

RILKE'S FICTIONAL NOTEBOOK¹

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IN 1910 Rainer Maria Rilke published a prose work which he called *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*. The book begins like a letter, with a heading which gives a date and the name of a street. The date is 11 September, the street is rue Toullier, the address in Paris where Rilke lived when he arrived there for the first time in August 1902. He had come with an introduction from his wife to the sculptor Auguste Rodin. His wife had been a pupil of Rodin's, and Rilke's intention was to write a study of the sculptor and his work.

On 1 September 1902 he paid his first visit to Rodin at his studio in Paris. The next morning he took the nine o'clock train from the gare Montparnasse to Meudon, a twenty minutes' journey, to see the sculptor at his villa. Not a beautiful house, reports Rilke in a letter to his wife written the same day.² "Dann kommt man um die Ecke des kleinen rot-gelben Hauses und steht—vor einem Wunder,—vor einem Garten von Steinen und Gipsen." He tells her there is a huge pavilion in the garden with rooms for clay-firing, with studios and rooms for every kind of handcraft. What staggers him is the extent of Rodin's work, its variety and unity. His excitement is evident. This is something for *him*. "Groß ist dieser Eindruck, übergroß. Man sieht, noch ehe man eingetreten ist, daß alle diese hundert Leben *ein* Leben sind,—Schwingungen *einer* Kraft und *eines* Willens. Was da alles ist—alles, alles." Rodin's achievement seems to him like the labour of a century, an army of work. He does not know how to describe this scene, these acres of fragments. He dwells on the fragmentary aspect: "Da liegt es meterweit nur Bruchstücke, eines neben dem andern. Akte in

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester on Wednesday, 10th March 1976.

² Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1902 bis 1906* (1930), pp. 26-32. In subsequent footnotes Rilke's name is contracted to RMR.

der Größe meiner Hand und größer . . . aber nur Stücke, kaum einer ganz : oft nur ein Stück Arm, ein Stück Bein, wie sie so nebeneinander hergehen, und das Stück Leib, das ganz nahe dazu gehört."

Rilke, contemplating these parts, goes on to make a comment which shows the importance of this experience to his own work, and not least to the construction of *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* : " Jeder dieser Brocken ist von einer so eminenten ergreifenden Einheit, so allein möglich, so gar nicht der Ergänzung bedürftig, daß man vergißt, daß es nur *Teile* und oft *Teile* von *verschiedenen* Körpern sind, die da so leidenschaftlich aneinander hängen."

For the next twelve years Paris was to be the productive centre of Rilke's life. This is where he felt at home. He always returned there. This city was the lesson and the challenge ; and the lesson began in Rodin's garden when a little girl (Rilke assumed she must be Rodin's daughter) picked up a tiny snail from the gravel and gave it to the sculptor. What impressed Rilke was that in this surface, the snail shell, the sculptor immediately saw an equivalent to the masterpieces of Greek art.¹ What unity there must be in the eye which sees Apollo in the snail shell. Vision, we are told by Jonathan Swift, is the art of seeing things invisible. Rilke was to learn from Rodin that vision is simply the art of seeing, of really looking at the surface, without pre-judgement. How is this done? He reports what Rodin has told him : " Er schwieg eine Weile und sagte dann, wunderbar ernst sagte er das : . . . il faut travailler, rien que travailler. Et il faut avoir patience."²

The meaning of patience, as Rodin used the word and as he showed by his example, is exposure to experience without prejudice, in the same way as the earth is constantly exposed to the experience of sky and elements. The result should be, for the artist as for the earth, an organic response.

In the spring after that first meeting with Rodin Rilke began to write a series of letters to a young poet who had sent him his work. He talks about poetry and the poetic attitude ; the

¹ Ibid. p. 34.

² Ibid. p. 36.

connection with Rodin's advice and example is apparent: "Künstler sein heißt: nicht rechnen und zählen; reifen wie der Baum, der seine Säfte nicht drängt und getrost in den Stürmen des Frühlings steht ohne die Angst, daß dahinter kein Sommer kommen könnte. Er kommt doch. Aber er kommt nur zu den Geduldigen, die da sind, als ob die Ewigkeit vor ihnen läge, so sorglos still und weit. Ich lerne es täglich, lerne es unter Schmerzen, denen ich dankbar bin: *Geduld* ist alles!"¹

He is talking about realizing one's full potential in the organic response which is growth. It is his own problem and hope. The storms of spring are obviously the troublesome youth of the poet, when feeling seems all-important. Rilke himself knows this trap of vagueness, of waiting for some indefinite moment of inspiration. He has now come across an artist who is to serve him as a vital model for the rest of his life, a sculptor for whom nothing is vague, who concerns himself with the trifling details of surfaces, and who, from this single concern with observed detail, has produced an immensity of work characterized by unity. What more can Rilke the poet want for himself?

Writing to his wife on 5 September 1902, Rilke is clearly paraphrasing Rodin's own words to him, and paraphrasing with approval, when he says: "Man soll nicht daran denken, etwas *machen* zu wollen, man soll nur suchen, das eigene Ausdrucksmittel auszubauen und alles zu sagen. Man soll arbeiten und Geduld haben. Nicht rechts, nicht links schauen. Das ganze Leben in diesen Kreis hineinziehen, *nichts* haben außerhalb dieses Lebens."² Later in the same letter he must be thinking of his own earlier method, or lack of method, when he tells her it is essential not to stop at dreams, at intentions, at being in the mood, but to transpose everything into *things*, as Rodin has done.

Of course the sculptor does make *things*. We can see that they are things. He works from the surfaces of life to make surfaces of art. The question Rilke now put to himself was: how can the poet make *things*? He believed he should work like

¹ RMR, *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter* (1929), p. 19.

² RMR, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1902 bis 1906* (1930), p. 36.

the sculptor from the surfaces of life to create poems which should also be surfaces, linguistic objects as separate and independent in space as the sculptured shapes made by Rodin, fragments complete in themselves. The poetry written over the next few years and collected in the two volumes of *Neue Gedichte* was intentionally, as he told his publisher, "aus . . . Betrachtung und Bewältigung des Angeschauten erwachsen".¹

Work and patience. The work of the poet springs organically from his attitude of patience. It is not a spasmodic process, it is continuous; it must be, because it corresponds to the normal process of growth—and there is not, and cannot be, any break in that process. Nothing is more expressive in Rilke's poetry than his constant reference to the cyclic process in natural life (in the tree, for instance), with its implication that nothing is ever stationary. The work of the poet too must be constant transformation.

The lesson he has learnt from Rodin is that the artist transposes the observed surface about him. Now he comes to the challenge, because the surface he now has to transpose, the surface which is his present experience, is the observed shape of the great city. And what a terrible thing this turns out to be. This is what he must make into art, as he describes it in a letter to his friend Lou Andreas-Salomé:

Als ich zum ersten Mal am *Hotel Dieu* vorüberkam fuhr gerade eine offene Droschke ein, in der ein Mensch hing, schwankend bei jeder Bewegung, wie eine zerbrochene Marionette schief, und mit einem schweren Geschwür auf dem langen, grauen, hängenden Halse. Und was für Menschen bin ich seither begegnet, fast an jedem Tage; Trümmern von Karyatiden, auf denen noch das ganze Leid, das ganze Gebäude eines Leides lag, unter dem sie langsam wie Schildkröten lebten. Und sie waren Vorübergehende unter Vorübergehenden, alleingelassen und ungestört in ihrem Schicksal. Man fing sie höchstens als Eindruck auf und betrachtete sie mit ruhiger sachlicher Neugier wie eine neue Art Thier, dem die Noth besondere Organe ausgebildet hat, Hunger- und Sterbeorgane. Und sie trugen das trostlose, mißfarbene Mimicry der übergroßen Städte und hielten aus unter den Fuß jedes Tages der sie trat wie zähe Käfer, dauerten, als ob sie noch auf etwas warten müßten, zuckten wie Stücke eines zerhauenen großen Fisches, der schon fault aber immer noch lebt. Sie lebten, lebten von nichts, vom Staub, vom Ruß und vom Schmutz auf ihrer Oberfläche, von dem was den Hunden aus den Zähnen fällt, von irgend einem

¹ RMR, *Briefe an seinen Verleger 1906 bis 1926*, i (1949), 30.

sinnlos zerbrochenen Dinge, das immer noch jemand kaufen mag zu unerklärlichem Gebrauch. O was ist das für eine Welt. Stücke, Stücke von Menschen, Theile von Thieren, Überreste von gewesenen Dingen und alles noch bewegt, wie in einem unheimlichen Winde durcheinandertreibend, getragen und tragend, fallend und sich überholend im Fall.¹

These people endure. This is the surface he now has to observe without judgement and transpose into poetry. It is a world of pieces, of disconnection ; but so, at first sight, was the world of Rodin's creation, those acres of fragments. Disconnection is the source of fear or Angst, because disconnection prevents the discovery of meaning, which emerges only when things are joined together. Poetry is the shape given to meaning when the connection is not quite seen but is instinctively believed.

In this letter of 18 July 1903 to Lou Andreas-Salomé, a remarkable letter even for this remarkable correspondent, we find the material of *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* and also hear something about Rilke's purpose in writing this work.²

Among details of people seen in the streets of Paris and precisely recalled, he describes a man afflicted with St. Vitus's Dance, a figure taken fully into *Malte*. The poet is compulsively drawn to follow this man ; his description of the incident is accurate and ghastly ; the man jerks, falters, trips and tries to control the force which compels him to movements he does not have in mind. The poet too is compelled to movements he does not have in mind, not only by profession but also individually and physically at this moment. In spite of revulsion, Rilke follows this sufferer along the streets, as if impelled by a will greater than his own.

“ Ich war jetzt dicht hinter ihm,” he says in this long letter, “ willenlos, mitgezogen von seiner Angst, die von meiner nicht mehr zu unterscheiden war.”³ And later he goes on to say : “ Ich war wie verbraucht ; als hätte die Angst eines anderen sich aus mir genährt und mich erschöpft, so war ich.”⁴ Here he feels identity with the experienced object, whose fears are his

¹ RMR—Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Briefwechsel* (1952), pp. 55-56.

² From this point the work will be referred to in the text as *Malte*.

³ RMR—Lou Andreas-Salomé, op. cit. p. 63.

⁴ Ibid. p. 64.

own. His aim as a poet is to transpose experience, even this experience (there are no exceptions), into a representative object which shall exist outside him. He knows this, because in the letter he immediately goes on to say: "Hätte ich die Ängste, die ich so erlebte, *machen* können, hätte ich Dinge bilden können aus ihnen, wirkliche stille Dinge, die zu schaffen Heiterkeit und Freiheit ist und von denen, wenn sie sind, Beruhigung ausgeht, so wäre mir nichts geschehen."

So this creation is protective too. Naturally, because without it the poet is left with the raw detail of experience, the fears which *are* disconnection. He is, in this state, following the sufferer in the street, not knowing why, in spite of himself. The patience which implies open receptivity is in the first place an invitation to chaos, where disconnection remains disconnection; it is only the work of transposition into art, that discovery of shape and therefore of meaning, which prevents the personal ruin which Rilke sensed as he followed the man with St. Vitus's Dance, "als hätte die Angst eines anderen sich aus mir genährt und mich erschöpft . . .". It is not surprising that Rodin mentioned work first and patience second in that advice he gave Rilke: without the habit of work, which is conversion, the habit of patient acceptance can be perilous.

"Hätte ich die Ängste, die ich so erlebte, *machen* können, hätte ich Dinge bilden können aus ihnen . . .", says Rilke. He resolves to do this. He has the example of Rodin before him. The things to be made are poems or, as it turns out now, this fictional notebook in prose, constructions in words, made as the sculptor shapes objects out of stone. Rilke's purpose is put plainly in this letter. "Dinge machen aus Angst," he says; and Angst is obviously the feeling drawn from the surface of daily life in Paris as he experiences it.

Nine months later, in April 1904, another letter from Rilke tells Lou Andreas-Salomé that in February he began a new work.¹ He was taking his own advice, he was making things out of fear, the atmosphere of Paris. February was to be a good month for Rilke. In February 1922 he was to complete his best-known poetic cycles, the *Duineser Elegien* and the *Sonette*

¹ Ibid. p. 142.

an Orpheus, the latter in particular coming to him as a surprise, like something forced on him, a dictation, a gift which he gratefully transcribed. Another instance of an action he did not have in mind. Or did he? We know, looking back over Rilke's work, that material and intention were there all the time. The unconscious has its own way of storing and secretly striving. Where inspiration is concerned, the phrase "I never thought of that" can be explanation as well as expression of surprise.

The inception of this new work in February 1904 was just as mysterious and just as plainly an overflow of unconscious urgency. Rilke began to write a series of dialogues between a young man and a girl. He was then reading with great interest the Danish author Jens Peter Jacobsen, and it happened, as if by a law of nature, that in the dialogues the young man mentioned a Danish poet, a certain Malte, whom he had known and who had died at an early age in Paris. The girl, after the manner of girls, wanted to know more. The young man was then careless enough to add that his friend Malte had left behind a journal. The girl said she would like to read this document, pestered him to let her see it. These facts are reported by Rilke's French translator, Maurice Betz. They were revealed by Rilke during a conversation with Betz in Paris in 1925, and Rilke's subsequent words are both amusing and revealing. Who is creating whom?

Pendant quelques jours . . . je réussis à lui faire prendre patience sous divers prétextes. Mais la curiosité de la jeune fille n'en était que plus vive et elle-même commençait de se représenter Malte à sa façon. Je compris que je ne pourrais pas me dérober plus longtemps. Interrompant mon dialogue, je commençai d'écrire le journal de Malte lui-même, sans plus me soucier des personnages secondaires qui, presque malgré moi, m'avaient ramené à lui.¹

"Presque" is of course the saving word. It is his intention to make things out of Angst, and the imagined poet Malte is the representative who experiences for him. The precision of place and date at the first line of *Malte* is characteristic of the poet who has learned from a sculptor that the surface—snail shell, Apollo, or poem—must be exact and tangible. "I do not mind lying," says Samuel Butler, "but I hate inaccuracy."

¹ Maurice Betz, *Rilke vivant* (1937), p. 121.

Rilke could have said that too. After that place and date, the book begins :

So, also hierher kommen die Leute, um zu leben, ich würde eher meinen, es stürbe sich hier. Ich bin ausgewesen. Ich habe gesehen : Hospitälere. Ich habe einen Menschen gesehen, welcher schwankte und umsank. Die Leute versammelten sich um ihn, das ersparte mir den Rest. Ich habe eine schwangere Frau gesehen. Sie schob sich schwer an einer hohen, warmen Mauer entlang, nach der sie manchmal tastete, wie um sich zu überzeugen, ob sie noch da sei. Ja, sie war noch da.¹

Thus begins a catalogue of impressions as they fall on the senses. Life and death are interwoven from the first sentence. The pregnant woman seems to emerge from an image of death. He is recording the surface of the city, and what he has recorded so far comes from his sense of sight. Almost at once another sense asserts itself, as if the perception must be complete, or more complete than merely one sense will allow. "Die Gasse begann von allen Seiten zu riechen. Es roch, soviel sich unterscheiden ließ, nach Jodoform, nach dem Fett von pommes frites, nach Angst."² Malte sees a child in a stationary pram :

Und sonst? ein Kind in einem stehenden Kinderwagen : es war dick, grünlich und hatte einen deutlichen Ausschlag auf der Stirn. Er heilte offenbar ab und tat nicht weh. Das Kind schlief, der Mund war offen, atmete Jodoform, pommes frites, Angst. Das war nun mal so. Die Hauptsache war, daß man lebte. Das war die Hauptsache.³

This hope of endurance, introduced on the first page and carried over from Rilke's letters about the poor people of Paris, is vital. It is the necessary corollary to patience. And at once the sense of hearing adds its quota to the impressions which assault the writer in the city ; the ear seems really to open and expose the sensibility. Nothing is yet *made* of the fears. The main thing is to survive. This is the condition of surrender he has to survive :

Daß ich es nicht lassen kann, bei offenem Fenster zu schlafen. Elektrische Bahnen rasen läutend durch meine Stube. Automobile gehen über mich hin. Eine Türe fällt zu. Irgendwo klirrt eine Scheibe herunter, ich höre ihre großen Scherben lachen, die kleinen Splitter kichern. Dann plötzlich dumpfer, eingeschlossener Lärm von der anderen Seite, innen im Hause. Jemand steigt

¹ RMR, *Sämtliche Werke*, vi (1966), 709. This collected edition will be referred to in subsequent footnotes as *SW*.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

die Treppe. Kommt, kommt unaufhörlich. Ist da, ist lange da, geht vorbei. Und wieder die Straße.¹

Here we see the immersion of self in experience which Rilke talks about in his letter concerning the man with St. Vitus's Dance, the fear which is not to be distinguished from his own. As a poet he hopes to transcend this fear, to transform it and leave it like a discarded skin. But in the meantime he is still at the beginning. Malte goes on to give a tremendous image of indefinable Angst :

Das sind die Geräusche. Aber es gibt hier etwas, was furchtbarer ist : die Stille. Ich glaube, bei großen Bränden tritt manchmal so ein Augenblick äußerster Spannung ein, die Wasserstrahlen fallen ab, die Feuerwehrlaute klettern nicht mehr, niemand rührt sich. Lautlos schiebt sich ein schwarzes Gesimse vor oben, und eine hohe Mauer, hinter welcher das Feuer auffährt, neigt sich, lautlos. Alles steht und wartet mit hochgeschobenen Schultern, die Gesichter über die Augen zusammengezogen, auf den schrecklichen Schlag. So ist hier die Stille.²

It has been said that the whole background of modern culture is pessimism ; and pessimism is the attitude which contemplates the unknown and always fears the worst. Malte is the man Rilke wants to leave behind.

Anyone who experiences life as a disconnected and therefore meaningless process (since meaning depends on connection, *logos*) must normally want, even with despair, to make sensible connection. It is a matter of survival. Goethe once loaded his own perplexities on his fictional character Werther, who seemed like Goethe in every respect except one : Goethe was a survivor, Werther wasn't. Goethe was a survivor because he threw Werther to the demons of destruction. By making Werther he harnessed the demons to creation. The imagined figure of Malte serves a similar purpose for Rilke. Malte is the deputy who registers in painful detail the complexity of every present moment.

The composition of the book was long and hard. For Rilke writing had never been like this. Now writing was *work*. In a letter of 8 September 1908 he asks his wife to help him find the peace which will enable him to "make" his *Malte* : "Ich kann nur durch ihn durch weiter, er liegt mir im Weg."³

¹ Ibid. p. 710.

² Ibid.

³ RMR, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1907 bis 1914* (1933), p. 54.

Something of the meaning of *Malte* for Rilke's development comes out in a letter written on 28 December 1911 (after the publication of the book) to Lou Andreas-Salomé. Rilke refers to his protagonist :

Ob er, der ja zum Teil aus meinen Gefahren gemacht ist, darin untergeht, gewissermaßen um mir den Untergang zu ersparen, oder ob ich erst recht mit diesen Aufzeichnungen in die Strömung geraten bin, die mich wegreißt und hinübertreibt. Kannst Du's begreifen, daß ich hinter diesem Buch recht wie ein Überlebender zurückgeblieben bin, im Innersten ratlos, unbeschäftigt, nicht mehr zu beschäftigen?¹

Later in the same letter Rilke remarks that perhaps this book had to be written "wie man eine Mine anzündet". The activity which can lead to such an explosion is simply the art of seeing. Immediately after describing the silence made of fear, Malte says (and this is the reason for the book's existence) : "Ich lerne sehen." How does it come about that a 28-year-old man has to learn to see? It is a particular kind of vision, which goes deeper than anything he has experienced before. "Ich weiß nicht, woran es liegt," says Malte, "es geht alles tiefer in mich ein und bleibt nicht an der Stelle stehen, wo es sonst immer zu Ende war. Ich habe ein Inneres, von dem ich nicht wußte. Alles geht jetzt dorthin. Ich weiß nicht, was dort geschieht."²

The book seems to have no unity of structure because it is a record of experience as it falls on that inner self of which Malte has been ignorant up to now. When the individual is ignorant, connection may be anywhere. It is mere honest perception that leads Rilke, in the unconventional structure of this fiction, to anticipate requirements formulated many years later by Virginia Woolf in her famous essay, *Modern Fiction*. She is examining what she calls an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. This mind, she says . . .

. . . receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant show of innumerable atoms ; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old ; the moment of importance came not here but there ; so that, if a writer were a free man and not

¹ RMR—Lou Andreas-Salomé, op. cit. p. 246.

² RMR, *SW*, vi. 710-11.

a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style. . .¹

Virginia Woolf was writing in April 1919, when parts of Joyce's *Ulysses* were appearing in the *Little Review*, and of course she had no idea that Rilke had anticipated her requirements for the novelist: "Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness."²

Malte does consist of sections which seem disconnected and incoherent. Some are impressions of Paris, others are memories of childhood in Denmark, other sections cannot be tagged with time or place, being thoughts about characters from history or literature, or thoughts about life and love and death. The unity of the book is contained in a single human consciousness in the present moment, which is the only place where the dead can mingle with the living.

Talking about the form of *Malte*, Rilke says in a letter of 11 April 1910 that the book is "durchaus nichts Vollzähliges". He goes on to develop this:

Es ist nur so, als fände man in einem Schubfach ungeordnete Papiere und fände eben vorderhand nicht mehr und müßte sich begnügen. Das ist, künstlerisch betrachtet, eine schlechte Einheit, aber menschlich ist es möglich, und was dahinter aufsteht, ist immerhin ein Daseinsentwurf und ein Schatten-zusammenhang sich rührender Kräfte.³

Rilke was right. Not only is the "form" humanly possible; it may seem to readers in the modern world that this is the only true way to delineate life as humanly experienced. Life seems like this: fragmentary, provisional, incoherent. We have discovered that we exist without a continuous psychology (as Gottfried Benn put it in connection with his fictional character Rönne). The staccato structure of Rilke's *Malte* is true to its philosophic intent, which can be summed up as "expose and record".

¹ *The Common Reader* (Penguin 1938), pp. 148-9.

² *Ibid.* p. 149.

³ To Gräfin Manon zu Solms-Laubach in RMR, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1907 bis 1914* (1933), p. 95.

The idea of the book as a chance collection of papers found in a drawer may have some connection with the interest Rilke was taking at that time in the Norwegian poet Sigbjørn Obstfelder. In November 1904, a few months after beginning work on *Malte*, Rilke wrote a short study of Obstfelder. To read it is like looking into the inner self which is projected into Rilke's book :

Als Obstfelder starb, hinterließ er nur *ein* Manuskript, das er selbst als vollkommen abgeschlossen ansah: *Das Tagebuch eines Priesters*. Außerdem fand sich eine Unmenge undatierter und ungeordneter Papiere mit verschiedenen, immer wieder veränderten Aufzeichnungen, nicht Bücher, sondern Buchanfänge, nicht Feststehendes, sondern Werdendes, steigendes und fallendes Leben, eine Wirnis, die im Grunde Bewegung war. . .¹

There could hardly be a better description of the disposal of sections in *Malte*. If the book is incomplete, it is because the man is incomplete. We learn that Rilke was particularly struck by the fact that Obstfelder had lived in Paris and had died at the early age of 32 without, as it seemed to Rilke, fully realizing his potential.² Here was a kindred spirit. So many of Rilke's poems are about the need to realize one's potential. He is talking about himself, his own fears; it is in himself that he looks for "nicht Feststehendes, sondern Werdendes". The fears are transferred to Malte; in this book Rilke faces the situation that in Rodin's acres of fragments he has found a calmly-realized potential, while in himself the confusion of impressions must still be subject to the work which is transposition in art.

Obstfelder's *Das Tagebuch eines Priesters* is the story of a soul which makes desperate efforts to draw nearer to God but drifts further away and finally dies of its own feverish condition. Nowhere in *Malte* are we told that the supposed author comes to an end like this, but Rilke makes it plain, in subsequent comments, that this is Malte's fate. He is meant to be the demonstration of what happens when patience is not carried to the ultimate point where endurance *creates*. Rilke's opinion in 1912 is that this book can be valuable only to those people, "die es

¹ RMR, *SW*, v. 657-8.

² Betz, *op. cit.* pp. 118-19.

gewissermaßen *gegen den Strom* zu lesen unternehmen".¹ Writing from Munich in November 1915 to another correspondent, Rilke puts it like this :

Ich habe schon einmal, vor Jahren, über den Malte jemandem, den dieses Buch erschreckt hatte, zu schreiben versucht, daß ich es selbst manchmal wie eine hohle Form, wie ein Negativ empfinde, dessen alle Mulden und Vertiefungen Schmerz sind, Trostlosigkeiten und weheste Einsicht, der Ausguß davon aber, wenn es möglich wäre einen herzustellen (wie bei einer Bronze die positive Figur, die man daraus gewönne) wäre vielleicht Glück, Zustimmung ;—genaueste und sicherste Seligkeit.²

It is interesting that he talks about the book in terms of the sculptor's craft. There is, he implies, a positive side which is the reward of endurance. Malte does not get this far, but it is possible. Malte is obsessed with what he calls "die Existenz des Entsetzlichen in jedem Bestandteil der Luft".³ Where is the sense and the beauty? More important for Rilke is the question : how does one achieve the attitude which can endure the inexplicable variations of the experienced surface and come to an act of affirmation, the gesture which is art? For Malte the possibility is there, sensed but not yet reached :

Bei aller Furcht bin ich schließlich doch wie einer, der vor etwas Großem steht, und ich erinnere mich, daß es früher oft ähnlich in mir war, ehe ich zu schreiben begann. Aber diesmal werde ich geschrieben werden. Ich bin der Eindruck, der sich verwandeln wird. Oh, es fehlt nur ein kleines, und ich könnte das alles begreifen und gutheißen. Nur ein Schritt, und mein tiefes Elend würde Seligkeit sein. Aber ich kann diesen Schritt nicht tun, ich bin gefallen und kann mich nicht mehr aufheben, weil ich zerbrochen bin.⁴

Potentially this is the "Umschlag" described by Rilke as the reward for patient endurance in his poem *Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth* (1908), but even earlier, before beginning to write *Malte*, he had pointed to the great example. The first part of his monograph of Rodin was written in 1902. It is preceded by a phrase from Emerson : "The hero is he who is immovably centred." Rilke tells us in the first pages that he is talking about a life, "das nichts verloren und vergessen hat, ein

¹ To Artur Hospelt, 11 February 1912, in RMR, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1907 bis 1914* (1933), pp. 196-7.

² To Lotte Hepner, 8 November 1915, in RMR, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1914 bis 1921* (1937), pp. 86-87.

³ RMR, *SW*, vi. 776.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 756.

Leben, das sich versammelte, da es verging".¹ Only a life like this, says Rilke, in which everything is simultaneous and awake, can remain young and strong and capable of creation.

Und in der Tat, es ist eine dunkle Geduld in Rodin, die ihn beinahe namenlos macht, eine stille überlegene Langmut, etwas von der großen Geduld und Güte der Natur, die mit einem Nichts beginnt, um still und ernst den weiten Weg zum Überfluß zu gehen. Auch Rodin vermaß sich nicht, Bäume machen zu wollen. Er fing mit dem Keim an, unter der Erde gleichsam. Und dieser Keim wuchs nach unten, senkte Wurzel um Wurzel abwärts, verankerte sich, ehe er anfang einen kleinen Trieb nach oben zu tun. Das brauchte Zeit und Zeit. "Man muß sich nicht eilen", sagte Rodin den wenigen Freunden, die um ihn waren, wenn sie ihn drängten.²

There is no short cut in growth. You follow the physical connection all the way. For Malte, learning to see and learning to have patience are the same. Patience is the capacity to absorb. Another early section in *Malte* begins like this :

Ich glaube, ich müßte anfangen, etwas zu arbeiten, jetzt, da ich sehen lerne. Ich bin achtundzwanzig, und es ist so gut wie nichts geschehen. Wiederholen wir : ich habe eine Studie über Carpaccio geschrieben, die schlecht ist, ein Drama, das "Ehe" heißt und etwas Falsches mit zweideutigen Mitteln beweisen will, und Verse. Ach, aber mit Versen ist so wenig getan, wenn man sie früh schreibt. Man sollte warten damit und Sinn und Süßigkeit sammeln ein ganzes Leben lang und ein langes womöglich, und dann, ganz zum Schluß, vielleicht könnte man dann zehn Zeilen schreiben, die gut sind. Denn Verse sind nicht, wie die Leute meinen, Gefühle (die hat man früh genug),—es sind Erfahrungen.³

Even then, we are told, the process is not complete. Everyone has experiences. What is the stage of development which makes a poet of the man who has experiences? Experience becomes memory, but even this is not enough, says Malte :

Denn die Erinnerungen selbst *sind* es noch nicht. Erst wenn sie Blut werden in uns, Blick und Gebärde, namenlos und nicht mehr zu unterscheiden von uns selbst, erst dann kann es geschehen, daß in einer sehr seltenen Stunde das erste Wort eines Verses aufsteht in ihrer Mitte und aus ihnen ausgeht.⁴

This is the upward thrust Rilke has observed in Rodin after long submission and root-formation, an unhurried organic process. It corresponds to his advice to the young poet that patience is everything. In another letter to that young poet, written a few months before he began *Malte*, Rilke tells his

¹ RMR, *SW*, v. 142.

³ RMR, *SW*, vi. 723-4.

² *Ibid.* pp. 147-8.

⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 724-5.

correspondent not to be confused by the surfaces, because in the depths everything becomes law. "Und werden Sie nicht irre," he says, "an der Vielheit der Namen und an der Kompliziertheit der Fälle."¹ Does he have his own experiences in Paris in mind? Malte has not yet got beyond the confusing surface of events to discover the law which is connection. In this he is a representative figure. Man does live on insufficient evidence; insufficient, that is, for *his* perceptions. In November 1915 Rilke says in a letter that one essential question is asked in his book:

Was in Malte Laurids Brigge . . . ausgesprochen eingelitten steht, das ist ja eigentlich nur *dies*, mit allen Mitteln und immer wieder von vorn und an allen Beweisen dies: *Dies*, wie ist es möglich zu leben, wenn doch die Elemente dieses Lebens uns völlig unfaßlich sind? Wenn wir immerfort im Lieben unzulänglich, im Entschließen unsicher und dem Tode gegenüber unfähig sind, wie ist es möglich dazusein?²

Malte says of Baudelaire, after referring to his poem *Une Charogne*: "Es war seine Aufgabe, in diesem Schrecklichen, scheinbar nur Widerwärtigen das Seiende zu sehen, das unter allem Seienden gilt. Auswahl und Ablehnung giebt es nicht."³ Where everything connects, as it does in law or logic, every detail is important and not to be discarded because it seems incomprehensible. Man's difficulties, according to Rilke, come from the fact that he does select and continues to select, on the basis of his own convenience. The most striking example is that he has chosen to externalize what he finds incomprehensible into distant gods . . . or devils. Man makes the separation, and feels separated. "Könnte man," says Rilke in a letter, "die Geschichte Gottes nicht behandeln als einen gleichsam nie angetretenen Teil des menschlichen Gemütes . . . ?"⁴

Death too is among the incomprehensibles, so human judgement places it in direct opposition to life, a negative to positive. But this is attributable only to human exclusion. In nature, as Rilke says, "blüht ein Baum, so blüht so gut der Tod in ihm

¹ RMR, *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter* (1929), p. 26.

² To Lotte Hepner in RMR, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1914 bis 1921* (1937), p. 86.

³ RMR, *SW*, vi. 775.

⁴ To Lotte Hepner in RMR, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1914 bis 1921* (1937), p. 88.

wie das Leben . . .".¹ He is talking about coherence and change ; that is, he is talking about life. Does man then have a different life? There is no disconnection except in the mind ; the organic link joins everything, no matter how fragmentary or even contradictory the surface may appear. It is man who postulates disconnection, a disconnection which cannot exist in life but only as an idea. There is a depth of which man is unaware, just as Malte finds, through his unusually open perceptions, that there is a depth in himself of which he is ignorant.

"Oh, es fehlt nur ein kleines," says Malte, "und ich könnte das alles begreifen und gutheißen. Nur ein Schritt, und mein tiefes Elend würde Seligkeit sein." He senses that division does not exist. Man's feelings are interpretations before they are facts. The one fact in the beginning is physical existence derived from the law of connection, which means growth. All subsequent ideas are generalizations.

¹ Ibid. p. 90.