical objects to examine whether these objects exist independently of our looking at them. They treat this basic inaction and indifference of things as their immanence—which is no different than the immanence of Rilke's poetry, which occasionally treats words for their sound, for instance, instead of their signification within a language. Each of the three Buddha poems is a self-portrait. As the Buddha eventually disappears into the descriptive metaphors, so does Rilke's self disappear in his writing. The larger context, which Rilke calls the "passion for the whole," is evoked in all three poems, as Rilke places the pure materiality of the statue above the spiritual significance of Buddha, so that ultimately the material itself is recognizable as a higher order.

This is one of Rilke's most characteristic poetic methods: In poems about the inner essence of a given thing, he takes what seem to be its secondary qualities and ancillary objects (such as the material of which a relic is made, the color of a flower, the shape of an object, or, also in *New Poems*, the "vinegar-soaked sponge" and "hard brush" used for washing a corpse[28]) and emphasizes these properties in such a way that the thing in question is pried from its familiar context, emptied of its allegorical meaning, and glimpsed as if for the first time. The idea in the Buddha poems is to layer the metaphors of transcendence (star, distance, sublimity, majesty, gold, eternity, center) in such a way that they eventually give up all meaning in the face of the unmoving presence of the Buddha. Rilke takes the metaphors literally, develops more images from them, and thus leads them *ad absurdum*. The metaphors are stripped of their value; the poem, however—as one of the Buddha poems says—"endures." The first Buddha poem, which is titled "Buddha," likens the Buddha to a star:

> As if he listened. Stillness: something distant . . .
> We check ourselves—and do not hear it.
> And he is Star. And throngs of giant stars
> which we do not see stand around him.[29]

Als ob er horchte. Stille: eine Ferne . . .
Wir halten ein und hören sie nicht mehr.
Und er ist Stern. Und andre große Sterne,
die wir nicht sehen, stehen um ihn her.[30]

Rilke is looking at himself. He writes to Clara: "Don't be dismayed—but I am so overly sensitive, and when anyone's gaze rests on me, I grow weak in that spot. I would like to know from now on that only the stars linger on me, they see everything at once from their distance, the whole, and so do not tie anything down, but rather release everything in everything . . ."[31]

He wants to "release everything in everything": The wish for complete consciousness, the underlying gesture of meditation, the complete disinhibition and relinquishing of the self for the sake of the self, is always in conflict with the knowledge and awareness that in consciousness and meditation the desire (as well as knowledge and even awareness) and the self are supposed to disappear. Rilke's "Stillness" in the first line of "Buddha" describes not only the state in which Rilke discovers a statue of Buddha or imagines the Buddha to be. "Stillness" ("*Stille*") is also an imperative, a call, and a command, "Hush!"—to abide, to yield, to behold the Buddha, to sink into yourself, to read this poem. But as soon as we fall quiet with no purpose in mind, according to Rilke, we no longer examine that which so suddenly made us still. In the letter to Clara, Rilke expresses the monomaniacal wish to know that all "the stars linger on [him]." This wish corresponds to his longing for freedom from everything, a freedom that makes him the center of the world. It is Rilke's wish for complete stillness, for "releas[ing] everything in everything," which is tantamount to wishlessness, the end of desire, ignorance, repose in a stillness that can no longer be grasped.

Oh, he is everything. Really: do we stand here
until he sees us? What would he want?
And if instead we threw ourselves before him,
He'd remain deep and idle as a cat.[32]

O er ist Alles. Wirklich, warten wir,
daß er uns sähe? Sollte er bedürfen?
Und wenn wir hier uns vor ihm niederwürfen,
er bliebe tief und träge wie ein Tier.[33]

The Buddha is no golden calf, but rather an unmoving and unmoved, indifferent animal. It has no relation to us, since the Buddha meets our wishes with less than his own being. There is nothing but the inertness that underlies consciousness. And it is just this that we want to learn from the Buddha: to be—without the discontinuousness of the self that makes us aware of our being. "Let me be and have faith. Don't ask anything else of me. Not even in spirit," Rilke writes to his wife after she sends him the Buddha book. The final strophe of the Buddha poem should also simply exist, merely *be*. So it is structured around the words "tugs," "circled," "forgets," "denied" (in German: "*reißt*," "*kreist*," "*vergißt*," "*verweist*"), all of which literally contain the hidden promise of pure being—the German *ist*, for "is"—without appearing, without being redeemed.

> For what tugs us roughly to his feet
> has circled in him for a million years.
> He, who forgets what our life teaches
> and abides in the wisdom we're denied.[34]

> Denn das, was uns zu seinen Füßen reißt,
> das kreist in ihm seit Millionen Jahren.
> Er, der vergißt was wir erfahren
> und der erfährt was uns verweist.[35]

The Buddha's being is not a fulfillment, nor a revelation. We cannot experience it as long as we think of that experience as a step on the way to knowledge. For the Buddha "abides in" what we are "denied," that which leads us away from experience to reflection, awareness, thinking, understanding, memory, and knowledge.

The second Buddha poem in the same part of *New Poems* is also called "Buddha." It deals with the base materiality of a Buddha, whose inscrutability confuses the pilgrim. The Buddha does not rise out of "kingdoms full of penitence," as the icons in a church do, whose art- and craftworks are meant to be signs of the coming majesty that compensates for the rejection of this world. The power of the Buddha arises rather from its seeming lack of connection with the world of the pilgrims. This distinguishes it from Christian icons, which draw their strength from the believers' material and spiritual sacrifices.

Already from afar the wary foreign
pilgrim feels how it drips from him goldenly:
as if whole kingdoms full of penitence
had heaped up all the secrecies.

but drawing nearer he grows confused
before the loftiness of these eyebrows:
for this is not their drinking cups
and the earrings of their women.[36]

Schon von ferne fühlt der fremde scheue
Pilger, wie es golden von ihm träuft;
so als hätten Reiche voller Reue
ihre Heimlichkeiten aufgehäuft.

Aber näher kommend wird er irre
vor der Hoheit dieser Augenbraun:
denn das sind nicht ihre Trinkgeschirre
und die Ohrgehänge ihrer Fraun.[37]

The Buddha does not care about his pilgrims; he makes them grow confused and lose their way, instead of offering himself as the destination and purpose of their pilgrimage. The pilgrims see that the gleam of his gold cannot be compared with anything from the world they live in. The "loftiness of these eyebrows" comes from indifference to the objects and values of this world. Yet the pilgrim is amazed and confused that the material of the Buddha remains so present. With the emphasis on the material, which even the Buddha cannot overcome by virtue of a transcendental meaning, Rilke proposes something like a koan, an impossible riddle in the Buddhist tradition. It goes like this: If the only goal in Buddhism is being, then a bejeweled statue dripping with gold, just like Gotama Buddha, does nothing more or less than—be. The body, the statue, the gold, the material cannot be separated from the spirit. In a letter Rilke describes this philosophy, which is in fact not a philosophy but merely life: "You know that I am not one of those who neglect their body to offer it up as a sacrifice to the soul. Mine [i.e., my soul] does not at all care to receive such an offering, since the entire motion of my spirit begins in my blood."[38]

The unknowability of the materiality of the Buddha, which—like Rilke's body and its rushing blood—cannot be forgotten just because of its spiritual meaning, creates a broader connection:

> Is there someone then who could say
> what things were melted down to erect
> this image on this flower chalice:
>
> more hushed, more peacefully yellow
> than a golden one and all around
> touching space the way it does itself.[39]
>
> Wüßte einer denn zu sagen, welche
> Dinge eingeschmolzen wurden, um
> dieses Bild auf diesem Blumenkelche
>
> aufzurichten: stummer, ruhiggelber
> als ein goldenes und rundherum
> auch den Raum berührend wie sich selber.[40]

What "touches space the way it does itself" is neither self-involved nor lost to itself. Here is the key to Rilke's belief, his faith, his system of thought (really it should be called his poetics, since it is too materialistic for a credo): that the things of this world constitute the entire context that can be given to us. Hence Rilke's conviction that a simple life would prepare him for his work, which led him to becoming a vegetarian, and forgoing (unlike his French precursor poets) alcohol, tobacco, and drugs. To make up for this sobriety he took "air baths" in the nude, had a passion for walking barefoot, and relished erotic communion with many of the women in his life. His poetry exists not in opposition to his body, because he finds the reason for his poetry in the rushes of the body. Instead of seeking a supernatural moment of transcendence, Rilke stands by the unmoving material composition of the world.

The result: The pilgrims in the Buddha poem "grow confused," because they want to experience the meaning of the Buddha as something extramaterial—something spiritual as opposed to material. But the meaning of the Buddha is nothing but his physical presence, his goldenness. To express the fact that the Buddha overcomes himself simply by being what he is, through his own physical presence as a statue, Rilke

never once makes a distinction in either of the two poems called "Buddha," nor in the third Buddha poem in *New Poems*, called "Buddha in Glory," between God and idol, saint and statue, idea and icon, spirit and matter, language and referent. We don't know if he means the Buddha himself or an image like the large statue in Rodin's garden. For it is just this distinction, so fundamental for Western thought, between essence and substance, spirit and body, language and meaning, appearance and reality, imagination, will, and world, that Rilke makes unrecognizable. Nothing remains but a poem in which these distinctions are invalidated and in which the subject, in the sound of the rhymes (in German, the final six lines rhyme in a pattern of A-B-A-C-B-C: "*sagen, welche*"/"*Blumenkelche*"; "*wurden, um*"/"*und rundherum*"; "*ruhiggelber*"/"*wie sich selber*"), touches the empty space of the page "the way it does itself." The enormous spiritual meaning of the Buddha is not distinguishable from his being absolutely material.

But Rilke would not be Rilke if he left the blatantly phallic "Buddha in Glory," in which the "thick fluids rise and flow," in its position as the center of the universe. In an opening stanza that takes off with a prayer's intensity and the urgent energy of one of Rilke's erotic poems to Lou Andreas-Salomé, he focuses the quasiatomic centrality of the Buddha, who shines like the sun at the center of the solar system:

> Center of all centers, core of cores,
> almond self-enclosed, and growing sweet—
> all this universe, to the furthest stars
> all beyond them, is your flesh, your fruit.[41]
>
> Mitte aller Mitten, Kern der Kerne,
> Mandel, die sich einschließt und versüßt,—
> dieses Alles bis an alle Sterne
> ist dein Fruchtfleisch: Sei gegrüßt.[42]

That poem embeds the traditional lyric image of a fruit in its rind in the very modern conception of the universe, of which Rilke was an adherent (he followed with enthusiasm newspaper accounts of the "great success" won by Albert Einstein against the opinion of conservative scholars at a conference).[43] Ultimately "Buddha in Glory" looks beyond itself:

A billion stars go spinning through the night,
blazing high above your head.
But in you is the presence that
will be, when all the stars are dead.[44]

denn ganz oben werden deine Sonnen
voll und glühend umgedreht.
Doch in dir ist schon begonnen,
was die Sonnen übersteht.[45]

The Buddha as embodiment of the "unspeakable closeness" that for Rilke represents the apotheosis of the work of art contains a force that overcomes this unity. What outlives the sun and billions of stars? Rilke's poetry, naturally—at least that is what the poet means to say in the final poem of *New Poems*. It remains the center, the core, and the flesh of the Buddha, and thus that material of the divinity, as in the second Buddha poem, where unknown materials were melted down to "erect this image on this flower chalice." What outlives the sun and stars is all that endures beyond our expectations and hopes as mere materiality. And this is what Rilke wants to achieve in his poems: that his words carry on, simultaneous with and independent of the meaning we find in them. This is impossible, utopian. And yet Rilke comes close to this by letting the white metaphors of truth—the suns and stars in his poetry—burn themselves out. What endures is nothing but the poem, which in its final lines leaves its metaphorical matrix behind. *New Poems*'s final poem also leaves behind the two earlier Buddha poems, whose metaphors all orbited the unnamed, white metaphor of the sun, as our guiding star, as truth. Thus, in the first Buddha poem:

And he is Star. And throngs of giant stars
which we do not see stand around him.[46]

Und er ist Stern. Und andre große Sterne,
die wir nicht sehen, stehen um ihn her.[47]

And the final stanza of the second Buddha poem:

more hushed, more peacefully yellow
than a golden one and all around
touching space the way it does itself.[48]

stummer, ruhiggelber
als ein goldenes und rundherum
auch den Raum berührend wie sich selber.[49]

In the final poem, "Buddha in Glory," these golden metaphors have been melted down. The self-sufficient sun is called autopoetic and onanistic, after having centered the poem around itself as "center of all centers, core of cores [. . .] all this universe to the furthest stars." But something "will be" after the sun has blazed out. And what "will be" is no deeper insight, no wisdom, no improvement of thought. It is the poem that lets its metaphors flare out in its midst.

C
for Circle

In late fall of 1926, Rilke was on his deathbed. He was suffering terribly from leukemia, which had been diagnosed too late, and entrusted himself to the Swiss doctor Dr. Haemmerli despite his lifelong fear of having his body interpreted by another person. "It's bad enough that the needs of my body have forced me to hand myself over to an intermediary and negotiator, that is, to a doctor."[1]

In his despair, Rilke had, a year before his death, called on another person as "intermediary and negotiator": the friend of his youth and his erstwhile lover Lou Andreas-Salomé, who as early as 1913 had been trained under Freud's supervision as one of the first female psychoanalysts. In 1912 Rilke had turned down a chance to be psychoanalyzed, saying, "If one were to exorcise my demons [. . .], this would also be a small, indeed very small scare, to put it thus, for my angels."[2] He considered Freud, whom he had personally met in 1913, "important and memorable" after that first meeting, even if his writings struck him initially as "unsympathetic" (he later revised his judgment and had new publications by Freud sent to him as soon as they appeared); ultimately he viewed Freud to be a representative of "that human science which does not yet, in fact, exist."[3] As a poet, he feared this "straightening up" of the thus "disinfected soul" not because he considered analysis useless, but rather because he viewed it as too effective, too powerful; Rilke's rejection of psychoanalysis was

based on his great confidence in its healing power to cure his neuroses, on which his productivity depended.[4]

Faced with a serious illness that the doctor could do nothing to relieve, Rilke writes to Andreas-Salomé to ask for help. In the letter he identifies a presumed bodily cause of his suffering: masturbation.

> Dear Lou,
>
> [. . .] for two years now I have been living more and more in the grip of something horrible, the most immediate cause of which (a stimulation I carry out on myself) I keep aggravating with a devilish obsession, even when I think that I have overcome this temptation. It is a horrid circle [*ein entsetzlicher Cirkel*] of black magic that encloses me like a Bruegel-style picture of hell. Now, for the last month, I've had visions that preserve that particular phobia in me [. . .] It has been two years since I first concocted a scheme to outwit that repugnant desire to carry out that stimulation [. . .] I traveled to Paris [. . .] in order that such a complete change of environment and every influence would, at one go, tear me out of the rhythm of senseless temptation [. . .] But victory did not come [. . .] Just imagine: this compulsion to do the same old damage to myself, with all its after-effects and threats, was stronger, more powerful [. . .] and if I [. . .] stayed in Paris, it was only because I was ashamed to go back to my tower still entangled in the same snares, where I was afraid that in my isolation these pesky devils would really start to overdo their game with me.[5]

And so on.

Rilke suffers terribly from these "defeats," whose absurdity he fully comprehends. For in the same year that his compulsive behavior torments him as "the most immediate cause" of his suffering, he without a doubt read André Gide's novel *The Counterfeiters*, in which the French author seeks to strip onanism, among other things, of its social taboo.[6] But Andreas-Salomé does not liberate Rilke from his compulsions when she links his masturbatory urges to his work. In Rilke's work, as we shall see, there is already an empty space prepared for masturbation, which cannot be filled with analytical or other explanations.

Rilke's letter to Andreas-Salomé is a final call for help, a desperate plea, a last reproach to his first serious lover and great maternal

figure—you are not there for me! In her answer, Andreas-Salomé tries to dissuade Rilke from locating the root of his illness in onanism. The doctor had informed Andreas-Salomé about Rilke's acute leukemia. He considered sharing this knowledge with Rilke too risky for the patient, who had requested that his diagnosis be shared exclusively with Andreas-Salomé and his close friend and patron Nanny Wunderly-Volkart, but not with Rilke, the patient, himself. But with her psychoanalytic explanations, Andreas-Salomé makes Rilke responsible, if indirectly, for his suffering. Because he is still caught up in old-fashioned guilt complexes, as Andreas-Salomé analyzes his call for help, his onanism is unconsciously manifesting itself as a pathological symptom in other organs. Onanism is not a mistake, as Andreas-Salomé says, but Rilke's feelings of guilt are.

"Rainer, this is what it comes down to: it is not a devilish obsession at all! *Because* it gives you all these feelings of guilt, and has ever since childhood, *that's why* it has such ill effects."[7] Andreas-Salomé attributes Rilke's bodily pain to an indirect overstimulation of various body parts, which are now working "as something very like [. . .] erotic sensations on the penis," displaced onto that organ.[8] The final letters between the two are deeply disquieting. Rilke's despair in the face of his deadly illness is not assuaged and despite Andreas-Salomé's best intentions, her psychoanalytic interpretation—that feelings of guilt and fear and the erotic excitement of onanism have been displaced onto other organs—only strengthens Rilke's mistaken belief that onanism is the cause of his sickness.

Although Rilke did not want to write to Andreas-Salomé anymore after this exchange, in his last days, spent in great physical pain, he believed—as Wunderly-Volkart reports in a letter written shortly after Rilke's death—"that Lou [would have been] the only one to understand." Andreas-Salomé had made Rilke into a poet, taken him under her wing as an experienced woman, given him his identity as a writer, driven the sentimentality out of him. But she could not take away his adolescent urges for "this compulsion to do the same old damage" to himself, nor his despair in the face of a sickness that he wanted to experience in full but that he saw from the wrong perspective of a "horrid circle" in which his shameful "obsession" trapped him.

The remote stone cottage in Muzot, which a well-meaning Swiss patron had provided for Rilke as a residence, had given him the necessary peace to complete his masterpieces *Duino Elegies* and *The Sonnets to*

Orpheus. In this old building, where Rilke asked for "great solitude" from his housekeeper, because "when occupied with literary work, he did not wished to be disturbed," he becomes a plaything of the autoerotic "pesky devils."[9] Although Andreas-Salomé's suggestions trail off helplessly, they could have hit upon the right way out of this terrible "circle." For Andreas-Salomé's final piece of advice to Rilke was that he, in a kind of self-therapy, read his own works, take up "R. M. Rilke's elegies (as some of my sickest patients do)."[10] Rilke's "lapse into frustration, into despair, betrayed by [his] own body," was for the artist not only a discharge "after tense work [but also] something belonging to it, the reverse side of the matter, as the devil is only a *deus inversus*."[11] The work is supposed to heal the poet. This attempt to interpret masturbation as the necessary inverse of Rilke's creations, however, does not succeed. Masturbation remains Rilke's unsolvable problem since the "circle" of pure, unproductive waste in which Rilke is caught cannot be broken open nor brought into a productive context, since it doesn't result in any growth.[12] Andreas-Salomé's suggestion places onanism alongside his work and thus keeps it in the "circle" of Rilke's self-doubt, instead of recognizing that it is in fact, as Rilke wrote in his letter, "senseless." By applying Rilke's work as the cure for her own patients (including the author), Andreas-Salomé instrumentalizes the work in the same way that she ascribes Rilke's masturbation a function as the "inverse of creation."

As pure "*dépense*" (expenditure), to rely on a later definition by philosopher Georges Bataille, Rilke's masturbation in his tower at Muzot is functionless and therefore neither a distraction from his work (what Andreas-Salomé calls the inverse of creation) nor its condition.[13] To call Rilke's regular self-pleasuring a part of his work, as Andreas-Salomé suggests, means to explain a bodily, wasteful "*dépense*" either as a condition for or as an obstacle to writing poetry, and thus ascribe a (positive or negative) value to it. Rilke avoids this kind of attribution and evaluation of everything in *Duino Elegies*. The work that Andreas-Salomé regarded as a counterweight to masturbation and prescribed to her patients is precisely the attempt to simply let some things be, without assigning them a value.

When Andreas-Salomé urges *Elegies* upon Rilke, she recommends to Rilke his own work as a self-imposed therapeutic control of the compulsion to pleasure himself. But in *Elegies* Rilke actually wants limitation *and* freedom, constraint *and* moderation, desire *and* sublimation,

both faraway locations *and* a home. He himself thought that the elegies "reach out endlessly beyond themselves."[14] He suffers from onanism because he continues to understand his compulsive behavior as the edge of "a horrid circle of black magic" and not as a self-imposed limitation, beyond all "circles," on something that reaches "beyond itself." When the well-intentioned Andreas-Salomé assigns to Rilke's onanism the function of an "inverse God," she proceeds precisely with the thought of a closed system of energy, which is as inappropriate for masturbation as a worldly context (such as assigning his poems a healing, therapeutic function) is for Rilke's works. Rilke's *Elegies* cannot heal. Many of his texts are unapologetically phallic. They deal with the sexuality that ministers to a man "even before [the girl] could soothe him, and as though she didn't exist," and into which a man throws himself while "sleeping,/yes but dreaming, but flushed with what fevers."[15] Eros is for Rilke a curse and a blessing at once; ultimately eros, the bittersweet, and sexuality unleash powers that surpass us. When Rilke, in his letter, describes masturbation as "the grip of something horrible" and a "horrid circle," he is using the same words he uses in "The Third Elegy" to reduce a young man's experience of love to something "fearful," "horrid," and "repulsive."[16] While the lover thinks she is holding him secure in his sleep, the youth falls in love "*inside*" himself—Rilke's emphasis—"not one who would someday/ appear, but/seething multitudes [. . .] all this, my dear, preceded you."[17] The experience of love is a primal, elementary experience of unrestrained power in Rilke's imagination—even if it takes place in the embrace of two people. In "The Third Elegy" the softness of the girl in love is neither reassuring nor provides relief for the youth, whom the "lord of desire [. . .] often, up from the depths of his solitude, even before she could soothe him, and as though she didn't exist, held up his head [. . .]/erect, and summoned the night to an endless uproar."[18] Eros is an autonomous power that seizes a man—here Rilke is uncharacteristically bound to conservative gender roles—against his will, and that even in sexual activity is not necessarily sated. For Rilke this illustrates the powers inside us that are greater than us.

Andreas-Salomé's attempt to ascribe a healing power to *Elegies* or to think of Rilke's onanism as the inverse of creation betrays a logic that no longer applies in *Elegies*, but with which Rilke himself, in his letter, condemns his masturbation as "devilish obsession." In *Elegies*, a man's

"entanglement" (Rilke uses the same word as in his letter about masturbation; the word later appears as a euphemism—unexplained, although the letter to Andreas-Salomé is quoted—in certain biographies) in his original sexuality remains unresolved.[19] Every attempt, including Rilke's own, to see onanism as an antibourgeois provocation, as the introduction of the unreal into the work, or as the inverse of creation only encourages this "entanglement" in this "circle."

In 1915 Rilke wrote seven erotic poems. The poems link sexuality and creative achievement in surprisingly direct images of male potency. The reanimation of poetry for Rilke bursts out of the "full bud of his vitality" in the hand of the "rose-gatherer."[20] Yet Rilke's descriptions cannot be neatly accounted for as metaphors for poetic production. The sexual images are both erotic and, as some critics maintain, obscene. The parts of them that cannot be understood as allegory are no longer purely lyrical or aesthetic. But precisely because Rilke crosses the boundaries of good taste, these poems offer a key to his creative process. Without these concrete images of an *unrestrained*—that is, occasionally indecent—excess, the refined passages from *Elegies* ("our own heart always exceeds us"[21]) remain incomprehensible. The sexual dimension cannot be removed from Rilke's work, but it cannot be completely integrated into the work, as Rilke did not experience sexuality reliably as something that always exceeded him. His phallic poems, of which there are quite a few, have a different function than analogous poems by other poets. In Rilke, these erotic poems contain an additional meaning, which neither destroys nor fundamentally determines the sense of the poems. The erotic poems can no more easily be incorporated into a full understanding of Rilke's poetry and his existence than can his masturbation. They remain excessive and superfluous.

Such a devaluation of onanism as pointless waste was possible in Rilke's time. In Sigmund Freud's circle, for instance, masturbation was defended only by such figures as Wilhelm Stekel, who was soon excluded from the weekly analysts' meetings. Andreas-Salomé's explanations remain derivative of Freud's heavily debated and conservative opinions on onanism, and Freud, on account of his own clinical observations, argued to "not eliminate the rubric: damaging effects of onanism."[22]

Here stands the great poet, who makes a tremendous contribution to world literature from his Swiss hideaway, pleasuring himself the whole time. A century after the first major psychoanalytic discussions about

onanism in Vienna, our understanding of Rilke's "devilish obsession" remains caught up in unproductive reflections on productivity. Andreas-Salomé plays Rilke's work against the "unproductive" onanism, furthering his obsession with a closed system of angels and devils, creation and destruction. To her credit, one can say that Rilke always liked his devils. She had no other choice but to argue from inside this economy and to address the situation directly. Rilke wanted to ignite himself with guilt.

In much of the secondary literature, Rilke's sexuality is not mentioned at all. In Andreas-Salomé's memoirs of Rilke, written a year after his death, she quotes the passage from the letter with the "horrid circle" and the "Bruegel-style picture of hell," the "rhythm of senseless temptation" and the "compulsion to do the same old damage to myself," without once mentioning the actual reason for Rilke's horror, which she had referred to in her private letter unabashedly as "erotic sensations on the penis."[23] Andreas-Salomé comments on the masturbation letter, without naming onanism, and interprets for Rilke's later readers the poet's terror as fear of the superior power of the beauty he has created, in the presence of which everything "material"—and that included Rilke's body—was hit "with a terrible stamp of non-admission to the kingdom of angels."[24]

The portrait of Rilke as a sublimated genius who suffers at having a body at all perseveres as myth. Until 1952, a solid quarter of a century after Rilke's death, Rilke's stepson and daughter avoided the publication of his letters to Lou Andreas-Salomé, because they revealed "too many symptoms of psychogenic suffering."[25] Only in 1975 did the publication of these letters finally seem justified, because, as the editor put it then, "their contents have become history."[26] The story of these letters is in fact dodgy, since Andreas-Salomé's explicit reply was "not found in the Rilke archive" at the time of the first publication of the correspondence, but had been copied and cataloged by a researcher in an archive years before.[27] The belated publication of this letter, once suppressed, and then known only in a copy, has not productively revised our understanding of Rilke. In more recent biographies Rilke continues to be portrayed as a sublime, angelic being of pure inspiration, who either has no body or—what amounts to the same thing—suffers terribly from having one. Donald Prater paraphrases Rilke's letter to Andreas-Salomé in his biography, without explaining that Rilke's "stimulations applied to himself" are compulsive masturbation.[28] Ralph Freedman's extensive biography corrects this mis-estimation in a few lines, but without adding any real

insight into the role of this behavior for our understanding of his work.[29] And a five-hundred-page cultural history of masturbation, *Solitary Sex*, mentions Schiele, Wittgenstein, Stekel, and Freud, but does not catch Rilke in the act.[30]

Andreas-Salomé could have known better. And that even without knowing about *Viennese Psychoanalytic Discussions* (1913), a publication in which several analysts in Freud's circle question the discussion of onanism in terms of "usefulness." Already in *The Book of Hours*, the volume of poems that Rilke had dedicated to his lover Andreas-Salomé in 1899, Rilke describes a young man's difficulties in keeping his hands still and not too much to himself. In a poem from *The Book of Hours*, "To the Young Brother: You, a Boy Just Yesterday, Taken Over by Confusion," this inner struggle leads to an empty line in a poem:

> And suddenly you are left all alone
> with your hands that hate you so—
> and if your will does not produce a miracle:
> _____
>
> Und plötzlich bist du ganz allein gelassen
> mit deinen Händen, die dich hassen –
> und wenn dein Wille nicht ein Wunder tut:
> _____[31]

"Self-love" is abruptly turned around here. The hands, with which the "younger brother" could autoerotically divert and satisfy his growing love for God, are near to taking hold of him and, by succumbing to this vice, "hating" him. But Rilke does not trust the miracle of will; the poet's hand lets go of the pen for one line. Does the young brother . . . ? Or doesn't he . . . ? The poem does not provide an answer. The empty line shows only that either way, it does not lead to anything. The sublimated drive conceives either an empty space, which pours itself out as a wondrous interruption in the poem, or a silent pause, during which the brother-poet, "left all alone," cannot refrain from himself. This distinction cannot be made for good and doesn't matter at this moment, since in both cases nothing is achieved, said, or conceived. No "circle" is closed, and no "reverse side of the matter" reveals itself. There is a straight line but no circle. It is pure waste.

Andreas-Salomé could have recognized this. The fact is that as early as 1899, at the age of twenty-four, Rilke was fighting with his hands, which hated him (or did he hate them?), because he couldn't keep them off himself. The fact is that at age fifty he was still fighting. He had been with many women but still couldn't stop himself. And the fact is that the "miracle" that Rilke—who was able to work with such discipline—demanded from his will was precisely that he spent and surpassed himself. He could not separate this "miracle" of self-surpassing from his obsessive autoerotic activities. The fact that Lou did not recognize this fact that was staring her in the face is all the more astonishing given that Rilke's *Book of Hours* bears the dedication "Placed in Lou's Hands." Why placed in her hands? Perhaps because Rilke's hands were all too busy _____.

d

for Destiny Disrupted

In the charming Hollywood romantic comedy *Only You* (1994), Peter Wright (played by Robert Downey Jr.) tries to convince the beautiful Faith (Marisa Tomei) that he is the right man for her as they take an evening stroll through Rome. As her name suggests, Faith is a firm believer in prophecy and fate. When she was eleven she learned the name of her true love, Damon Bradley, from a Ouija board and now travels through Italy in pursuit of the thus-named prince. By happenstance Peter knows about Faith's idée fixe and acts as though he is the Bradley in question. In order to fool Faith, he recites, in a halfhearted Italian accent, the lines of a great German poet:

> Peter: There's this poem by . . . Goethe . . . yeah, Goethe, and it's about two people who come from different places, but they hear the same bird singing.
> Faith: "Perhaps the same bird echoed through both of us yesterday, separate, in the evening."
> Peter: That's it. Exactly.
> Faith: Wow . . . yeah, it was Rilke.
> Peter: Rilke? Oh . . . same country. How'd you know that?
> Faith: Oh, I could tell you some things.

Oh, you have a lot to learn from me, Faith explains to the besotted man. What can Peter learn from Faith? What can we learn here? The Hollywood genre of the romantic comedy does not leave any doubt that the two main characters (easy to recognize, since they are the stars) will find themselves, after many obstacles, together at the end. What is there to learn when everything is already known?

The lines Peter quotes are from Rilke's poem "You Who Never Arrived," which Rilke wrote in Paris during the winter of 1913–14 but did not publish. The melancholy poem attests to a love—à la Baudelaire's "To a Passerby"—that befalls us just after a missed chance or opportunity. "I have given up trying/to recognize you in the surging wave of the next/moment," sighs the poet self-pityingly, and in the second stanza gives up the naïve belief in the promise of love: "You, Beloved, who are all/the gardens I have ever gazed at,/longing." But the final lines, cited by the Hollywood screenwriters, promise fulfillment once again and attest to belief in true love:

> [. . .]—Who knows? Perhaps the same
> bird echoed through both of us
> yesterday, separate, in the evening.[1]
>
> [. . .]—Wer weiß, ob derselbe
> Vogel nicht hinklang durch uns
> gestern, einzeln, im Abend?[2]

The three final lines give the melancholy poem a hopeful ending, since the birdcall links the unknown beloved who had been assumed "lost/from the start," without her knowledge, to the poet, "yesterday [. . .] in the evening." The poem considers whether this unknown connection had always been there: The unheard birdcall, audible to only two people, becomes the promise of a connection, which existed even *before* the shared call. With this notion Rilke opens the poem to a future predestined on the previous evening by a birdcall the two lovers didn't know they shared. The melancholy "from the start" in the poem's opening line, according to which all love is lost to melancholy a priori, is undercut by the fact that the unknowable and yet insistent "yesterday [. . .] in the evening" has initiated another sense of time, another logic of belonging that skirts the loss of the beloved. The poem, so to speak, is suspended between two

states of the anterior future: of something (love as experience) lost "from the start" and something (love as destiny) predetermined "from the start."

For the birdcall is the poet's deceptive and mystifying mating call, is Peter Wright's arrow in his seducer's quiver, is the line of the poem that claims (without quite saying it) that when in love, we are destined for one another "from the start." The birdcall can open a future that interrupts the pattern of disappointment and frustration prevailing until now, because this future had already been lived.

In *Only You* we learn that there is something like destiny, a greater order, predestination, that constitutes the film's plot; but there is also disruption, an unexpected and even uncanny correspondence between people and things that cannot be known, an event, a birdcall. There is something that one can learn (as the steadfast Faith learned, early in life, the name of her future beloved) and something that one cannot learn (how to fall in love). This is the reason why Peter, acting on his belief that love cannot be learned, learns nothing on the plot level and symptomatically attributes to the wrong author (Goethe) the poem he quotes to show off to Faith. He still has a lot to learn from the woman his heart is set on, or at least he hopes so.

This notion of an overarching structure, including that of destiny and predetermination, that is disrupted by an imminent event is found throughout all of Rilke's works. Much in Rilke's works seems to be predetermined, including the return to the great themes of love and death and human possibility in *Duino Elegies* and *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, finished not until 1922, themes that also occur as early as Rilke's poems from his adolescence and student years prior to 1900. Following this logic of an interruption to a pattern that can be recognized only in retrospect, the birdcall, which stands for the disruption of anything that is predetermined, resounds at odds with destiny and intersects with the illusion of having life under control. This poem, written in 1913, used in the Hollywood movie, is not the first time Rilke sounds a birdcall.

A birdcall resounds already in Rilke's work in the poem "Apprehension" in *The Book of Images*, written in Berlin in December 1900.

> In the faded forest is a birdcall
> that seems meaningless in this faded forest.
> And yet the rounded birdcall rests
> in this interim that shaped it,

wide as a sky upon the faded forest.
Everything pliantly makes room in the cry:
the whole landscape seems to lie there soundlessly [. . .][3]

Im welken Walde ist ein Vogelruf,
der sinnlos scheint in diesem welken Walde.
Und dennoch ruht der runde Vogelruf
in dieser Weile, die ihn schuf,
breit wie ein Himmel auf dem welken Walde.
Geräumig räumt sich alles in den Schrei:
Das ganze Land scheint lautlos drin zu liegen [. . .][4]

This birdcall, which no longer celebrates nature or attests to its beauty, has become senseless. It is no longer a traditional metaphor (as the flight of the lark) for the transcendence of poetry, but rather a metaphor for that which creates and expends itself, holds and is held, in the same gesture. This type of inversion (of figure and referent) is typical for Rilke's work: the "senseless"-seeming birdcall in "the faded forest" ultimately holds "the whole landscape" in its sound, instead of just trailing off, small and mournful. For many interpreters such a reversal of actual relations is mere poetic window dressing and mystification, with which Rilke pulls the rug from under our feet but puts it back in the same image to create the impression that the poem has written itself, or at least that what he says there is inevitable and destined to be so. But Rilke does not invert the relation between structure and event, ground and figure, the rhetorical devices of poetic speech and the experience of reading simply to create a literary effect. He does so in order to reflect in our experience of reading the poem the inversion of the relation between life and experience, between destiny and its accidental, miraculous disruption.

Here the event is nothing other than the opening of time onto the "interim," which the poem now takes on and without which this poem simply couldn't exist. For an interim needs to be created: in nature there is no interim because there time is empty. The theoretical demystification, by various critics, of Rilke's rhetorical inversions is as clever as it is endless and ultimately frustrating; such deconstructions show again and again that Rilke's poems "are the outcome of poetic skills directed towards the rhetorical potentialities of the signifier."[5] And thus Rilke's deconstructive critics demonstrate that the experience of poetry is not something you

prove, but something that happens. This, indeed, is correct. But the "rhetorical possibilities" of a signifier like "birdcall"—as for instance Paul de Man, one of the most important interpreters of Rilke, never tires of emphasizing—cannot be delineated by the poet himself. With "birdcall," Rilke sets free precisely the possibility that a word says more than its meaning, that something happens that cannot be predicted, proven, or explained.

Just as the birdcall in "You Who Never Arrived" disrupts the structure of a predetermined destiny, it also disrupts the composition of Rilke's entire oeuvre, in that this metaphor, despite being a figure for unremembered experience, resounds repeatedly as something new and unique. In a short essay on *Letters of a Portuguese Nun* by Marianna Alcoforado, which Rilke translated in 1907, he writes: "Just as the nightingale breaks out not only in song, but also in a silence that encloses the unfathomable night, so is the entirety of feeling to be found in the words of this nun, the speakable and the ineffable. And her voice is just as devoid of destiny [*schicksalslos*] as the voice of the bird."[6] In his introduction to the poems of Anna de Noailles, which Rilke also wrote in 1907, the birdcall is a very similar metaphor of lamentation: "And when her heart suffers, the same sorrow breaks out like a plague over all the land, and in the now-desolate evenings her lament lingers like a birdcall."[7] Here, just as in the essay about the Portuguese nun and in the early poem "Apprehension," the birdcall at once creates space in the landscape and also expresses the "unexpected and undeserved poems" of Noailles, which then divide this space and give voice to a unique love. It is the "ever-recurring lament, the single eternal sorrow; the lament of a love that is too great, that has grown beyond every beloved."[8]

The same metaphor of the birdcall resounds throughout Rilke's texts, again and again, as an index of the unique. In *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* it is the metaphor for the lament of the unhappy lover: "No other lament has ever come from a woman [. . .] it is recognized again, like a bird call."[9]

In 1908 an infamous birdcall sounds at the end of a long poem in *New Poems* as a sign of decline, the rise and fall of which Rilke develops as an allegory of human life.

> As on stairs, with every lightest gale
> clammy leaves descend from every side there,

every bird-cry seems as though decried there,
poisoned every nightingale.[10]

Immer geht ein feuchter Blätterfall
durch die Luft hinunter wie auf Stufen,
jeder Vogelruf ist wie verrufen,
wie vergiftet jede Nachtigall.[11]

In 1911 Rilke wrote "Judith's Return," in which the resonant lament of a woman turns into a birdcall:

Heart, famed heart, beat on the countering wind:
how I stride, stride
and swifter the voice in me, mine that will call, bird-call,
before the locked-in city of fear.[12]

Herz, mein berühmtes Herz, schlag an den Gegenwind:
wie ich geh, wie ich geh—
und schneller die Stimme in mir: meine, die rufen wird, Vogelruf,
vor der Not-Stadt.[13]

In 1913 the birdcall resounds several times. In the prose piece "Experience," in which the poet describes the mystical experience of the unity between consciousness and world, the birdcall is the prelude to a mystical moment of unmediated consciousness: "He recalled the hour in that other Southern garden (Capri) when a birdcall outside was in harmony with what was inside him, because it was (so to speak) unbroken by the surface of his body, treating its inside and outside together as an uninterrupted space in which, secretly protected, there remained only one unified region of the deepest and most pure consciousness."[14]

And in the "Improvisations from the Capri Winter," written at the same time, the birdcall motif appears in a variant form as a world-constituting "bird sound": "Because what good to me/are the innumerable words that come and go,/when the cry of a bird/uttered again and again,/makes a tiny heart so vast and one/with the heart of the air, the heart of the grove."[15] If you look through Rilke's work for all the birdcalls, you start hearing them all over. In the dedication to Merline Klossowska that

Rilke added to his translations of the sonnets of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, he describes his own creations as a "birdcall."[16]

A further birdcall occurs as the germ of all his later texts in a letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé from 1912: "I am going on long, long walks out here [. . .] when I hear a small birdcall singing out to me."[17] In another letter written two years later Rilke adumbrates this metaphor: "The reason why we so easily allow a birdcall to penetrate our inner being is because it seems as if we could translate it without remainder into our emotion. Indeed, for a moment a birdcall can turn the entire world into our inner space since we feel that the bird makes no distinction between its heart and that of the world."[18]

The birdcall recurs even more frequently as a leitmotif in Rilke's work (which begins to resemble an aviary once you start to listen). From a psychological perspective Rilke suffered from an idée fixe. But both the philological tracking of this motif and the notion of an idée fixe depend on the same conception of an all-encompassing structure, which the appearance of a birdcall confirms as overarching, by interrupting it. For every birdcall in Rilke's work constitutes an event that disrupts the normal course of things and thereby confirms the presence of a different and yet immanent level, on which things assume an additional meaning. In each passage the birdcall marks the point where it no longer serves as a metaphor, but rather depicts the disruption and interruption of such rhetorical conventions and the logic of the poem.

Each of the passages quoted above shows in a new way how the birdcall breaks through the invisible structure (of our consciousness and thus by extension of the text, the work, of language as a whole) that makes the relationship between world and body possible in the first place, since it "was to some degree unbroken by the surface of his body, taking its inside and outside together as an uninterrupted space." It is precisely a birdcall in the middle of human words: sonorous, auspicious, beautiful, ephemeral, unintelligible, foreign.

It is remarkable, therefore, that Rilke seems to have envisioned this penetrating, singular, unplannable "experience" of an unbroken consciousness, in which body and spirit are one, and deliberately prepared the unplannable through the repeated use of this metaphor of the birdcall. Already in 1900 Rilke wrote in "Apprehension": "everything pliantly accommodates to the call." What is sworn, envisioned, anticipated, and proposed poetically for the massive, all-encompassing work, and hoped