



Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi

The Journal of International Social Research

Cilt: 6 Sayı: 24 Volume: 6 Issue: 24

Kış 2013 Winter 2013

www.sosyalarastirmalar.com Issn: 1307-9581

## RILKE AND THE MODERNIST TRADITION: A BRIEF LOOK AT "ARCHAIC TORSO OF APOLLO"\*

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### Abstract

The twentieth century is associated with drastic changes as well as disintegration of old beliefs and grand narratives. Modern poets felt that it was high time they searched for new potentialities of language and made changes in form in order to express and explore changes the world was experiencing. The oneness of the world within and the world without is not peculiar to Rilke. He explores human consciousness as well as the interaction between human and the non-human world. This paper argues that his poetry is an invitation to the reader to participate and create. In "Archaic Torso of Apollo" the transfixed poet finds the torso full of life and vitality, a complete work of art and suggestive of the modernist tradition. As a modern poet Rilke would see the world within and the world without as the same aspects of each other. He believes that existence consists of interactions between things and the perceiving selves and that the inner world, familiar to our consciousness, is continuous with, even identical to, the material world we think of as exterior to our conscious selves. The interaction between the poet (subject) and the torso (subject) creates the sense of transformation. The article concludes that transformation seems to be the most critical change that the modern man needs to experience in the chaotic and disjointed world of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This emotion is created by the torso of Apollo, a figure from the world of myths created by classical artists and a life force necessary to change the passive man of the modern era.

**Keywords:** Rilke, Modernism, "Archaic Torso of Apollo," Externalization, Symbol.

The twentieth century is associated with drastic changes as well as disintegration of old beliefs and values. European powers were caught in the Great War that was reflected in the poetry of many great poets as the main cause of big changes. Draper sees the war as "the outcome of a competitive struggle between the older industrial power of Britain and France and the growing industrial strength of Germany" (1999: 3). To the industrial and socio-cultural changes of the time, relativistic views must be added. These views put many grand narratives such as God—the most prominent central authority—under question and, many poets like Rilke (1875-1926) believed in Christ's humanity rather than divinity the result of which was uncertainty, anxiety, and a desperate need for order and meaning. Poets felt that it was high time they searched for new potentialities of language and made changes in form in order to express and explore changes the world was experiencing.

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\* This paper is extracted from research project 910610 done at the University of Isfahan

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Literary modernism, according to Shaffer, is “a transatlantic cultural phenomenon that influenced the direction of the twentieth-century” (2006: 1). The first World War brought Europe and America into contact and acted as a context that gave birth to modernism as an international movement. An important ingredient of modern German poetry seems to be war and the disintegration coming from German collective memory of soldiers and machine-guns. Wilenski states that modern German poetry is associated with “the rise of German army, technological progress and commercial expansion” (1915: 180). Nevertheless, Nelson and Kueffner refer to such modern poets as Hugo von Hoffmannsthal and Hauptmann who “are by no means obsessed by militarism [and environment]” (1915: 210).

Modern German poets felt the need for a new and different culture and poetry as well as the need to assert and explore German independence and identity. They turned inward upon themselves to think about the meaning of life, civilization and humanity. Sentimentality, listlessness and passivity have been German poetry’s characteristics. The change in form and content was what modern poets desired. According to Childs modernity is considered to describe “a way of living and of experiencing life which has arisen with the changes wrought by industrialization, urbanization and secularization” (2000: 14). Wade believes that the fragmented sensibilities on battlefields “found their natural expression in the fragmentary, probably Godless, but still potentially mythopoeic literary and poetic forms of [many poets]” (2003: 9). Modernism was associated with experimentation, novelty, new forms of perception and innovation or to “make it new” which Malcolm Bradbury interprets as the fact that “the modern arts have a special obligation, an advanced or avant-garde duty, to go ahead of their own age and transform it”- to break “free from the frozen structures of the past” (qtd. in Shaffer, 2006: 2).

Many modernist works of art share the following features: “radical experiments with point of view and with the representation of time and space; the shattering of the illusion of a unified, omniscient narrator; linguistic pyrotechnics, textual self-referentiality, and literary allusiveness and narrative fragmentation [...]” (Shaffer, 2006: 1). Modern poetry is man-made and humanized, and “plunges the reader into a confusing and difficult mental landscape” (Childs, 2000: 4). This shifts modern poets’ attempt towards creating a kind of poetry that is itself an attempt at creating meaning or finding meaning in a senseless and chaotic world that has fallen apart.

German literature and culture have been rivals for other European cultures. Rainer Maria Rilke’s poetry, specially his poetry after 1907 that is more consistent and symbolic in content, represents a whole era of European thought. Nelson and Kueffner go farther to claim that from an artistic point of view, the “American publishing world would be a barren desert were it not for European, and particularly German importations” (1915: 209). Rilke who is known as one of Germany’s greatest modern lyric poets, had associations with other artists and poets that made him a modern poet. The technological innovations and the radicality of his poetry have made him an excellent modern poet in contrast with such a poet as Wilhelm Müller who, in present-day Germany, is considered “old-fashioned and out-of-date,” for “the passionate note of freedom which ennobles [his] poems in spite of much rhetoric, finds no response in the soul of the modern German” (Müller and Hatfield, 1909: 157). Rilke is well-known for his power over his environment and context, break with Christianity, hatred of modern technology, and for being difficult because of personal poetic utterances. For sure, cultural background and environment influences modern poets, however, Kueffner and Nelson believe that “no poet, great or small, is necessarily influenced by his environment.” They continue that “a great poet makes his [own] environment” (1915: 210). This implies the modern poet’s power of creating meaning in what he sees, as well as the poet’s passionate, emotional and sensuous response to his environment. As a matter of fact Rilke’s poem is the “externalization of his own inner world” which he “project[s] in carefully defined symbols that objectively externalize the events within the poet that are stimulated by the process of seeing” (Bangerter, 2011: 892; 894).

The tradition of modern German poetry is overgrown with sentimentalism. German culture and intellect is said to be “the monopoly of the professional thinking classes” and “capable of intense thought and unremitting labour” (Wilenski, 1915: 179). Rilke’s poems that are abound with emotional intensity come from the poet’s private experiences: “gloom, absurdity, and disintegration are common moods in poems that question the possibility for everything, including humanity, to exist and thereby to become the subject of literature” (Bangerter, 2011: 894). The following lines from “The Bleak Fields Are Asleep” are suggestive:

The bleak fields are asleep,  
My heart alone wakes;  
The evening in the harbor  
Down his red sails takes.  
Night, guardian of dreams,  
Now wanders through the land;  
The moon, a lily white,  
Blossoms within her hand.

Deutsch believes that “bruised and compassionate spirit” is an important feature of modern poetry (1922: 153), and this poem can beautifully show Rilke’s representation of emotion, perception and novelty of perspective.

Rilke’s poetry expresses his philosophical ideas. He, non-Platonically, non-Christianly and non-Cartesianly, reconciles the reader with the world outside. Accordingly his metaphors are largely used for reciprocity rather than hierarchy. Certainly the oneness of the world within and the world without is not peculiar to Rilke. Rilke adopts the darkness of the world easily and this is manifest in his juxtaposition of transcendence and immanence, beauty and pain, day and night, earth and space, and life and death in his poems where the reconciliation of binaries affirms continuation of existence. He explores human consciousness and the interaction between human and non-human world in a very novel way. Rilke believed that “being involves a dynamic interaction and reciprocity and that human interior life, consciousness, is a perfectly normal part of this process” (Young, 2006: 20). In the seventh elegy from *Duino Elegies*, Rilke says

Even the most  
Visible joy  
Will reveal itself  
Only when we have  
Transferred it within.  
There’s nowhere, my love,  
The world can exist  
Except within.  
Our lives are used up  
In transformations  
And what’s outside us  
Always diminishing  
Vanishes.

It is by the power of imagination that the modern poet explores different possibilities of language in order to come to new realms of perception, understanding, interaction and making meaning. Young’s words are insightful regarding imagination: “human consciousness, which is a constant interrogation of the meaning of things, cannot operate without imagination.” He continues that “we construct reality as we go about our daily living and perceiving and that fact validates the artistic imagination as a heightened form of ordinary human thought and consciousness” (2006: xi). It is the power of imagination in Rilke that makes the union of binary oppositions possible, and creates a vision in which death is both destiny and existence.

Modern poetry is not representational but post-realist and made by exploration, expression, effect, imagination, perception and response. Reading modern poetry, the reader feels himself in an imaginary space from where he can see the world from a new perspective. Childs states that modernity involves "certain new understandings of time and space" (2000: 15). The spatial – and not chronological – search for impressions and the description of things are, to Rilke, "glimpses of a mysterious reality" (Lamont, 1919: 169). Accordingly spiritual reality is another idea explored in Rilke's poetry. To this must be added man's desire for the Divine. However, divinity and spirituality never take the place of things, words and sensuality that help readers share the feeling of existence with Rilke.

The point must be made that Rilke was fascinated with physical and concrete symbols like roses standing for sleep or petals for closed eyelids, for he was fascinated with the world of objects. It is this fascination with things and the so-called realm of senses as well as the power to feel things that is an important modern element in Rilke. The reason the poet can defamiliarize such everyday things as roses as they appear in "The Bowl of Roses" (1907) as an instance, bicycles, bars or even panthers is his faith in seemingly simple experiences of life. Rilke's selection of simple subjects and revealing much about them is reminiscent of Williams' world-known line "so much depends upon a wheelbarrow." "Growing Blind" (1908) is an excellent example of how Rilke can be fascinated by a simple scene of a blind woman drinking tea:

She sat, like all the rest of us, at tea.  
It seemed at first as if she raised her cup  
Not quite as all the others held theirs up  
She smiled: her smile was pitiful to see.  
And when we rose at last with talk and laughter  
And through the many rooms with idle pace,  
As chance would have it, strolled from place to place –  
Then I saw her. She slowly followed after.  
Restrained, like one who must be calm and cool  
Because she soon will sing before a crowd;  
Upon her happy eyes, without a cloud,  
The light fell from outside, as on a pool.  
She followed slowly, hesitatingly, shy,  
As if some height or bridge must still be passed,  
And yet – as if, when that was done, at last  
She would no longer walk her way, but fly.

The ineluctable images of the poem and the sensitivity that accompanies the rhyme and slow pace of the poem are noteworthy. It is through images that the poet explores language's potentialities. Thus it is the exploration of language and meaning that postmodernist poets have inherited from modern poets. In Rilke's "Autumn" (1906) the falling of leaves creates an exceptionally beautiful mystic mode in the poem:

The leaves fall, fall as from far,  
Like distant gardens withered in the heavens;  
They fall with slow and lingering descent.  
And in the nights the heavy earth, too, falls  
From out the stars into the Solitude.  
Thus all doth fall. This land of mine must fall;  
And lo, the other one! – it is the law.  
But there is One who holds this falling  
Infinitely, softly in His hands.

Talking of change the point must be made that one of the drastic changes in modern poetry was that nature was replaced by such topics as technology – trains and bars – and this introduced a sense of isolation to poems. Despite the fact that typical of Rilke's poems are

“encounters with sorrow and pain, powerful absorption in specific objects, a strange blending of the experience of death and love, and an overwhelming sense of isolation” (Reisman, 2011: 892), this, of course, should not be read in the negative sense of the term, for Rilke is described as “the poet of lonely contemplation” and “the poet of lonely exultation” (Lamont, 1919: 170). This implies that alienation is a topic worth being explored poetically.

Lamont sees Rilke’s work as “a protest against the realism and the externality of German literature” (1919: 168). As a reaction against realism, Rilke began with symbolism (a form of writing) and then became a poet of the modernist tradition (1890-1930) that itself started with French Symbolism. Childs refers to the anesthetist philosophy of the symbolist movement and its insistence upon “the autonomy of the poem together with the importance of the mystical and spiritual worlds” alluded via symbols (2000: 95). Symbolism has always been associated with art’s independence. What is significant in Rilke is that symbolism in his poetry does not emphasize transcendence but is more in daily objects. Rilke’s use of symbols and myths is a means for retelling classical stories as well as making new interpretations of them. Myths can well trigger the imagination that is the shaping power in every poet. Rilke was at the same time mystic and concrete. As a mystic poet he was hopeful and well aware of things that would stimulate the senses. According to Deutsch a religious mystic like Rilke “reconciled the ugly and the beautiful, the real and the supersensuous” (1922: 151). What remained irreconcilable in him was the old conflict between art and life/reality.

The element of romanticism is also eye-catching in Rilke. As a matter of fact his poetry reflects German Romanticism. Wallace Stevens believed that every poet was a romantic poet. Rilke’s romanticism is his reaction against naturalism as both a 19<sup>th</sup> century practice and a modern element. Such poets as Hille, George, Dauthendey and Richard Dehmel who was an important naturalist figure in contemporary German poetry, remained loyal to the naturalist tradition.

The essential question in Beach’s words is that “is poetry the product of an interaction between the real world and the artistic imagination?” (2003: 1). Young believes that Rilke saw his poetry as “a struggle to resolve the art/life differences” (2006: xii). However, Wilenski believes that Rilke “has no doctrines, only eyes that see and ears that hear, and deep feeling and hopes that life will conquer in the end” (1915: 239). Thus “life must be accepted and made fruitful despite its limitations” (Bangerter, 2011: 896). Like Yeats, Rilke would believe in the interdependence of art and religion, and that art was the means to touch divinity. Rilke knew art as the supreme human achievement, and superior to ethics, morality, religion and even metaphysics. Therefore, many poems by Rilke are poems about art or poems about themselves (self-referential). Rilke sees God as a life force, a Wordsworthian pantheistic force to be more exact, and art was the means to interpret this force and find peace in a fragmented and chaotic world. Rilke was a believer in the power of art (a power that creates) and nearly believed that “religion kills” and “all religions [were] equally wrong” (qtd. in Bradley and Tate, 2010: 2, 4). Thus his poetry can be said to be a kind of “speculation about a world without God” (Ibid., 3) and asking the reader to participate and create as well.

“Archaischer Torso Apollos” is the first poem of the second volume of the *New Poems* (1907). It is a poem that tests the reader’s reality. Once Rilke stood before a statue as a spiritual mirror in the Louvre Museum in Paris imagining the missing head of the torso. The transfixed poet finds the torso full of life and vitality, a whole in itself, a complete work of art. Young’s words regarding creation of meaning are noteworthy: “wandering around Rodin’s studio and watching the way that torsos and body parts grew in meaning as they expressed themselves in space and changing light were profoundly instructive” to Rilke as a young poet (2006: 8). Here is the poem:

“Archaic Torso of Apollo” (1908)  
We’ve never known the legendary head  
Where the eye-apples ripened. But

His torso glows still, like a candelabrum  
In which his gaze, turned down,  
Contains itself and shines. Otherwise  
The breast-curve wouldn't blind you so, nor would  
The hips and groin from toward that smile  
Whose center held the seeds of procreation.  
And then this stone would stand here, short and broken,  
Under the shoulders' clear, cascading plunge  
And wouldn't ripple like a wild beast's fur  
And break with light from every surface  
Like a star: because there is no place  
That doesn't see you. You must change your life.

The poem is about art and is suggestive of the modernist tradition in another way: "the ways in which [the torso] is mundane, rooted in physical being, set in a familiar place, a daylight world and not some symbolist twilight, escapist and subjective, takes us beyond symbolism and into modernism" (Young, 2006: 11).

An important idea in the poem is the idea of gaze. Before referring to gaze in "Torso" some lines from "Der Panther" show that Rilke was obsessed with the idea of gaze:

His gaze, from passing all those bars,  
Is too tired for anything more.  
It seems to him there are a thousand bars  
And past those thousand bars no world.

In both "Torso" and "The Panther" we see the observer being looked at. The observer in Rilke is a self-conscious of itself. The torso's gaze gives identity to the poet and makes him ready for a kind of spiritual rebirth. As a modern poet Rilke would see the world within and the world without as the same aspects of each other. He believes that existence consists of interactions between things and the perceiving selves. He believes that "the inner world, familiar to our consciousness, is continuous with, even identical to, the material world we think of as exterior to our conscious selves" (Young, 2006: 17). As a matter of fact Rilke's prominent contribution to modern (German) poetry was "an originally conceived interpretation of inner experiences generated in response to encounters with external objects and phenomena that the poet transformed into symbols for the elements of human life" (Bangerter, 2011: 894). In the fourth stanza of "The Bowl of Roses" Rilke sees the petal equal to the particular emotion described:

Then like this: that emotion is born  
From the touch of petal to petal?

Phenomenologically speaking, Young refers to Husserl's and Heidegger's ideas that "perception always involves reciprocity and that you can't, in effect, gaze at the world without a meaningful interchange. The world will gaze back at you, and the interaction will affect you both" (2006: 11). This signifies that the interaction is between subject and subject rather than subject and object. The interaction between the poet (subject) and the torso (subject) creates the sense of transformation, a concept well liked by symbolists. Transformation seems to be the most critical change that the modern man needs to experience in the chaotic and disjointed world of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This emotion is created by the torso of Apollo, a figure from the world of myths created by classical artists. German modern poetry gives weight to inner experiences and creates social, political, cultural and spiritual awareness. It is not irrelevant to refer to the Panther (heroism in existence) who is identified with the poet, and is "able to create its own inner landscape, absorbing the visual impressions of external objects into itself, where it may modify, penetrate, or even destroy them" (Reisman, 2011: 895).

As a modern poet, Rilke feels inferior to classical artists. The juxtaposition of the old and the new reveals a lot about order and disorder, and the need for transformation. The poet, by no means, attempts to offer a solution or draw a conclusion but tries to make his reader think about an experience of life or the record of an emotional experience. Man can, Godlike, create a torso that changes into a source of inspiration. This shows Rilke's power of changing a broken torso to something extraordinary which is a manifest reaction against the objectivity of the realist and naturalist traditions. The theme of spiritual rebirth is a theme explored by such modern poets as Yeats or T. S. Eliot who would explore, in their poems, a life force necessary to change the passive man of the modern era. Eliot writes that "poetry may help to break up the conventional modes of perception and valuation which are perpetually forming and make people see the world afresh, or some new part of it" (1964: 155).

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