

THE REAL MR. BRIGGE

presented before

THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB

October 12, 1998

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A search through MidWestern bookstores for the works of modern Central European poets is bound to be a frustrating experience. "Where", you ask, "are the lyrics of Richard Dehmel and Stephan George, of Gottfried Benn and George Trakl?" The answer is, "nowhere. There is no market in America for the poetry written by these gentlemen." There is, however, one exception to this exclusion of Central European poets from the consciousness of America. His name is RAINER MARIA RILKE. In a recent survey of 5 Chicagoland bookstores, I was able to find copies of Rilke's poems in all five., but not one volume by George, Trakl, Dehmel or Benn. That firm is out of business in the Upper Midwest, but Rilke is very much alive. The question is, "What is there about Rilke which makes his writing, even in English translation, attractive to an American audience?" An answer to that question is the project of this paper.

His parents did not anticipate a career as a poet for the baby boy who was born to them in Prague in December 1875. Prague at that time was a provincial capital within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The father was a failed army officer, who later contented himself with a minor position in the Austrian bureaucracy. The mother was a somewhat

hysterical lady with lofty social aspirations. In furtherance of those aspirations, and to redeem his father's career, young René (the name given our subject at birth) was sent at the age of ten to a military academy and then at the age of 14 to an even more demanding military institute. In both institutions he showed his utter incapacity for life as an army officer. Finally he was rescued by an uncle and sent to a Gymnasium in Prague and then on to Charles University. Already as a high school student he had published a volume of poetry.

What turned the immature René Rilke into Rainer Maria Rilke, the literary giant whose works occupy shelf space in Chicagoland bookstores? You guessed it - a woman! In 1896, at the age of twenty, Rilke left Prague and moved to Munich, where he met and formed a liaison with Lou Andreas Salomé, a 36 year old femme fatale, who had already demonstrated her ability to consort with geniuses. Lou was the daughter of a Russian general. As a teenager she had attracted the attention of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. He proposed marriage and Lou turned him down. You may remember Nietzsche's book *Thus spoke Zarathustra*. In a number of passages in this book the philosopher advocates male dominance over the female. There is extant a great photograph from the 1880's which shows Lou Salomé standing in a cart and carrying a whip. In

the traces, pulling the cart, is Friedreich Nietzsche. Much later Lou became a friend of the Viennese psychiatrist, Sigmund Freud. Freud, Nietzsche, and Rilke - not a bad collection of boy friends for a simple girl from the Russian hinterland!

Shortly after Lou and René met they started looking for a place in the mountains where they might live together quietly. René changed his name from René to the more manly Rainer. Lou's husband, the orientalist - Professor Andreas, came to visit in the autumn, along with their little dog Lotte. Later Lou and Rainer made two trips to Russia together. These were important in Rilke's development. To the end of his life Rilke looked on Russia as his spiritual home. The Russia he had in mind was the land of simple peasants who were rooted in the soil and who had uncomplicated strong religious beliefs. At the center of Rilke's Russian construct was the figure of Leo Tolstoy, whom Lou and Rainer had visited at his estate, Yasnaya Polyana.

On his return from the first trip to Russia - at the age of 23 - Rilke started writing poetry reflecting the spiritual impulse given him by his time in that country. Of course most of his poetry then and later was written in German; a few works were composed in French. We can only give you translations into English from the German originals. Here is a

poem from 1899:

"I live my life in growing rings
 Which hover over the world of things.
 I know I will not come to the end
 But I will continue to try.
 I circle round God, the ancient tower,
 And I circle for ever so long,
 And I know not what I am: a hawk or a storm,
 Or perhaps a giant song". (Berlin-Schmargendorf 1899) (RWC)

The poem expresses our desire to know ultimate reality - and the impossibility of that quest. As we seek we also are, perhaps even something quite dynamic, a hawk or a storm, or perhaps a giant song. Obviously this is Romanticism.

Rilke was the great twentieth century example in German literature of a Romantic poet, the modern representative of a line which stretches back to Goethe in the eighteenth century.. These Romantics have certain themes in common. We have already heard one: the recognition of hiddenness as part of reality. Another theme was the need to be rooted in the life of a people. Listen to this little poem, written in 1895, when Rilke was 19 and still a student in Prague: In it Rilke describes his

relationship to his roots in Bohemia:

"I am so moved
by a Bohemian folk song
It slides into my heart
And weighs it down.
When a child softly
Sings in the potato field
His song echoes in
Your dreams in the night.
You may well travel
Far over the land
Still, after years,
It remains a part of you. (Prague 1895)(RWC)

These two themes - reverence for the natural unconscious world (child, potato field, dream)) and rootedness in a people (in this case Bohemia) - are hallmarks of the Romantic movement.

In a talk before this Club several years ago David Baldwin emphasized the sympathy which another Romantic poet, William Wordsworth, felt for life's losers. Rilke responded to the same impulse. According to the Romantics, the lives of the marginalized may be more

authentic (or perhaps more open to authentic life concerns) than are successful lives dominated by trivia. This insight was expressed by Rilke in a series of short poems. Here is one entitled *Going Blind*

"She sat just like the others at the table,
But on second glance, she seemed to hold her cup
A little differently as she picked it up.
She smiled once. It was almost painful.
And when they finished, and it was time to stand
And slowly, as chance selected them, they left
And moved through many rooms (they talked and laughed)
I saw her. She was moving far behind
The others, absorbed, like someone who will soon
Have to sing before a large assembly;
Upon her eyes, which were radiant with joy,
Light played as on the surface of a pool.
She followed slowly, taking a long time
As though there were some obstacle in the way;
and yet: as though, once it was overcome,
She would be beyond all walking and would fly." (SM)

Soon after his return from the second trip to Russia Rilke joined an artists' colony at Worpswede, near Bremen. There in April 1901 he married Clara Westhoff, a young sculptor. Their daughter Ruth was born in December. Shortly thereafter the two separated, although they remained on friendly terms, and some of Rilke's best letters in future years were written to Clara. He also remained close to Lou Andreas-Salomé, with whom he corresponded for the rest of his life.

In 1902 Rilke was commissioned by a German publisher to write a book on the French sculptor Rodin. He moved to Paris, and this city became the center of his life for the next twelve years. He became close to Rodin and for a time worked as his secretary. Rilke was a person of extraordinary sensitivity.. In Paris he was able to detect tendencies which were later to blossom into the modern world as we know it. He early recognized the revolution in painting brought about by Cezanne, Manet, and Van Gough. A great letter about Cezanne to Clara is dated October 9, 1907

Many of the experiences of the Paris years are described in his only prose work, *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge*. This is available in English in a good translation by Herter Norton. *Malte* is the story of a young Danish expatriate living in Paris. Rilke always denied that the novel

was autobiographical, but it's easy to discover elements of his own life and outlook in it. The protagonist, Malte, lives in conditions of poverty in one room in a cold water boarding house, although both his grandfathers were members of the wealthy Danish landowning class. The flashbacks to Malte's childhood in great Danish country houses are convincing.

If I can persuade you to read *Malte* you may find it confusing. You must realize that the book was written in the first decade of the twentieth century. A few years later World War I would destroy many of the illusions of progress and security which had characterized the European culture of the Nineteenth Century. Rilke was remarkable because he anticipated the mood of the modern world before the war which kicked off the modern age. Read the book and see how many of these trends you can detect. I would like to call your attention to two..

One is a certain sense of alienation, a disconnection of the individual from his past. Malte - as he survives in 20th Century urban Paris - is enough of a poet to reflect creatively on the split between his current life and the rural privileged background from which he had come. A consciousness of disinheritance was a feature of the radical program of the 1920's. This same feeling of disinheritance emerged again in the 1960's. When students joined the four letter word movement at the

University of California in 1965 or rioted at the Democratic Convention in 1968, they were expressing alienation from traditional Western Culture. This sense of alienation held by a young person at war with his background was given classic expression by Malte Laurids Brigge.

Secondly, Rilke in his novel identified some of the dilemmas which have been brought to the surface by the practice of medicine in the late twentieth century. Should medical care be industrialized in the interest of efficiency, or is care of the patient as an individual still important? What place do cost-benefit ratios play in the care of the sick and dying? Here's Rilke's description of the Hôtel-Dieu Hospital in Paris around 1905, long before respirators or cardiopulmonary resuscitation had been invented but at a time when the possibility of the mechanization of medical care was becoming apparent.:

"This distinguished hospital is very old. Already by King Chlodwig's time people die there in the few beds. Now death comes in 559 beds. Naturally in factory style. Production of the individual death is not carried out as well as formerly, but that's not the important point. It's the mass that counts. Who cares now for a well-done death?

No one. Even the rich, who could afford to die as this passage deserves, become careless and indifferent. The desire to have one's

own death has become rare. In a little while and this desire will become as unusual as the desire to have one's own life." (RWC)

Eighty eight years have passed since the publication of *Malte* in 1910. The struggle of the individual with mass society, which Rilke identified, is still with us. If you doubt this you have only to read in the newspaper or experience personally the problems which many patients have with the impersonal treatment in HMO's and other forms of managed care. Some of Rilke's popularity today results from his uncompromising stand in favor of the worth of the individual human being. Individualism is a central characteristic of the Romantic sensibility.

By the first decade of the twentieth century Rainer Maria Rilke had reached maturity as an artist. But how to support himself? As you know it's hard to make much money writing poetry. His father suggested that he might find a position for Rainer in the Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy. He could then write his poems in the evening. This advice Rilke rejected. Instead he chose a life of ceaseless wandering. It was not very responsible, if you think about his family duties, but it allowed him to continue as a poet. His letters tell the story. They are written over a thirty year period from an incredible number of locations, many of them quite attractive. Here are a few, taken in from the places of origin of his

letters: Oberneuland bei Bremen in Germany; Via del Campidoglio, Rome; Villa Strohl-Fern, Rome; Province of Skane, Sweden; Villa Charlottenlund near Copenhagen; Worpswede bei Bremen; Marburg an der Lahn, in central Germany; Villa des Brillants at Meudon near Paris; 29 rue Cassette, Paris; Hotel Hassler, Naples; Hotel Cocumella, Sorrento; Rhonda, Spain - and on and on. He obviously was no stay-at-home and obviously made no attempt to coach his little daughter's soccer team. He was very much a Continental European. He never visited England in his travels. America was out of the question. In fact his letters show him to have been unsympathetic to the brash enterprising commercial spirit represented by the United States.. The question, of course, is whether there are special rules for living which apply to the artist, which allow him to create and which free him from the ordinary constraints imposed by society. This same question occupied the attention of another major German author, Thomas Mann, who explored it in a number of books, including *Tono Kreuger* and *Doctor Faustus*. As lives have become less structured in the late twentieth century perhaps the divide between the life of the artist and the life of the ordinary citizen has become less obvious. Is a life dedicated solely to art legitimate? I do not know the answer. Perhaps you do.

With the publication of *New Poems* in 1908 Rilke achieved full control of his voice. The poems in this book are truly marvelous, full of insight. One critic spoke of the 'strangeness' of Rilke's vision. . Many are "thing-poems", about animals or things. Here is one of the most famous. It describes an archaic torso of the god Apollo:

"We did not know his unbelievable head
In which ripened the apples of his eyes, but
his torso glows like a candelabra
in which his stare, now toned down,
persists and gleams. If this were not so the thrust
of the chest would not blind you, and the slight turning
of the loins would not permit a smile
which travels to that middle, where his manhood dwelt.
If this were not so, this stone would seem defaced and cropped
under the transparent thrust of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast's pelt.
and would not break out of all its boundaries
like a star; now there is no spot
that does not see you. You must change your life." (RWC)

Another poem from the volume *New Poems* appears in all the anthologies. It describes a panther which Rilke had seen in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris:

His sight has become so tired
from continually passing by the bars
that it can hold nothing else.
It seems to him as though there were only a thousand bars
and behind those bars no world at all.
The soft pacing of his powerful stride,
captured in a tight circle,
is like the dance of strength around an axis
in which a mighty will moves drugged.
From time to time the curtain of his pupils
lifts silently. A picture slides inside,
slips through the tension of the muscles
and ceases in the heart to be. (RWC)

At the outbreak of World War I in August 1914 Rilke was in Munich. After a brief outburst of patriotic enthusiasm his natural antimilitarism asserted itself. He quickly came to regard the war as a disaster but could

not entirely escape its demands. In December 1915 he was called up for service in the Austrian army. By June of 1916 he was found physically unfit for military service and was discharged.

We mentioned above the disruption caused in European thought by World War I. Many sensitive Europeans, including Rainer Maria Rilke, were profoundly depressed by the breakdown of all values which accompanied the cataclysm of this war. Rilke didn't publish anything for thirteen years after the appearance of *The notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge* in 1910. During much of this time he was entirely incapable of composition. If we remember that he was a professional author and little else, this inability to compose poetry represented an annihilation of his being. Then in a short period in February 1922 he completed a cycle of poems, *the Duino Elegies*, which he regarded as his greatest achievement. The name 'Duino' comes from the castle of Duino near Trieste, where composition of the elegies had originally started. There are ten of these long poems, and they make tough reading indeed. Essentially he tried to express the inexpressible. They are religious poems and reflect the Author's life journey from the Roman Catholicism of his youth to the ecstatic humanism of his maturity. They deal with the problem of all humanism: If God is does not exist in reality but is simply a projection of our

longings for significance, how can our lives have significance? Now please don't ask me to extract more systematic philosophy or theology from a man who was neither a philosopher nor a theologian. Let's listen to a little of the characteristic poetry from the *Ninth Elegy*: The "laurel" which he speaks about initially I interpret to mean the laurel of approval after achievement, as in the laurel wreaths given to the victors in the Olympic Games

"Why, when it seems tolerable to spend this term as laurel
a little darker than all other green, with little waves
on the edge of each leaf (like the laughing of the wind) - why then
should one have to be human - and avoiding fate
still strain after fate?

Not because happiness exists,
this premature payment in advance of an immanent loss,
not out of curiosity, or to exercise the heart,
all this is comprised in laurel
But because being here is much, and because apparently
everything here needs us, this fleeting world. One time
each thing, only one time. Once and no more. And we also
one time. Not again. But this

one time to have been, if only one time
to have been here, seems to be to have existed beyond recall.

Well, there he is. Of course there is much more. You have listened to the voice of an unreconstructed humanist rhapsodizing over the human situation in verse which is tough but which has meaning at its core. Stephen Spender, who translated the *Elegies* and who was a considerable poet in his own right, thought that these last poems of Rilke and T S Eliot's *Four Quartets* were "perhaps the two greatest long poems of the century." Others have not been so sure. They do not represent my outlook on life, but they are worth reading as an expression of a humanism which appeals to many thoughtful people.

After Rilke wrote and published the *Elegies* in the early 1920's his creative burst had pretty well come to an end. By that time he had been recognized in Europe as a major artist of the modernist generation which had come to fruition in the first couple of decades of the twentieth century. In 1925 he went once more to Paris, where he was lionized by such admirers as André Gide and Paul Valéry. Early in 1926 he was diagnosed as suffering from a rare form of leukemia and shortly thereafter died at a sanatorium above Territet, on Lake Geneva in

Switzerland.

Seventy two years have passed since Rainer Maria Rilke's death. The poems of his early and middle periods continue to be read by people who appreciate flawless and highly original lyric poetry. His one novel, *Malte Laurids Brigge*, remains a classic expression of alienation and the breakdown of values which occurred in the early decades of this century. The long poems of his last period are notable as modernist literature dealing seriously with the human situation. We are lucky to have available to us the insights provided by this strange and durable figure.

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