

**Representing the Visual: A Study of Aesthetics in Rainer Maria Rilke's  
Selected Works**

**A Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award  
of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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**DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that the thesis entitled “**Representing the Visual: A Study of Aesthetics in Rainer Maria Rilke’s Selected Works**” is the result of investigation carried out by me at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, under the supervision of Prof. Krishna Barua. The work has not been submitted either in whole or in part to any other University/ Institution for a research degree.

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**CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that Rosy Saikia has prepared the thesis entitled **“Representing the Visual: A Study of Aesthetics in Rainer Maria Rilke’s Selected Works”** for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati. The work was carried out under my general supervision and in strict conformity with the rules laid down for the purpose. It is the result of her investigation and has not been submitted either in whole or in part to any other University/ Institution for a research degree.

March 2016  
IIT Guwahati

**Prof. Krishna Barua**  
Supervisor

Dedicated to my mother Mrs Ami Bora Saikia





*...for here there is no place  
that does not see you. You must change your life.*

*Rainer Maria Rilke, Archaic Torso of Apollo*

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## Preface

The study of aesthetics incorporates art and beauty as major concepts. It is seen that the history of aesthetics has undergone several changes through the centuries. Art as a key concept of aesthetics came in the Eighteenth century. The scope of aesthetics was expanded after the publication of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* in 1750, which eventually helped to draw the attention of writers, philosophers, and the common men in this field. Aesthetics has played a pivotal role in modern literature. A shift in general aesthetic theory took place where a cross cultural trait between aesthetic theory and various forms of art, including the literary arts and the visual arts occurred. In the later part of the nineteenth century the Modernist movement started in Europe which brought a wide-spread and far-reaching transformation especially in art and literature. In the years around 1900 an interest in visual art became immensely popular amongst the writers especially in Germany. German writer Rainer Maria Rilke was one of those who constantly worked to integrate the arts into life. Rilke's connection with artists, poets and art critics played a significant role in his life. The present study is an attempt to explore Rilke's creative process with the argument that his artistic oeuvre was largely moulded through his understanding of visual arts. A particular attempt is made to bring out the aesthetic relation between the visual image and literary representation in Rilke.

## Chapter I

### Aesthetics and Rainer Maria Rilke: the Visual imagination

The word aesthetics from the Greek word *aisthetikos*, was initially used to denote something which is sensitive. Although the history of aesthetics can be traced back from the age of Aristotle and Plato yet no specific usage is seen till the Eighteenth century. Aesthetics is closely related to the philosophy of art, and can be delineated as the systematic study of beauty and taste. It does not only deal with the nature and the value of the arts but with everything that pleases us, irrespective of its fineness or ugliness. The history and meaning of aesthetics has undergone several changes through the centuries. The term representation, which is closely related to the study of aesthetics, denotes a method of producing or portraying things in a particular way. Like aesthetics, the concept of representation emerged with the ideas of Plato and Aristotle. The Greek masters theorised representation with the concept of mimesis. W J T Mitchell in his book *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* has categorized representation in two sub categories: semiotics: in terms of signs and aesthetics: in terms of arts. The idea of aesthetics developed with the Greeks, who considered beauty as the central theme of studying aesthetics. As J. Harrell, et al, have discussed about aesthetics with its modern implications:

First of all the word *kalon* which the Greeks used and we translate as beauty had a different from that which this word commonly has today. It signified everything that pleases, attracts and arouses admiration. It meant sights and sounds but also a quality of human mind and character in which we today see a value of a different order and which we only call “beautiful” with the realization that the word is being used metaphorically (Harrell 25).

Paul Oskar Kristeller's "Introduction" to *Aesthetics: A Comprehensive Anthology*, 2008, has discussed on what Plato had said about beauty in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, both published between 385–380 BC. He has argued that Plato did not mention about art in his notion of beauty. "When Plato discusses beauty in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, he is speaking not merely of the physical beauty of human, but also of beautiful habits of the soul and of beautiful cognitions, whereas he fails completely to mention works of art in this connection" (Kristeller 4). Medieval philosophers discussed beauty without mentioning anything about arts and crafts. Rather they linked beauty basically as a "metaphysical attribute of God and of his creation" (Kristeller 8).

The term art is commonly associated with the visual arts. But in broader sense it incorporates five major arts- painting, sculpture, architecture, music and poetry. Jerrold Levinson in his essay "Philosophical Aesthetics: An Overview" in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, 2003, has explained art as "a vehicle of expression or of communication, especially of states of mind or non- propositional contents" (Levinson 5). The Greeks had associated the arts to every creative representation. The main point of contradiction was that where modern aesthetics believes that "art cannot be learned, and thus often becomes involved in the curious endeavour to teach the unteachable, the ancients always understood by art something that can be taught and learned" (Kristeller 10). The ancient Greeks discussed the term aesthetics for all skilful production and "included the labours of carpenters and weavers as well as architects. They laid stress on the knowledge which art entails and valued it primarily on account of that knowledge" (Harrell 25).

The study of aesthetics therefore incorporates art and beauty as major concepts. Some critics argue that the notion of beauty is indeterminate and hence it is proper rather to investigate the study of art. Other group of critics preferred to examine both as separate fields. Harrell

defines that “Beauty is not confined to art, while art is not solely the pursuit of beauty... An aesthete may interest himself in either beauty or art, but aesthetics as an entity is a twofold study, embracing both the study of beauty and the study of art. This is the first duality of aesthetics” (Harrell 27).

Plato and Aristotle considered poetry, music and fine arts as different forms of imitation and M.H. Abrams considers mimesis as the “most primitive aesthetic theory...and from the initial position that art imitates the world of appearance not of essence, it follows that works of art have a lowly status in the order of existing things” (Abrams 8). If we look into Aristotle's *Poetics*, it “does not present us with aesthetics, but with an analysis of poetic creation. There is a danger in constructing a theory of aesthetics from the *Poetics*, because the idea of imitation is not the source of Aristotle's philosophy of beauty. Imitation is a method of artistic construction, but it is not the criterion of beauty” (Marshall 229). But amongst all the fine arts it was mainly poetry which Plato discussed in the *Republic*. “The arts of painting, poetry music, dancing and sculpture, Socrates says, are all imitation” (Abrams 8). Arts of the Archaic period was characterised by linear designs or proto-geometric style, more figurative of animal and human figures. Greek art was remarkable for pottery and stone sculptures inspired by Egypt and Mesopotamia. Besides having its significant root it appears that art in antiquity had lower “social and intellectual prestige” (Kristeller 5). The main contribution of Greek Classicism to fine arts was undoubtedly its sculpture.

Coming down to the high era of aesthetics during the Italian Renaissance, it was Leonardo Da Vinci who repeatedly appealed to the mirror image to describe the art of representation: “The mind of the painter should be like a mirror which always takes the colour of the thing it reflects and which is filled by as many images as there are things placed before it...” (McCurdy 163). Renaissance artists tried to represent the perfect human body with

anatomically correct patterns, and at the same time there was scope for the Grotesque. There was a strong desire to portray the beauty of nature in a realistic linear proportion with the help of newly invented studies on light and shadows. Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* published in 1486 argued about the importance of human quest for knowledge and the role of science in understanding the world was a treatise on representation. The Italian Renaissance provided a platform for the development of aesthetic theory in the field of art and culture. However, Renaissance "did not formulate a system of the fine arts or a comprehensive theory of aesthetics" (Kristeller 8). But the striking impact that it had left on the sixteenth century was that "...the three visual arts, painting, sculpture and architecture were for the first time clearly separated from the crafts which they had been associated in the preceding period" (Kristeller 8). As Harrell states that the evolution of the concept of art was similar to the evolution of the concept of beauty: "it was first wider and was only gradually narrowed down to a specifically aesthetic concept" (Harrell 25). It has been noticed that the term fine arts did not work as an umbrella term for visual art, poetry and music till the Renaissance.

The treatment of Aesthetics as a separate discipline came into prominence in 1735 with the works of German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten who introduced the term in his thesis *Meditationes Philosophicae de Nonnullis ad Poema Pertinentibus: Philosophical Meditations Pertaining to Some Matters Concerning Poetry*. Baumgarten defined aesthetics as a science of how things are to be known by means of the senses. But later he developed it as logic of the "lower cognitive faculty" and "lower gnoseology" (Guyer 3), the art of thinking beautifully, in his *Metaphysica*. But finally in his *Aesthetica*, the first dissertation to have the term in the title he combined his earlier two notions: "Aesthetics is the science of sensitive cognition" (Guyer 3).

The eighteenth century saw a resurgence of philosophical debates on aesthetics. Paul Guyer states in *Values of Beauty* that the central idea to emerge in eighteenth century aesthetics was the “idea of the freedom of the imagination which later Immanuel Kant divided as negative and positive conception of freedom. It was the attraction of this idea that provided much of the impetus behind the explosion of aesthetic theory in the period” (Guyer 7). After Baumgarten it was Immanuel Kant (1724 –1804) who developed the theory of aesthetics elaborately in his work *Critique of Judgment* published in 1790. Kant described the theory of aesthetics in terms of “judgement”- judgement of “agreeable”, “taste” and “sublime” (Kant 91, 115, 148). Other substantial and enduring contributions to the field of aesthetics after Kant are Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770 –1831), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788 –1860), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844- 1900) and Martin Heidegger (1889- 1976).

Hegel was influenced particularly by Winckelmann, Kant and Schiller. He considered art as equal to religion and philosophy which bears a cognitive value. Beauty in art is not only a matter of giving pleasure but it is “sensuous appearance of the idea, a manifestation of truth through some experinceable medium” (Janaway 163). By looking into Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics*, which gives an extensive analysis on art and beauty, Kai Hammermeister calls it as “a veritable world history of art” (Hammermeister 24). Hegel divided the history of art into three categories- pre- classical symbolic phase, classical phase and romantic phase which includes medieval, Christian and modern art. In *The World as Will and Representation* published in 1818, Schopenhauer developed his theory of “aesthetic attitude” in terms of “will” (Janaway 164). Aesthetic experience for him was a “suspension of the will, allowing the subject to enter a higher state of consciousness, freed from desire or interest towards the object of contemplation, and free of the suffering that attends willing” (Janaway 164). Schopenhauer marked a point of departure from Kant stating that aesthetician should start

from the “aesthetic experience”, not from “aesthetic judgment” (Janaway 164) as held by Kant. Schopenhauer believed that every man could have an aesthetic experience. Like Hegel he too incorporated a cognitive value to his theory of aesthetics. Art is treated in Schopenhauer with a special value because it can suspend “individual willing” (Janaway 164) and transfer human experience of reality more objectively. Initially Nietzsche was influenced by Schopenhauer but later his interest went more on Hegel and he started to promote Richard Wagner’s ideology. Nietzsche said that “it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and world are eternally justified” (Janaway 164). His *The Birth of Tragedy* was a compilation of Schopenhauer and Hegel’s influences centering on Apollo and Dionysus, the two Greek deities. “Apollo is associated with sun, light, appearance, and clarity, Dionysus with trance, abandon, and ritual dance. Nietzsche takes them to symbolize natural forces or drives whose key- words are *dream* and *intoxication*” (Janaway 164). At that point, the study of aesthetics intruded into the domain of phenomenology and hermeneutics. The major exponent of the phenomenological approach to aesthetics was Martin Heidegger. Heidegger was influenced by Hegel and Nietzsche and his 1936 essay *The Origin of the Work of Art* brought new inroads to the study of the philosophy of art. Heidegger believed that art is something which “opens up a world and is a happening of truth. The being of things in our experience is ‘unconcealed’ by an art work...Art is a uniquely revelatory form of *poesis* or bringing forth and fundamentally challenges traditional ontology and the technological conceptions of things...” (Janaway 165). Though Heidegger was inspired by Hegel and Nietzsche but he found a new way of describing the term art. “It is for him a fundamental mistake characteristic to modernity to regard the work of art as a thing present in the word” (Janaway 165).

Aesthetics and representation in eighteenth century German literature was marked by the *Sturm und Drang* (Storm-Stress), provoked by the Baroque movement which dominated German art, literature and culture, continuing to the glorious period of German Romanticism of 1795-1830. It was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's 1774 novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* which drew first "critical attention" (Mahoney 1) in terms of the beginning of a new movement called Romanticism. It emerged in reaction to the rationalism propagated by the Enlightenment and made a way to the expression of extreme emotions. German Romanticism was closely associated with folk elements and myths. The art of that period also represented the three stages of the Romantic Movement though only a thin line existed in between: "the periodization applied to German Romantic art coincides for the most part with that accorded German Romantic literature, although their centres of activity do not specifically coincide" (Allert 273). The paintings of that period included minute representation of human life, animals and plants. Perhaps the images, arabesques and metaphors used by Friedrich Nietzsche had their route in the "uncanny" and the "grotesque" (Allert 275) brought into the scene by German Romanticism. Later art movements such as impressionism, cubism were influenced by German Romanticism. The early Romantic painters adopted the notion of "sublime" and the concept of "organic growth" (Allert 273, 278) which was a leitmotif of the English Romanticist Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

English Romanticism had its roots in the German *Sturm und Drang* movement and French Revolution. In the early nineteenth century in the works of the Pre-Raphaelites, a struggle of representing the visual into the verbal is seen as constant and all pervading. The Pre-Raphaelites came up with their basic motto to unify poetry and painting. Many of them were painters as well as poets, which helped them to transfer the essence of one medium to the other. With the English Romantics, that exchange was quite dominant in Keats' Odes. *Ode*

*on a Grecian Urn* discusses a distinct philosophy on art and art's representation. The poem was inspired by the classical Greek art where the final lines of the poem proclaim that “beauty is truth, truth beauty,’ – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know”. Walter Pater’s text *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* published in 1873 became immensely popular where the author tried to look into the term ‘beauty’ and ‘art’ with new dimensions: “We owe to Pater our characteristic modern use of aesthetic for he emancipated the word from its bondage to philosophy...” (Bloom *Walter Pater: The Intoxication of Belatedness* 164). The slogan *Art for Art’s Sake*, which was originally a French slogan ‘*l’art pour l’art*’ gained huge popularity with Pater and other writers of the Decadent movement. Landscape and gothic elements were portrayed with different techniques.

In the later part of the nineteenth century the a new movement called Modernism started in Europe which was “more than an aesthetic event,” (Bradbury 28) bringing a wide-spread and far-reaching transformation in art and literature. It was a movement that encompassed all aspects of art, literature, music, dance, sculpture and beyond. Defining modernism has been a tough affair for the critics, as it was not only a movement in and of itself but was a series of movements, such as Symbolism, Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, and Expressionism. Precisely Modernism was an “umbrella term” (Krammer 113) which included a sequence of movements both in art and literature that occurred between the year 1870- 1930. It was marked by its opposition to Realism or Romanticism and also by its “deliberate challenge to traditional forms of art and thought” (Krammer 113) which was radically replaced by scientific thought and reason. “In literary terms it was French Symbolism that provided the most lasting impetus for aestheticism” (Krammer 115). The period of Modernism was a “new era of high aesthetic self- consciousness and non representationalism, in which art turns from realism and humanistic representation towards style, technique, and spatial form in

pursuit of a deeper penetration of life ” (Bradbury 25). In the year 1934 Ezra Pound came up with the idea *make it new* (Alexander 19) which further stimulated artists and authors to come out of the obsolete. “I do not think that any previous age produced work which was, in its own time as shatteringly and bewilderingly new as that of the Cubists, the Dadaists, the Surrealists and Picasso has been in ours” (Bradbury 20). Bradbury has further added that Modernism “contains a highly aesthetic response, one which turns on the assumption that the registering of modern consciousness or experience was not a problem in representation but a profound cultural and aesthetic crux” (Bradbury 23).

In the years around 1900 an interest in visual arts became immensely popular amongst the writers in Germany. Rainer Maria Rilke was one of the most enigmatic poets of the Modern era. As one of the greatest German poets of the twentieth century, his influence has been far and wide – his work is frequently cited and celebrated not only in literature but also in philosophy, music and film. “Rilke went further than any other German writer in using ideas from the visual and plastic arts to shape his poetry” (Bridge *Rilke and the Visual Arts* 145). Rainer Maria Rilke was enthusiastic about the French Symbolism and considered the poet Mallarmé as his inspiration.

Apart from being firmly rooted in European aestheticism, Rilke was also one of the many fin de siècle writers who adopted a Nietzschean and essentially vitalist philosophy of life. In Rilke’s case, this was a strategy which helped him overcome the aestheticist impasse by which art is rigidly separated from life and social reality” (Krammer 115).

Although symbolism left highest impact on Rilke yet he constantly tried to go beyond the Symbolists’ idea of separating art and life and worked towards integrating the arts into life with modernism’s conventional and innovative modes.

## **Rainer Maria Rilke: Life and Works**

Rilke was born in Prague on 4<sup>th</sup> Dec 1875 and spent twenty years of his life with his parents. “It seems an unlikely story. An unhappy, somewhat affected young man from Prague began his career as a highly imitative versifier. By dint of hard work and ascetic discipline, he became a poet, indeed the foremost European poet of his generation. This man, Rainer Maria Rilke became known as the poet's poet of the 20th century” (Paine 148).

Rilke had a very ‘heavy’ and ‘anxious’ (Gorner 10) childhood. His father, Josef Rilke was a railway official after a failed military career and Mother Sophie known also as Phia was a housewife. Rilke’s parents lost their daughter when she was just a week old. During Rilke's early years Phia acted as if she was searching for the dead child in Rilke making him dressed like a girl, which destroyed the child’s identity, paving the way for the androgynous self. In the year 1882 he was sent to Military school where he spent the most unhappy days of his life. The memories of the military school traumatized him for a long period. Both these incidents left a deep psychological effect on Rilke, which is reflected through his persona Malte in his autobiographical novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Briggs*: “Malte’s thought about radical alteration of mind, self and world teeter on a thin ledge of uncertainty between the fear that he is mentally disintegrating and the hope that he is going through a frightening process which will bring the poet in him to birth” (Kleinbard 26). In Malte, we find the “near- autonomous existence of an alter ego, gave frequent reminders that self and fiction are intricately interwoven. Rilke’s Malte is an observer, and the more we are shown the people and things he sees, the more we become conscious that Malte himself is a blank screen on to which images can be projected, rather than a sharply contoured and richly realized individual” (Hulse xviii).

Rilke spent a restless life throughout. He moved from one country to another, almost all Europe and beyond visiting his friends and relatives who accommodated him to write because most of the time Rilke was unable to afford his own living. And that was one of the foremost reasons of his varied literary oeuvre consisting of diverse regional literatures and cultures. Rilke formally appeared as a writer in the year 1894 with the publication of *Lives and Song: Leben und Lieder*. In 1895 Rilke began Art and Literature History studies in Prague. At the end of his first semester he published *Offerings to the Lares: Larenopfer*, with the support of his friend Valerie von David. This volume of poetry was dedicated to Prague, dealt with landscapes, scenes of folk life and objects of everyday use. Though it clearly contained influences of German Romanticism yet it drew attention from many well known critics. In 1896 Rilke left Prague and followed his friend, the painter Emil Orlik to Munich to study philosophy. 1897 was the first major turning point in Rilke's life when he met the German Russian writer Lou Andreas- Salome, fourteen years senior to him. Lou had close association with renowned scholars, philosophers and critics including Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud. Meeting Lou was a major breakthrough of Rilke's life for many reasons. She opened up the world of Russian art, literature and culture to him and acquainted him with Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud and Leo Tolstoy. In the same year Rilke, under her influence changed his first name Rene to Rainer. In 1898 he completed writing *Florentine Diary* which was published later in 1942. Within 1899- 1900 Rilke undertook two extensive journeys through Russia with Lou, where he met Leo Tolstoy, and considered him as a prophet along with Zola and Turgenev. While talking about Rilke's connection with Tolstoy, Lou Andrea Salome labelled him as the "eternal Russian" (Tavis, *Rilke and Tolstoy: The Predicament of Influence* 192), who had played a symbolic role in Rilke's life, which he later denied. Rilke spent the whole summer of 1899 studying "things Russian" (Ashton 49). He was so impressed with the artists that he planned a monograph on

Russian painters, which, however, was never written. During Rilke's stay in Russia with Lou, both of them studied the pre-Christian period, the architecture and its interior church structures, "old enamels and filigree work, miniatures, costumes, furniture and household items, especially of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (Ashton 49). The time Rilke spent with Lou was highly formative years for him. So tender in age and a proper direction helped Rilke to shape his direction towards a poet. He was gradually transforming from a simple Prague boy to a minute observer, a visionary thinker and above all a true critic of art. In September, 1900, Rilke accepted an invitation from the painter Heinrich Vogeler to visit the artists' colony in Worpswede, where he met painter Paula Modersohn Becker and sculptor Clara Westhoff. His impression on Worpswede was recorded in *Worpswede Diary* and in the collection of poems *The Book of Images*, 1902. Worpswede provided Rilke with first hand experience of the artists' life and work where he came directly in touch with the Jugendstil work of art. Rilke developed his concept of "relationship between man and the natural world, and on the function of art" (Bridge, "Rilke and the Visual Arts" 148). Critics tend to consider Worpswede as one of the significant turning point in his developing aesthetics- "It is a first step away from the aestheticising quality of Jugendstil, towards a form of art which, like Baudelaire's poetry, is able to create something beautiful out of the ugly and the alien" (Bridge, "Rilke and the Visual Arts" 149).

In 1901 Rilke broke off his relationship with Lou Andreas-Salomé and married Clara Westhoff and moved to Westerwede, near Worpswede. Their daughter was born and just after that he had to face terrible financial crisis. He started working as a newspaper critic and decided to write a monograph on the artists' colony at Worpswede, and also one on Rodin. In 1902 Rilke moved to Paris. The city which he had considered as alien later turned out to be the strongest inspiration for his literary career. He worked with Rodin and learnt the most

precious lessons on representation and creativity. Rilke's association with Rodin and his learning paved the way for *New Poems* and *New Poems: the Other Part*. His monograph on the sculptor *Auguste Rodin* is considered as one of the best critical studies on the artist. His ensuing correspondence with Ellen Key and Franz Xaver Kappus, which came out as *Letters to a Young Poet* became a milestone in his career. In Paris he visited Cezanne's painting exhibition in the Salon d'Automne almost every day and noted down his experience in letters to Clara which later was published as *Letters on Cezanne*. On 20<sup>th</sup> November 1907 Paula Becker died, and Rilke was deeply saddened by her death. He wrote *Requiem for a Friend* as a tribute to one of his closest friends.

In 1910, just after the publication of the novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* a period of restlessness started. Rilke continuously travelled to Castle Duino, near Trieste, North Africa, Algiers, Tunis and the holy city of Kairouan and then Egypt. His strong impressions in Egypt shaped the main theme of the *Duino Elegies*. During summer he travelled to Germany and met the expressionist Franz Werfel, and read the poetry of Georg Heym, which led him to write an essay *About the Young Poet*. In September, the same year he visited a psychoanalytic congress with Lou where he met Freud. He began to read Georg Trakl, Franz Kafka and Friedrich Holderin. "By 1908 visual art had fulfilled and reached the end of its function for Rilke as a source of aesthetic models" (Bridge, "Rilke and the Visual Arts" 149). But his admiration for Picasso and Paul Klee remained till his last days of life. "Rilke himself, who tended to play down literary influences on his work, referred regularly and enthusiastically to the inspiration he had found in visual art" (Bridge, "Rilke and the Visual Arts" 145).

In 1922 he finished writing *Duino Elegies* and wrote *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, dedicated to Wera Ockama Knoop, a young dancer from Munich. Rilke died of leukemia on 29

December, 1925 and “for the next 60 years, poets from all over the world- from Boris Pasternak in Russia to Randall Jarrell in America- claim him as their inspiration and model” (Paine 148). He had chosen his own epitaph-

*Rose, oh pure contradiction, delight  
of being no one's sleep under so  
many lids.*

Rilke has been an inspiration for many visual artists and “today he even enjoys a reception as a guru of queer studies and New Age Thinking” (Leeder and Villain 1). Undoubtedly he was one of the foremost modernist poets, “comparable in importance and influence with American-born T. S .Eliot and French poet Paul Valery” (Leeder and Villain 1).

### **Literature Review**

Steven M. Cahn and Aaron Meskin’s edited collection *Aesthetics: A Comprehensive Anthology*, Blackwell Publishing, 2008 is a collection of essays is divided into three parts which include classical, modern and contemporary theories of aesthetics.

Stephen Davies et al, edited *A Companion to Aesthetics*, Wiley Blackwell, 2009 incorporates all the major concepts and key terms associated with aesthetics.

Jerrold Levinson’s *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, Oxford University Press, 2003 is another substantial work on aesthetics where the author has touched upon its history and the associated concepts of recent times.

Jessie Lemont’s *Poems: Rainer Maria Rilke*, Gobias A. Wright, 1918 is one of the oldest collection of Rilke’s poem.

M. D. Herter Norton's *Translations from the Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1938, is a collection of Rilke's poetry.

Josef A Leese's *An Interpreter's Guide to Rainer Maria Rilke*, 1968, was a dissertation in the Illinois Wesleyan University having eleven chapters covering every aspect of Rilke's life starting from family, education, correspondence to his philosophy of life.

George C Schoolfield's *Rilke's Last Year*, University of Kansas Library, was a part of Annual Public Lecture on Books and Biography, University of Kansas in 1966, published in 1969. It is a detailed examination of Rilke's creative spirit during the year of his death.

Timothy J. Casey's *Rainer Maria Rilke: A Centenary Essay*, Macmillan Press Ltd, 1976, is a critical and philosophical study on Rilke's poetry.

Jeffery M Paine's "The Evolution of a Poet" is published in *The Wilson Quarterly*, 1976, is an interesting record of Rilke's stages of transformation through years.

Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*, Yale University Press, 1979 contains one chapter on Rilke's writing skill and how that made him different than his contemporaries.

Frank Baron, Ernst S. Dick and Warner R. Maurer's *Rilke: The Alchemy of Alienation*, The Regents Press of Kansas, 1980, is an anthology of essays which covers a thematic analysis of some of Rilke's selected work.

Donald Prater's *A Ringing Glass: The Life of Rainer Maria Rilke*, Oxford University Press, 1994, is a minutely researched biographical work.

Dore Ashton's *A Fable of Modern Art*, University of California Press, 1991, includes one chapter on Rilke. It talks of Rilke's Russian journey, the role of correspondence in Rilke's

life and also his impression on Rodin and Cezanne. It is a short critical study on Rilke's creative venture.

David Kleinbard's *The Beginning of Terror: A Psychological Study of Rainer Maria Rilke's Life and Work*, New York University, 1993, is somewhat different than other critical studies on Rilke. The author has tried to explore "the relationship between illness and genius in the poet and his work a subject to which he returned time and again" (Kleinbard 1). An examination on the impact of agony and how that brought the poet in Rilke to birth is being discussed. The striking factor of this study is that Kleinbard has tried to establish a possible link between Rilke and Sigmund Freud.

Anna, A. Tavis's *Rilke's Russia: A Cultural Encounter*, Northwestern University Press, 1994 is possibly the most precise work on Rilke's connection to Russia. In her perceptive analysis Tavis has covered almost every aspect of Rilke's Russian connection. The study has examined Rilke's change in vision from Prague to Russia and placed him against the backdrop of socio-political set-up. It also sheds light on Rilke's craft and technique.

Ralph Freedman's *Life of a Poet: Rainer Maria Rilke*. Northwestern University Press, 1996, is a biographical and historical exploration of Rilke. It is a full length study on both Rilke's life and works.

Judith Ryan's *Rilke, Modernism and Poetic Tradition* Cambridge University Press, 1999, critically examines Rilke's literary sojourn towards modernism. This study traces the many ways in which contemporary culture is constituted and confronted in Rilke's work.

Erika A Metzger and Michael M. Metzger's *A Companion to the Works of Rainer Maria Rilke*, Camden House, 2001, is an eclectic collection of ten essays by eminent Rilke scholars.

This is an attempt to explore some of the ways Rilke adopted for his writing and the impact of Baudelaire, Mallarm and Verlaine on Rilke.

Rosy Singh's *Tagore, Rilke and Gibran*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2002, presents a comparative study of three texts – Tagore's *Gitanjali*, Rilke's *The Book of Hours* and Gibran's *The Prophet*.

Ben Hutchinson's *Rilke's Poetics of Becoming*, Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2006, examines many levels of Rilke's early poetry, its motives, metaphors, rhythm and syntax. The study tries to trace stylistic development in Rilke.

Eric L Santner. *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*, The University of Chicago Press, 2006, presents a psychological study of Rilke with special reference to *Notebooks on Malte Laurids Brigge*.

George C. Schoolfield's *Young Rilke and His Time* Camden House, 2009, discusses Rilke's early life and works including his three diaries.

Edward Snow's *The Poetry of Rilke*, North Point Press, 2009 is a collection of poetry with an introduction by Adam Zagajewski.

*The Cambridge Companion to Rilke* edited by Karen Leeder, and Robert Vilain, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 13 scholarly essays. The book has three parts- Life, Works and Cultural contexts, Influences and Reception.

Stephan Delbos's *From A Terrace in Prague*, Univerzita Karlova v Praze, 2011, gives a general overview of the poets of Prague in Rilke's time.

Will Stone's *Rilke in Paris*, Hesperus Press Limited, 2012, gives an account of Rilke's time in Paris.

Luke Fischer's *The Poet as Phenomenologist*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, is coming up with new perspectives on the relation between Rilke's poetry and phenomenological philosophy. Fischer has tried to illustrate the ways in which poetry can offer an exceptional response to the philosophical problem of dualism.

### **Rationale and Objective of the study**

As is evident from the literature survey a substantial body of works on Rilke have focused on biographical aspects and characterization, but Rilke's developing aesthetics and conversion of visual into verbal have drawn only incidental comments. Rilke as a writer, whose commitment to the visual arts forms an intrinsic part of his literature has not drawn much critical attention. The present study is an attempt to explore Rilke's creative process which was closely linked to his understanding of visual art and artistic tradition. The title of the thesis: *Representing the Visual: A Study of Aesthetics in Rainer Maria Rilke* aims to see the converging patterns in literature and visual art which was a preoccupation in Rainer Maria Rilke.

### **Methodology**

As the study primarily deals with the visual and the literary representation in Rilke, some selected works which include these aspects are taken into account. The study is based on close reading of the following selected texts: *Larenfer: Lares' Sacrifice* (1895), *Advent: Advent* (1898), monograph *Auguste Rodin* (1903), *The Book of Hours: Das Stunden-Buch* (1905), *New Poems: Neue Gedichte* (1907), *New Poems the Other Part* (1908), *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge: Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910), *Letters on Cezanne* (1942) and *Diaries of a Young Poet* (1942).

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## Chapter II

### The Romantic Aesthete: Prague, Munich and Florence

Rainer Maria Rilke spent the early years of his life in Prague, the capital city of Bohemia. He was a restless traveller throughout and hardly came back to Prague after he left the city in the year 1896. But Prague was all-pervading in Rilke's early works, which was a city that had fascinated some great poets from many corners of the world in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Every city is distinctive in terms of its culture, history and politics. Prague, with its rich architectural heritage inspired a wide range and form in poetry: the image of death, landscape, folk life along with socio- political movements like "Pan- Slavism" and "National Revival" (Tavis 1, 3). Rilke witnessed Pan- Slavism (a mid 19<sup>th</sup> century movement in Germany) in Prague at an early age which was a combination of "German Romantic thought" and "indigenous Slavic Nationalism" (Tavis 3). Before that, in the eighties of the eighteenth century a patriotic, Bohemian trend of literature was growing amongst the German writers and it continued till the first decades of the nineteenth century. Prague's national conflict involved three ethnic groups- "...the Germans, desperately clinging to their privileges"; the Czechs, clamoring for cultural recognition and political representation; and the Jewish minority struggling to survive in the political crossfire between the German and the Czechs" (Tavis 6).

Most of the poetry of this age was a result of many dominant literary movements of the period, such as Revivalism and Decadence. For many poets the main preoccupation was the atrocious and turbulent Czech history as the country was closely engaged in almost all the major European political affairs of the twentieth century. Rilke was born in the nineteenth

century which itself was a period of turbulence and transition with wars and revolutions and marked a drastic change in the minds of Europeans.

In the literary traditions of Prague there was always a clash between Czech ideologies and the Austro- Hungarian. “The literature of Rilke’s time expressed a synthesis of three different styles: Romanticism, Realism, and Naturalism” (Leese 11). The poets of nineteenth and the twentieth century in Prague shared many common creeds. The spirit of promoting the culture and language of Czech nation was more pervading than promoting Austro- Hungarian. Besides that ideological conflict it was a “decadent movement in Czech poetry” (Leese 11) which influenced the late nineteenth century poets like Karel Hlavacek and Antonin Sova. Rilke also experimented with this form. Both Edward Snow and Michael Winkler had commented about Rilke’s style between 1898- 1900:

At the beginning of this phase the young poet had perfected, if not yet exhausted, the rhetorical techniques and mannerisms of his early impressionistic style. His verse was still prone to the gossamer and was given more to a flirtation than a sustained artistic engagement with the exquisite and the delicate (Snow and Winkler vii).

By 1870, a new movement namely “Revival of the Czech Nation” (Tavis 3) appeared in the scene of Prague, where a difference between national tradition and folk tradition emerged. And gradually folkloristic literature drew attention of the Young Czech writers. Nearly every writer was writing on Prague’s national history and related areas. “This nationalist impatience for historical legitimization eventually resulted in an episode of cultural embarrassment, of which Rilke was an interested witness” (Tavis 3). In the mid 1800s, a sense of “nonbelonging” (Tavis 2) affected the people of Prague and Rilke blamed the city for his own dilemma. In 1896 he moved to Munich, following the footsteps of some Prague writers, yet could not escape from that cultural incongruity. “The difference between the Czechs and the

Germans always remained for Rilke one of essence rather than of power and politics” (Tavis 5). The anxiety between competing Czech and Austro- Hungarian ideologies plays an important role in Rilke’s poetry. Stephan Delbos has pointed out the poem *Hradcany*, where Rilke has used a term “old Hofburg”, the name of the seat of Austro- Hungarian Emperor in Vienna. Delbos argues that “it is a telling mix of allusions to the capital of the empire and the Bohemian capital” (Delbos 11). The poem *Hradcany* was actually named after the city, where Prague Castle is still situated. Ralph Freedman has talked in *Life of a poet: Rainer Maria Rilke*, about Rilke’s time and architectural pattern of the period especially of the Prague castle, “...when the facades of the great buildings along the Vltava River still looked splendid. The plaster covering the ancient bricks had not yet peeled off as cafes and theatres cast their lights upon the water (Freedman 6). In the poem *Hradcany* Rilke sees the castle looking down upon the city, dominating the scene with its magnificent walls, a “symbol of imperial power” (Freedman 6):

*It's beautiful, the weather- beaten  
brow of old Hofburg;  
even the short stares of children  
must climb it.*

*And its welcoming gaze rushes  
Vltava- waves to the castles foot.  
From the bridge, the holy ones  
look on with concern*

*The towers turn, the newer ones,  
to St. Vitus above  
like a choir of children to their  
dear father.*

(Delbos 36)

In *Hradcany* Rilke had carefully chosen some expressions to give the readers a structural overview of the castle. Prague castle is a combination of Gothic St Vitus styles and Basilica of St. George which are Romanesque in style. The phrase *welcoming gaze* clearly reveals the castle's majesty as if it would embrace everyone's attention at a glance. But for Rilke it was not only a concrete building rather it went beyond. His way of looking into the Prague castle as reflected in this poem is akin to the Heideggerian concept of lived experience. His approach towards the Castle has become an "object for human subjects to experience in an especially intense, vital, or meaningful way" (Thomson, Iain). Once the experience becomes "lived", it involuntarily keeps room for participation. Eventually the castle is no longer a building, because "lived experience" elevates the object into the level interpersonal correspondence. It also evokes interplay between the seen and the unseen. Like a person interprets an art object with its own cultural background the castle also comes up with its untold history. In Rilke, poetry and painting merge so well that a piece of art can be visualized through his poem. *Hradcany* is an obvious example of this. The metaphor "*choir of children to their dear father*" is used to symbolize the rising tomb of the castle as if it is moving towards heaven invoking a sense of the sacred. The creation of pictorial representation was in itself a distinctive mode of aesthetic imagination. "...Rilke's poetry and the visual arts involve a more general transference of aesthetic means and goals from

sculpture and painting to poetry” (Bridge, “Rilke and the Modern Portrait” 682). In fact German Romantics were fond of merging the line between poetry and painting where “...paintings become poems, poems become music, and solemn sacred music may become a towering temple” (Blankenagel 3). City landscape and locations were some major themes adopted by Prague poets in the last decades of nineteenth century. Amongst all it was the *Prague Castle* which has been treated as predominant element to glorify the city.

The castle, which looms over Prague would have been as inescapable symbol that every ‘respectable’ poet would have tried his or her hand at describing while attempting to remain faithful to the landmark itself and all it implied about Czech history and culture without compromising his or her own poetic vision and style (Delbos 12).

During his stay in the Military Academy, Marisch- Weisskerchen in the year 1896 Rilke spent some unhappy days of his life. Though he was totally unfit for that environment, he stayed there for six years because his father wanted him to be a military official. Later he expressed that the years in the military school had traumatized him and called it as “Dostoevskian House of the Dead” (Leese 25). This happened mainly because of his androgynous upbringing, where he was dressed up like a girl by his mother to fill the gap of his parent’s departed child. He was so meek that he could not bear even pranks played by his fellow friends. The clashes of desire between Rilke’s parents gave birth to another Rene who could not sense his own identity. Later, Rilke through his novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, published in the year 1910 shows this dilemma of androgynous self which placed him “within the framework of a progressively conceived feminine aesthetics” (Ryan 6). Protagonist Malte in the novel is a persona of the poet which shows how this duality made him feel different than others and how it continued to affect him all through his life. As a

child, Rilke was compelled to behave like an entertainer by his mother, where he had to showcase his talent in front of guests. Though Phia acted as a caring mother yet there relationship was quite complicated. Rilke felt a lack of genuine love and called her as “an utterly shallow woman with no true affection for him” (Leese 17):

*Poor saints of wood  
to whom my mother brought her gifts;  
Mute and proud, they were amazed  
behind their hardwood benches.*

*For her searing troubles  
they certainly knew no gratitude,  
solely knew the candle- glos  
of their icy masses.*

*But my mother came  
and brought them flowers.  
my mother picked these flowers,  
all of them, out of my life.*

(Leese 18)

Through this poem he expressed how he felt alienated towards Phia- *my mother picked these flowers/ all of them, out of my life*, which perhaps reveals how she seized her son’s choice and happiness. The flower theme is metaphorically used. Rilke might have used the flower

motif spontaneously but not deliberately, yet it occurs as a recurrent leitmotif in his later poems. Toward off his isolation, he chose art as a way to liberation:

Know then that art is: paths toward freedom. We have all been born in chains. A few forget their chains: they have them silver-plated or gilded. But we want to rend them; not through ugly and brute force; our desire is to grow out of them. Know then that artist creates for himself- only for himself. In him there is no room for his past, and so he gives it a separate, independent existence in works of art (Rilke, *Diaries of a Young Poet* 17).

The concept of alienation was a dominant theme in Modern European poetry and German Romantic literature. German Romantics believed that “at the root of all alienation there is uprootedness, intellectual curiosity, man’s heightened consciousness and the unrest of freedom” (Pribic 5). Rilke’s childhood was driven by his parents’ eccentricity. That impact of their parents’ behaviour on the formative years was a persistent theme in Rilke’s work. For Rilke that suffering of loneliness became a “heraldic emblem” (Freedman 17) which finally ushered in his close association with myth. Rilke created a world of his own where he read vigorously and immersed himself in the reading of mythological heroes and their tales. That was one reason of his close involvement with Prague myth which has occurred in many of his early writings. That isolation and solitude remain constant in Rilke.

In two of Rilke’s prose works like “Two Prague Stories” and “Brother and Sister”, which he wrote around 1895, dealt with the story of a terrorist group called Omladina. Besides that Rilke learned about the mythological hero Dalibor.

Rilke was indebted to tradition at the same time he tried to free himself from it. As time went on, Rilke’s dependence on other people’s work became less evident. In

part, his move to Paris and the cross-linguistic nature of his borrowings meant that they were far less evident. Later, when he immersed himself once more in his native literary tradition, he grew more concerned about his imitative impulses (Ryan 1, 2).

As a child, Rilke's interest in painting and poetry made him to delve in caricatures. Rilke had a sense of "cultural interest" (Ryan 7) from his childhood. "Rene was trained to memorize, copy poetry and paint: he liked best to paint villas and castles on islands" (Leese 17). His subjects of interest in painting later appeared as prominent themes in his poetry, and his criticism of art was the result of his study and his constant contact with artist and their work. In the year 1897 he began to study Italian Renaissance Art, which helped him immensely to understand the visual arts. And that experience eventually culminated in his *Florentine Diary*.

At this moment a figure taken on for me his defining contours: Andrea Orcagna, the creator of this edifice, ceases to be an empty name; I feel over me the clarity of a man and the deep, faithful seriousness of someone who dwells in solitude. A master of life has arched these halls someone quiet and festive, who created columns in his own image and suspended the roof above them according to life's pattern, darkly weighing down and yet no burden for the assured striving of the sturdy posts. And this is how the first Renaissance man initiates me into the mystery of his time (Rilke, *Diaries of a Young Poet* 9).

Italian Renaissance brought many changes in the field of art and culture. It provided a platform for the development of aesthetic theory through its superior creative spirit. Rilke was deeply captivated by Renaissance art:

Suddenly we feel that these Madonnas are not monuments of a quiet gratefulness that they are only markstones of a dark and somber path to the sun, and we know that the degree of their beauty will be the sign of how near or far they are from this goal. For beauty is the involuntary gesture in which a personality distils itself. It becomes for perfect, the more hate and fear fall away from it, the more confident the artists grows on the path that leads to his most sacred fulfilment (Rilke, *Diaries of a Young Poet* 14).

Rilke was enrolled informally in the University of Berlin in 1897 where he studied art histories, especially Italian. He got an opportunity to get acquainted with many well known poets and writers, Stefan George, Carl Hauptmann and Richard Dehmel. In 1898 he visited Florence as suggested by Lou Andrea Salome to undertake Renaissance Art studies, which was a major breakthrough in Rilke's literary career. In Florence he met Heinrich Vogeler, and Rudolf Borchardt. "Besides engaging with the contemporary art scene, Rilke informed himself about the history of art by visiting galleries and exhibitions, and reading the most popular art history of the 1890s, Richard Muther's *The History of Modern Painting*, as well as other art- historical studies" (Bridge 145-46). Rilke was well aware about the German art scene especially of Jugendstil and French Neo- Impressionism. In his first published poem, Rilke looks quizzically at women's dresses:

*The Train is now in fashion-  
a thousand terms be cursed,  
into the latest newspaper  
it boldly slips, head- first!*

*And seeing that this fashion  
is not to be erased,  
we'll see stern public hygiene  
indignant and red- faced:  
once it's been alerted  
to defy this torture – rack  
that makes you calmly swallow  
dust enough to make you hack-  
quick, before they fine us,  
let's just forget the train,  
policeman might get serious  
and interface again.  
They'd need to stand on corners  
with monstrous pairs of shears,  
prepared to sever hastily  
whatever train appears.*

(Ryan 8)

The tone is ironic, yet playfully romantic resembling Eichendorff. Mid nineteenth century German Romantics were especially enthusiastic about this form, which could be seen as “German Romantic imitations of medieval songs” (Ryan 8). In *From the Life of A Good- for- Nothing* of Eichendorff “the protagonist’s song of praise to a beautiful woman, a servant he has mistaken for an elegant lady. The ironic implication of parodying this well known serenade in a piece of occasional verse about fashion would not have been lost on Rilke’s readers” (Ryan 8).

*Lives and Songs*, which published in 1894, could not establish Rilke amongst other poets. And it happened due to his clear obsession with the popular forms that were in trend. The poems visibly echoes the tone of German romanticism and French Symbolism, mostly represented by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Heinrich Heine and Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff. But besides many other shortcomings this collection could draw some interest for its “technical ease” and “virtuosity” (Louth 42).

Rilke’s second collection of poems *Larenofen* appeared in 1895, which was a tribute to Prague and contained clear images of the city. The poems speak about the landscape, folk life and the city with a great majestic beauty. “It stands out from the early collections in its main subject- manner, the topography and history of Prague, which it covers almost in the manner of a guidebook” (Louth 42). Apart from the fact that there was nothing new in the subject matter, *Larenofen* appeared as much developed and skillfully crafted labor than his earlier collection: “ ‘It was in May’ evokes Goethe’s ‘May Song’, and the next poem, ‘The Old Invalid’ turns to Heine’s ‘The Grenadiers’ ” (Louth 42).

Rilke shared some affinities with German Romantics, where “poetry and prose, creative genius and criticism, subtly refined poetry ‘Kunstpoesie’ and folk-poetry ‘Volkspoesie’ are to be mingled and blended” (Blankenagel 3). In the poem *The Folk Song* Rilke talks about an unknown poet who forgets everything in the world and finds freedom from strife amidst folk life:

*And a great poet, intoxicated with fame*

*Listened to simple songs*

*as piously as the people once listened*

*to the word of God on Sinai.* (Tavis 10)

Rilke believed that “legendary folk tradition alone, not poor imitations of the West, could provide nourishment for the national Slavic spirit” (Tavis 10). Prague is portrayed in Rilke as a city of utmost beauty. The first poem of this collection shows the city under the twilight- “*The city blurs, as if behind a glass*” (Louth 43). A fondness of forest, solitude, stillness always remained as a vital part of Rilke’s Romantic imagination- night, twilight, moonlight was always represented as beautiful and mysterious - “for night stimulates the imagination, for moonlight which feels man with longing, for clouds which journey afar like dreams, and for twilight which effaces sharp outlines and gives rise to vagueness of mood” (Blankenagel 7).

Most of Rilke’s early works focused on the revival of Czech tradition. “Rilke’s early stories capture the ghost of Prague’s ‘vanished age’, the aged lethargic citizenry paralyzed by a general feeling of hopelessness and inertia” (Tavis 6). National conflict and Slavophilism were integral parts of *Laronger*. Rilke was sympathetic towards the Czech people in terms of nationalism. He insisted that the writer should focus on his own Czech culture and tradition rather than imitating foreign models. He firmly believed that the future of Czech nation was in the hands of those people who can protect the nation from the cosmopolitan decadence that surrounded Prague. It has been seen that till *Laronger*, Rilke was mostly concerned with Prague where cityscapes happened to be the major theme in his works. Louth argues that this cityscape “becomes an image of Rilke’s lack of direction and poetic flightiness. He is still looking for an identity and a voice, and in the end in not that much further forward in finding it than in *Lives and Songs*” (43). The poem *Land and Folk* gives a clear picture of Prague and its happy people:

*Land and Folk*

*...God was in his good mood. Greediness*

*was not his way;*

*and he smiled; so became*

*Bohemia rich with a thousand riches.*

*Wheat like petrified light lies*

*between the mountains, hairy with forest,*

*and the tree, bending*

*under heavy fruits, demand props.*

*God have huts; stalls*

*full of sheep; and lasses whose bodices*

*were almost bursting from health.*

*Gave all the lads, the good fellows,*

*strength in their feasts,*

*and native songs- in their hearts.*

(Tavis 11)

Many times Rilke seems to be true counterpart of Eichendorff while it comes to romantic imagination in relation to nature and integrating life into work. *Land and Volk* shows the beautiful landscape of Prague surrounded by “mountains” and “hairy forest”. The line *and the*

*tree bending/ under heavy fruits* is quite similar to Eichendorff's poetry which talks about richness and mystical beauty of nature which "conjures up starry moonlit nights and rustling treetops in the unfathomable depth of forests where Lorelei, the seductive witch, lures the homeless wanderer to death and destruction" (Mahoney 25). Each visual that is represented in the poem symbolizes aesthetics of everyday life attained through a co- relation between man and nature. He considered it essential to be creative. "Despite the description of fallen tendency of everyday life Heidegger shares Rilke's view, at least in his early writings that ecstasies are latent within everyday experience. The possibility for heightened awareness about what ordinarily recedes from notice is already there within everyday life. The possibility and motivational movement of ecstasies is latent within the quotidian itself" (Gosetti-Ferencei 34). Thus Rilke's work illustrated and emphasized the spirit of nature which had become a pure aesthetic experience for the readers. And he did it with the swapping of reason and poetic imagination. Dennis F. Mahoney has rightly pointed out "In poetry what matters is not the generation of a sensible and comprehensible link to a particular life situation; rather, the medium art transforms the disparately experienced world into an imaginary cosmos of infinite varieties or into an artificial chaos, conceived as the vision of totality" (Mahoney 150).

Silence and solitude are predominant themes that occupy most of Rilke's works and he considered loneliness as "sacred" (Tavis 58). The poems of *Larenofen* are characterized by a "tendency to turn away from the turmoil of life" (Lemont xix). Why did Rilke name the collection *Sacrifices to the Lares* is a debatable question. "We know, however, that Rilke was to move to Munich in 1896, the first geographical displacement designed to help him escape his peripheral position. *Sacrifices to the Lares* is a collection of verbal postcard views,

as if Rilke felt obliged to propitiate the household gods before he left his native city for good” (Ryan 12). *Larenofers* is a visual treat like a poetic sojourn through Hradcany, the St. Wenceslas chapel, Emperor Rudolfs monument and the Town Hall clock. These poems “forge an aesthetic of marginality by looking at home from the perspective of a tourist. A conscious discrepancy between German literary language and Czech folk tradition runs through the entire volume. If the opening poems rework Eichendorff, the concluding poem recalls Heine” (Ryan 22). A wistful vision of the city’s architecture is reflected in ‘Auf der Kleinseite’ [In the Little Quarter], which is about a section of Prague: “The quarter’s dominant architectural style is baroque, and it is full of magnificent palaces and villas with richly decorated facades, elegant balustrades, and a proliferation of statues, niches and interior courtyards” (Ryan 17)-

*Ancient houses, steeply gabled,  
lofty towers full of bells, –  
Heaven, flirting with the fabled  
narrow courtyards, weaves its spells.  
And on every porch and stair,  
languid, smiling, cupids breathe.  
Baroque, on rooftops in the air,  
vases rustle round with wreaths.  
Spider webs obscure the portal  
in that place. The furtive sun  
reads the mystic words immortal  
on a Virgin’s pedestal of stone. (Ryan 18)*

With *Dream- Crowned* published in 1896 and *Advent in* 1897, Rilke took a different turn from landscape and folk imagery. As Jessie Lemont comments that “...a phase of questioning

commences, a dim desire begins to stir to reach out into the larger world ‘deep into life, out beyond time’ ” (Lemont xix).

Most of the poems in *Advent* were written in Munich, which was the hub of *Jugendstil*, an art movement in Germany parallel to Art Nouveau in France. Rilke incorporated the new findings. Munich was the main centre of *Jugendstil* until the turn of the century. The name *Jugendstil* was taken from the art journal, *Die Jugend*, which was published in Munich and adopted the new artistic movement. *Jugendstil* art integrated a wide range of variety in methods starting from the Classical to the Romantic. The major characteristics of the form were hard lines as well as lithe curves. As a movement, Art Nouveau shared certain characteristics with its preceding movements- Romanticism, and the Pre-Raphaelites. Rilke stepped himself in this “turn of the century art, with its decorative surfaces and flowing lines, giving new shape to his language and imagery” (Ryan 18).

In November of the same year, Rilke began to work on a volume of poetry, titled *Mir zur Feier* [To Celebrate Myself], where he sought to “establish a tone quite different from that of his previous two volumes. ... *Jugendstil*’s abolition of clear distinctions between background and foreground, nature and the human figure, subject and object, presents a seductive but troubling vision for the young writer trying to fashion a new lyric identity” (Ryan 18).

Two aspects of the *Jugendstil* movement, floral decor and its cult of youth attracted Rilke. Here Rilke develops the image of the “inner garden” (Ryan 19), a projection of the poet’s psyche into the external world in the three garden poems, written in November and December, 1897. These poems set forth a new poetic credo that proclaims the “first development of Rilke’s ideas about interior landscape” (Ryan 19):

*I am so young. And trembling, I incline  
to every sound that rustles through the air,  
and in wind's tender clasp, like columbine,  
or vines across the garden path that twine,  
my longing sends forth swaying pinions there,*

*And free of armour I will make my way,  
as long as I can feel my lungs expand.  
For it is time to leave, not time to stay,  
when, from this early coastal coolness, day  
guides me more deeply on the road inland.*

(Ryan 23)

In *The Letters to a Young Poet* Rilke has cited two continuous influences on his work, “the Bible and the books of the great Danish writer, Jens Peter Jacobsen” (Rilke *Letters to a Young Poet* 19). The poem *Solitude in Advent* was dedicated to the Danish poet Jean Peter Jacobson, whom Rilke considered “more as a poet of decadence” (Louth 44) and whose influence was constant in every point of Rilke’s life:

*You my sacred solitude,*

*You are rich and pure and open*

*As a garden awakening.*

*My sacred solitude-*

*Hold the golden gate closed*

*Where desires wait*

(Louth 44)

In the series of letters Rilke wrote between 1903- 1908 to his friend Franz Xaver Kappus, he had clearly expressed his longing for solitude and silence which anticipates his later poems on Buddha. Rilke was “an introvert, a lover of solitude” (Zagajewski vii), where everyday objects began to take on new images and meaning. He thought that surface of a thing might mislead one whereas “in the great depths all becomes law” (Rilke, *Letters to a Young poet* 38). In his own words “For the creative artist there is no poverty- nothing is insignificant or unimportant. Even if you were in prison whose walls would shut out from your senses the sounds of the outer world, would you not then still have your childhood, this precious wealth, this treasure house of memories” (Rilke, *Letters to a Young poet* 12).

Rilke was very close to four Czech poets during his stay in Prague, in Svatopluk Cech, Kajetan Tyl, Julius Zeyer and Jaroslav Vrchlicky. The poem *Kajetan Tyl* was written after Rilke visited an ethnographic exhibition, which was boycotted by Germans. It was Julius Zeyer’s attachment to Russian culture, literature and history which inspired Rilke’s interest for the country. “More important for Zeyer was to discover Russia’s simple, unquestioning faith in God, which purified and mystified aesthetic experience” (Tavis 14). Rilke edited a journal *Jung- Deutschland und Jung- Osterreich*, which clearly bore a slavic flavour.

The year 1897 was remarkable in Rilke’s life when he met Lou Andrea Salome, a high profile German Russian writer, who had good connections with Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud. “Lou’s effects on Rilke as a poet and as a man were far- reaching and lasting. She helped to change Rene Rilke from a provincial talent to a cosmopolitan artist”

(Delbos 39). It was Lou who inspired Rilke to understand the objectivity of the artist and in conceptualizing art as a relative independent medium, opening up new contacts with the artistic, cultural and philosophical world. The process of seeing brought in a transference of aesthetics which led to poetic ekphrasis. Florentine diary was first of this kind which testified Rilke's change of vision and artistic creation. Under Lou's influence Rilke carried out "intensive studies of Italian Renaissance and of Russian Art" (Bridge 146). In the same year Rilke changed his name to Rainer from Rilke in her influence. Rilke attained an "essence of Nietzscheanism" (Gorner 12) from Lou. In his *Florentine Diary*, dedicated to Lou, Rilke tried to "see art from the perspective of Nietzsche's Zarathustra and engage in reflections on the meaning of art and the existential condition of the artist..." (Gorner 12). Rilke wrote more than hundred love poems for Lou, unpublished at her request. "You have seen me suffer and have consoled me. Upon your consolation I want to build my church- in which joy has bright alters" (Rilke, *Diaries of a Young Poet* 17).

39). Rilke wrote three diaries between 15 April 1898 to 22 December 1900 which reflected his search "for a language that might capture the specificity of things natural and crafted and at the same time convey their intrinsic spirituality" (Snow and Winkler vii). The first one amongst these *Florentine Diary*, can be seen as a definite treatise on Florentine art and architecture. The first evening in Florence was overwhelming for Rilke:

*I can only keep silent and gaze...*

*Could I once also sound?*

*And the hours are women*

*who spoil me with all kinds of*

*blue, shimmering delight.*

*Shall I tell you of my crowded days*

*or of my place of sleep?*

*My desires run riot*

*and out of all paintings*

*the angels follow me.*

(Snow and Winkler 4)

More vignettes of perception through senses, sights and sound as he gazed up Benvenuto Cellini's *Perseus*:

I am amazed before its silhouette by the lovely, victorious movement and proud elan of this statue I had never been able to appreciate at a remove, and with every minute I grow calmer and more observant among this high, bright images that seem to me ever more familiar, caringly arched over as both they and I are by this somber, securely extended hall that rests on its strong Gothic columns in perfect confidence (Rilke, *Diaries of a Young Poet* 9).

He was amazed by the unprecedented autonomy of form and shape of the *Loggia dei Lanzi* “...I begin to reel as I gaze all the way up to its helmeted head, and as I glance around, disoriented, looking for shelter, a magnificent wide hall extends its broad arches toward me” (Rilke, *Diaries of a Young Poet* 9).

The harmony of shades of texture and colour of the Florentine evenings left Rilke fascinated:

Most decorative though are the red evenings. Above the Cascine the last, dying blaze still glows, and the Ponte Vecchio, its old houses stuck to it like nests, threads like a black ribbon through silk yellow as the sun. In reconciled shades of brown and gray

the city spreads out, and the mountains of Fiesole are already wearing the colors of the night. (Rilke, *Diaries of a Young Poet* 7)

For Rilke the Florentine experience was all engrossing:

I sat for hours before some single painting and formed my opinion about it and later sifted it through Burckhardt's beautiful critique. And behold my opinion was like many opinions. Then one day before Botticelli's *Magnificat* I forgot for once about my judgement and the judgment of the others. That's when it happened. I looked into a struggle and had the sensation of a victory. And my joy was like no other joy" (Rilke, *Diaries of a Young Poet* 20).

Rilke considered art as "a path toward freedom" and God as "oldest work of art" (Snow and Winkler 17, 27). According to Rilke artists create for themselves.

The artist work is a putting- in- order: he places outside himself all things that are small and transitory: his lone sufferings, his vague longings, his fearful dreams, and those joys that will fade. Then the realm inside him becomes spacious and festive, and he will have created that worthy home for- himself (Snow and Winkler 18).

This brings in a Rilkean poetics of the "gaze" and its representation "...Artist's way must be this: to bridge obstacle after obstacle and to build step after step, until at last he can gaze into himself. Not straining, not forced, not on his tiptoes: calmly and clearly as into a landscape (Snow and Winkler 18). Emphasizing parallelly the variables of an artistic creation Rilke states: "Every work of the arts, all effects 'of art' must be fulfilled. A painting should need no text, a statue no color (in painting's sense), and a poem no music; rather everything must be contained in each (Rilke, *Diaries of a Young Poet* 29).

Rilke reaches out to the dynamics of colour in sculpture as a different medium of representation:

I am convinced that sculpture, in order to achieve its ultimate goals, must often reach for color (which is not to say that it should get its color from the art of painting). When it is a matter of portrait busts, it will be up to the artist to determine whether an individuality, for its full realization, requires color- and as with all things of art the deciding factors will be the particular case, the motif at hand, and finally the material, not some universally valid law (Rilke, *Diaries of a Young Poet* 68).

Rilke wrote one poem each day in the first week of his stay in Florence. Capturing the essence of the city in its varied hues and colors:

AND shall I tell you how my day rolls by?

*Early in I make my way through shining streets*

*to palaces where hourly my soul broadens,*

*and then I mingle in the open squares*

*with swarthy folk amid their wildest clamor.*

*Middays I worship in the hall of paintings*

*before Madonnas of bright noble grace.*

*and later on, when I leave this holy room,*

*dusk will have covered Arno valley,*

*and I become silent, become slowly tired,*

*and paint myself a God in gold...*

(Rilke, *Diaries of a Young Poet* 5)

This “intensity of looking” at the statues of the Italian masters Giotto, Michelangelo and Leonardo was like “quiet dialogues” (Rilke, *Diaries of a Young Poet* 513, 14) with the masters:

Suddenly I feel it clearly. And with a shy awkwardness I, the small, the nameless, the unworthy one, hasten toward them, and pass devoutly and gratefully from one to the next, blessed by each, recognizing each: Andrea Orcanga first, as I had imagined him, his gaze full of will transcends raised on high, his forehead a broad expanse for light. And Giotto, deep in thought, and Michelangelo and Leonardo. Then also the poet Boccaccio, Petrarch and, wreathed in inspiration, Dante...And in this way I looked into all their faces and drew strength from their quietude (Rilke, *Diaries of a Young Poet* 10).

The main point of Rilke’s departure from the German Romantics was the selection of subject matter and carefully chosen imagery. Rilke’s understanding of the fundamentals of the pictorial and plastic arts shaped *Advent* and *Dream Crowned* bringing in a quiet stillness with a portrayal of soft, delicate words of expressions where colour was not the only factor. As he said “one will have to attend to the characteristics of the material and submit oneself to its will- even, up to point, to its whim (Rilke, *Diaries of a Young Poet* 69)

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(Zagajewski vii),

## Chap III

### Visual Imagination and Sacred Space: Russia and Worpswede

Termed as a “belated troubadour at times a vagrant revered” (Leeder 9) Rilke remained open minded towards all cultures of the world. His outlook was decidedly “international and anti-chauvinistic” (Leeder 9), and just after Prague and Munich it was Russia which fascinated the poet till the end of his life. In a letter to Leopold von Schlozer in January 21, 1920 Rilke called Russia as “my instinct’s homeland” (Greene and Norton 214). Though it was Lou Andrea Salome with whom Rilke took the two Russian trips, she was not the first to introduce Russia to him. It was the Czech poet Julius Zeyer’s “peculiar taste” (Tavis *Rilke’s Russia* 16) who instilled Rilke’s interest in Russia. Anna A. Tavis argues that Zeyer’s personal commitment to Russia worked as a foundation for Rilke’s upcoming image of the country. “Rilke’s acquaintance with Julius Zeyer profoundly influenced his future aesthetic orientation in general, not just his views of Russia” (Tavis *Rilke’s Russia* 14). During his first Russian trip with Lou Andreas-Salomé, Rilke concentrated on the study of the Russian language, the history of art and its literature. This, among other things, was a form of preparation for the already planned second trip, which took place from the 7th of May to the 24th of August in 1900. Amongst all Russian themes, Rilke was preoccupied with folklore and mysticism. Zeyer’s aim was to discover simplicity of the Russian people and “unquestioning faith in God, which purified and mystified aesthetic experience” (Tavis *Rilke’s Russia* 14) which eventually drew Rilke’s interest. Rilke’s concept of God was sceptical before he moved on to Russia. But his wide visit to the country made him realize that he “found home and God” (Wawrzynek 278) in the country. The poet felt the existence of God amidst folk life and clean landscape where Russian folks were directly related. He felt

that Russian folks were “in close communication with heaven and earth, with nature and with God” (Wawrzynek 278). For him “a farmer was the carrier of the divine and his work was considered a manifestation of becoming God” (Wawrzynek 278).

Lou declared before their trip to Russia, “I submit to it with deep humility and see clearly now that the time has come to call you: go your own way to meet your dark God” (Tavis *Rilke’s Russia* 32). Rilke was so fascinated with the common but deep relationship of the people with their land that he and Lou Andreas-Salome in their second Russian trip decided to stay last three days in a Russian village amongst peasants. *The Book of Hours*, composed during these visits is an “exploration of the nature of poetic rhetoric in which the structure of prayer is identified with the figurative structures of poetry. Superficially a volume of devotional poetry, *The Book of Hours* is in fact a meditation on the development of personal identity in an age where ‘God is dead’....” (Ryan 28):

*You neighbour God, if sometimes in the long night*

*I rouse you with my loud pounding,-*

*it’s only that I so seldom hear you breathing*

*and know: you’re in that huge room alone.*

*And should you need something, no one is there*

*to lift water to your lips.*

*I listen always. Give a small sign.*

*Feel me here.*

*Only a thin wall lies between us,*

*and that by purest chance: may be just one call*

*from your mouth or mine-*

*and it would collapse*

*completely , without a sound.*

(Snow 11)

The monk persona of this collection is an unknown Russian Icon painter who “invokes God as a mystery whose nature is to be concealed in these traditional representations.....a God of the darkness of Byzantine painting, not of the light of the Italian Renaissance” (Ryan 28). But he felt the existence of a narrow wall between God and men which could “collapse at a barely perceptible calling without any sound. In so far, the distance between man and God given by nature would implode like the narrow wall” (Wawrzynek 280). *The Book of Hours* clearly echoes the impact of Russia on the poet. It reveals “a typically neo-romantic confusion between aesthetic and religious concepts and a vapid spirituality predominates” (Furness 247).

For Rilke, God became “a metaphor, not for the creative act, but for the art objects” (Ryan 28). Rilke’s Russian experience was the beginning of his developing aesthetics of Russian mysticism, influenced by Neo-Romanticism and its association of origin, purity and chastity. He started believing that the one who is close to the Russian landscape “becomes sharply intuitive, uniting the great oneness life and death the two co-exists in everything” (Lagner 450). Provoked by the stark visual landscape, Rilke created aesthetics of space, a “new aesthetic conception of God not in his theoretical works, which concerned God and art, but the creations of new God became primarily the key element of his poetic opus” (Wawrzynek 277). God becomes another version of the devotional artefacts created by the monks’ yearning. In Rilke God was but a “projection of human consciousness” (Ryan 28):

*We are building Thee, with tremulous hands,*

*And we pile atom upon atom.*

*But who can complete Thee,*

*Cathedral Thou*

(Prater 55)

Rilke's visit to the country changed his vision on religion, god and the mystic but his interest in religion pertained "neither to ethics nor faith. But entirely to the aesthetic, the beautiful and the pleasant outgrowth for human eye and heart: Rilke is pious, humble, certainly only in relation to the poetry" (Wawrzynek 277). The Russian Icon painter, in *The Book of Hours*, finds God "in the very smallest":

*I find you, Lord, in all Things and in all  
my fellow creatures, pulsing with your life;  
as a tiny seed you sleep in what is small  
and in the vast you vastly yield yourself.*

*The wondrous game that power plays with Things  
is to move in such submission through the world:  
groping in roots and growing thick in trunks  
and in treetops like a rising from the dead.*

(Mitchell)

The first quatrain shows marks unification between human and the animal worlds. While the first quatrain projects God through the life of creations, the second quatrain introduces the theme of power, used to show the strength of God that considers everything within a cycle. In fact, the whole poem can be seen as the evocation of a pattern, a system that is articulated through the power of God. The usage of imagery from the first line to the last, perhaps the most effective being the word "yield" because this leads us to the idea of agricultural production. Through this it can be assumed that the cycle of the plant is never out of the poet's vision. It is the artistic vision of a landscape painter whose selective portrayal of the plant from the root to the fruit makes the whole process of God's wonder. The poem is significant because it is similar to the concentrated image-making style of the Imagists, yet

there is a distinctive engagement with issues of framing the poet's vision. It is evident that Rilke's aesthetic understanding facilitates his poetic images with greater force.

In another poem, struggle and pain in human life is shown and the power of God is portrayed as ultimate serenity and strength:

*It's as if I'm pushing through massive mountains  
through hard veins, like solitary ore;  
and I'm so deep that I can see no end  
and no distance: everything became nearness  
and all the nearness turned to stone.*

*I'm still a novice in the realm of pain,-  
so this enormous darkness makes me small;  
But if it's You- steel yourself, break in:  
that your whole hand will grip me  
and my whole scream will seize you.*

(Snow 45)

The metaphoric use of the word stone reminds us of the unchanged status of the poet's mind. The second stanza shows the poet's belief in a personal God and how it has held him back. The idea of movement through mountains is a natural image (drawn from Nature), because the movement of ore affects the mountains, showing how the process takes place in the natural order of things. The ore traverses through the mountains, and both these visually identifiable images are chosen carefully by the poet and making this the natural cycle alive

through his images. This is an extraordinary effect created by the transformation of the visual image from its raw state to its refined form where 'ore' becomes 'steel'. It is this culmination of the lines in the second stanza that brings about the situation of the speaker, his psychological condition, through nature and its cycle of life and organism- birth, maturity, decay, death. This is a representation of a different type of aesthetics, of an "Organic wholeness" (Ryan 83) which is closely linked to "Organic thinking in aesthetics" (Abrams 218) that had come to Coleridge from Germany, was not confined only to the process of artistic invention. "It penetrated all aspects of criticism, sometimes providing a new formulation and focus for existing opinions, and sometimes generating novel categories for chronicling, interpreting, and evaluating works of art" (Abrams 218). Organic growth in aesthetics therefore is an open ended process "nurturing a sense of the promise of the incomplete, and the glory of the imperfect... Also as a plant assimilates the most diverse materials of earth and air, so the synthetic power of imagination reveals itself in Coleridge's famous phrase, 'in the balance of reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities'" (Abrams 220).

Rilke's Russian journey was momentous for many reasons. Meeting Tolstoy was one of those, though Rilke denied former's influence on him towards the later part of his life. Rilke's relationship with Tolstoy has remained mixed. In a letter to an unknown recipient, written in twelfth February 1894 Rilke mentioned Tolstoy, Zola and Turgenev as his prophets. Tolstoy's role in Rilke's life was purely a "cultural one" and he served as an "archetype of the eternal Russian" (Tavis, "Rilke and Tolstoy" 192). He met Tolstoy twice in his life time: in Moscow and Yasnaya Polyana in 1899 and 1900. When he visited Tolstoy for the first time in 1899, Tolstoy's essay *What is Art?* was just published, which had already left a marked impetus on art criticism. Tolstoy argued that art should not be considered "as a means of pleasure' but as "a means of communion among people" (Tolstoy 37). He believed

that “Art is thus not disinterestedness or purposeless, but an organ of social and spiritual transformation” (Ryan 31) and here onwards Rilke and other modernist thinkers made a point of departure from the Art for Art’s sake movement where beauty is the key concept of art.

Tolstoy focussed his argument on the vital relationship between the artist, the community, and God. Unlike the majority of his contemporaries, he was not much concerned with either God’s personality or God’s creation, but with the essence of life, as he understood it, and with representing it in a simple and adequate way. Art appeared to him unconvincing and immoral in its claims to reflect both God and life singlehandedly (Tavis, “Rilke’s Russia” 80).

Rilke maintained two images about Tolstoy. He rejected the legend’s ideology and influence on him in public but at the same time in private he talked about him with great respect. Rilke opposed him on three specific issues: “on the nature of art, on the artist’s relationship with God, and on the autonomy of the art object. He shared Tolstoy’s expectations that “true” art would become “the worldview of the final goal” (Tavis, “Rilke’s Russia” 84). Against Tolstoy’s belief that art justified itself only as religious practice, Rilke found art as was the most “viable religion” (Tavis, “Rilke’s Russia” 84). Another disagreement of Rilke’s with Tolstoy was about the purpose and value of art. Whereas Tolstoy believed in “intrinsic value” of art Rilke believed in the autonomy of art and to him art “immediately parted from the artist at the moment of creation and entered the timeless cycle of other people’s experiences” (Tavis, “Rilke’s Russia” 84).

There were certain points in Rilke’s life when he could not do away with Tolstoy, especially after his close association with the works of Rodin and Cezanne and his reading of Maxim Gorky’s *Erinnerungen an Tolstoy* published in 1920. Besides many controversy and misapprehension it is seen that both of them shared some resemblances in terms of their

perception of art as they believed in “unity between life and art” (Tavis, “Rilke and Tolstoy” 192). Moreover Gorky’s portrayal of Tolstoy as an atheist and “irreverent pilgrim” (Tavis, Tavis, “Rilke and Tolstoy” 196) has much in common with Rilke. Tolstoy’s method of “fleshing out ideas with the episodes from ‘real-life’ appealed to Rilke’s aesthetic sensibility; he himself kept such visualized concepts in his active repertoire of artistic devices (Tavis, “Rilke and Tolstoy” 196). The way Gorky had presented Tolstoy had much more commonalities with the “rebellious protagonist” (Tavis, “Rilke’s Russia” 89) of *The Book of Hours*:

*What will you do, God, when I die?..*

*I am your jug (and I will shatter)*

*I am your drink (and I’ll go bad)*

*I am your clothing and your calling,*

*You’ll lose all reason, losing me....*

*What will you do, God? I am afraid.*

(Snow 27)

Gorky’s description of Tolstoy as a “wonderful one man orchestra, endowed with the ability to play several instruments simultaneously- a trumpet, a drum, an accordion, and a flute, corresponded to Rilke’s idea of the ultimate artist” (Tavis, *Rilke’s Russia* 89-90).

During his initial days in Russia, Rilke wrote some poems which reflect the influence of Russian peasant poet Spiridon Drozhzhin. Towards the later part of 1900 he wrote six poems which clearly echoed the tone of Spiridon. Rilke took great interest in peasant poetry because he realized peasants were much closer to truth and the world than any other. Anna A. Tavis has argued that Rilke’s Russian poems were an attempt to “gauge the distance between

himself and the unfathomable Russian soul” (Tavis, *Rilke’s Russia* 58). Through the poem *The Face*, Rilke tried to bridge the gap between him and the land:

*The Face*

*If I had been born a simple peasant  
I would have then lived with the big, broad face:  
and in my features I would not have betrayed  
what was difficult to think and what was impossible  
to say...  
And my hands alone would have been filled  
with my love and my patience,-  
if at daytime they would be busy with work,  
the night would lock them up in prayer.*

(Tavis 61)

Rilke termed Petersburg as an “alien city” (Tavis, *Rilke’s Russia* 42) which had highest impact on his life till the end. There he met Helan Voronina, a widely travelled lady whom he considered as replacement of Lou for quite a long time. Rilke wrote three poems to Voronina. Two of those poems namely *Let Every Joy Happened* and *A Song For Helene*, according to Anna A. Tavis anticipated Rilke’s aesthetics of “things”. His perception of seeing “things” and its representation in poetry changed towards the later part of his life. Lou Andrea Salome introduced Rilke to another Russian, an author, a gifted story teller who took interest in icon collection, Nikolai Leskov, sharing his faith in Russia’s singular historical role:

...his deeply religious but radically anticlerical outlook, and his principled insistence on the observance of traditional Russian aesthetic norms in all art forms from icon painting to storytelling. (Tavis, *Rilke's Russia* 66).

Some debates between tradition and the new innovation were going on in Russia around 1900. Rilke's two essays wrote during that time *Russian Art* and *Modern Russian Art Movements* expressed the positivity in new innovations. These essays are concerned with the position of Russian art, and biographical studies on many Russian painters. Russia has a very rich history of Icon painting. The main feature of twelfth century icon painting was symmetrical patterns and abstract of the images and rough facades. Yoori A. Olsufiev has talked about a figure drawn by St. Nicholas which had a "dry face, hollow- cheeked, with large, quiet, observant eyes, and a high, wise forehead, crossed by wrinkles" (351). In Rilke the themes, colour, style and variations of the changes in icon painting had a great impact. Icon painting speaks its own language, "ontologically related to the object of perception as well as to the idea...In it the accidental is replaced by the constant, the inessential by the essential; everywhere we notice a movement from the periphery toward the centre, from nature toward the idea" (Olsufiev 348).

The fourteenth and the fifteenth century icon paintings were influenced by the Byzantium art with a splendid artistic pattern. Finally nineteenth century witnessed a compromise between pictorial and iconic style. Colour had no specific role in the nineteenth century. It was only used to make the outlines. "Rilke's discussions of Russian icons and religious artefacts with Lou Andreas-Salome, which led to the beginnings of his own collection of Russian objects, were an important factor in his unorthodox view of God as an objective correlative for art" (Ryan 28).

*Modern Russian Art Movements* which Rilke wrote during his Russian journey, concentrated more on modern artist rather than icon painters such as Ivanov, Kramskoy, and Levitan. In the year 1899 after his first visit to Russia Rilke along with Lou spent a lot of time studying “things Russian” (Ashton 49). They studied mainly “pre- Christian period and the unique church architecture of ancient Kiev and Novgorod- Pskov. They were interested in interior church structures, old enamels and filigree work, miniatures, costumes, furniture and household items, especially of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (Ashton 49). Besides all those, Rilke and Lou took interest in folklore and tales of legendary heroes. Perhaps those rigorous studies on Russia’s past history helped Rilke to establish his point of view which showed the importance of assimilation in modern and traditional Russian art. When Rilke first stepped in Moscow as a part of his first Russian trip, Easter celebration was going on. He was captivated by the bright, shining view of the city which he cherished for his whole life. Amongst the entire elements in the city it was “bells and spaces of Moscow” (Ashton 49) which captured Rilke’s attention deeply. On May 2, Rilke wrote to Helene Voroninn “my voice has been lost in the Kremlin bells, and my eyes sees nothing after the golden dazzle of the domes” (Cushman 88). The country had definitely a sense of “*sobornost*: inward spiritual fellowship” (Lavrin 151). He visited Abramatshevo, an artist colony, which provided him with the craftsmanship of old tradition. Many of his poems contain an “ekphrastic” reference to Mary, “an archetypal matriarchal force in contrast to his own all too human mother, and later as a representation of the creative artist who is penetrated by the divine seed of inspiration and who (re)produces the incarnated word, sung by angels” (Cushman 88, 89):

*The Angels*

*They all have tired mouths  
And luminous, illimitable souls;  
And a longing (as if for sin)  
Trembles at times through their dreams.*

*They all resemble one another,  
In God's garden they are silent  
Like many, many intervals  
In His mighty melody.*

*But when they spread their wings  
They awaken the winds  
That stir as though God  
With His far-reaching master hands  
Turned the pages of the dark book of beginning.*

(Snow 55)

Russia was Rilke's favourite through his reading of Russian writers: Tolstoy, Dostoyvosky, Pushkin, Droskin and Chekov. After spending time in exotic Florence, it was Russia which provided Rilke a kind of peace and tranquillity. "As the Renaissance had appealed to his sense of beauty and his individualistic pride, so Russia appealed to his feeling for the dark, mystical unity of things, to his wish to relinquish himself in a fanatical humility, and to his feeling of brotherly kinship with all man" (Leese 33). Though critics and readers of Rilke have agreed to the point that it was Paris and his association with Rodin which was the actual turning point in his life but, the fact that Rilke's aesthetics sensibility was enriched more after his visit to Russia.

.....although Rilke's aesthetic turning point is generally attributed to Rodin and Paris, Rilke's Easter experience in the Kremlin prompted the psychological paradigm shift

that most intensely impacted his aesthetic development. Although even his early poetry exhibits finely-crafted language and vivid imagery, it is more descriptive and self-referential than his later works, which resound with more mysterious Russian echoes (Cushman 104).

In the year 1925, in response to Leonid Pasternak's question to Rilke whether he still remembered Moscow, Rilke replied that he had always been loyal to the "unforgettable and unfathomable *skazka* (fairy tale) of his youth" (Tavis, *Rilke's Russia* 103). Till his death Rilke exchanged letters to Pasternak. "For both Rilke and Pasternak, art represented a circular return to life's basic fundamentals: things and creatures provided the poets with immediate material for writing, and their sense of the sublime was permanently burdened with the concern for the real and earthly" (Tavis, *Rilke's Russia* 111). Pasternak believed that it was the problem of translation because of which Rilke's work was misunderstood in Russia- since "in Rilke everything depended on the tone" (Tavis, *Rilke's Russia* 111).

In September, 1900 Rilke moved to Worpswede, just after he came back from his second Russian trip. Worpswede was a village near Southern Germany where a group of artists were working devotedly and they were known as "Worpsweders" (Bridge 146). In the year 1898, in Florence, Rilke met Heinrich Vogeler, the youngest of Worpsweders, who was known for landscape painting and Barbizon style. Vogeler invited Rilke to Worpswede. Initially Rilke did not show any particular interest in that. Though Rilke went reluctantly, yet Worpswede provided him with much more than he expected from that "artist colony" (Bridge 146). This was another turning point of Rilke's life where he could feel the essence of an artist, their skill and above all a culture which he had never witnessed before. The connection between a piece of art and the artist, the rigorous process an artist goes through during their acts of creation was now experienced first hand by Rilke. He met artist Clara Westhoff whom he

married later. Amongst other artists, it was Paula Becker, Otto Modersohn and writer Carl Hauptmann, with whom Rilke spent a lot of time learning about art and artist. The two things that captured Rilke's attention were the Sunday discussions and the ambience of the village. That discussion of the artists was inclusive of literature, art and poetry. "The combined effect of regular conversations with artists, particularly Paula Becker and Clara Westhoff, and the experience of this unusual landscape, meant that Rilke came to feel he was learning nothing less than a new way of seeing" (Bridge 146).

Rilke's meeting with Clara, disciple of Rodin in 1900 added a new dimension in his research on art. "Clara Westhoff's light, reed- green slenderness stood out against the landscape with gray twilight air surrounding it, so ineffably pure and great that we all grew solitary and each was completely held in awe by this sight and given up to pure gazing" (Rilke, *Diaries of a Young Poet* 209).

Despite the fact that their marriage was unsuccessful and did not last long yet they were in contact till the end of Rilke's life. The most productive result of their correspondence was Rilke's letter to Clara which was published as *Letters on Cezanne*. Those letters addressed to Clara was the impression he had on Cezanne's painting exhibition in the Salon d'Automme in 1907. "Clara was first his partner in solitude, then his travelling companion, and in the end, little more than one of his correspondents" (Leese 41). Rilke considered Clara Westhoff as "blond painter" (Rilke, *Diaries of a Young Poet* 203) and he was fascinated by her skill. In his diary he quoted one of his friend with whom Rilke used to discuss and analyse the artists' work of the Worpswede.

It often moves me to watch how Clara Westhoff, whose instincts as a sculptor are so strong and monumental, will cup a flower in her hands, a single flower, or apply to

some one small object all the kindness and fullness of her broad being- how she will gather all her senses around one small word so that it almost collapses under the weight of love. Watching this makes me melancholy. Watching how she contracts herself, withdraws herself from her own dimensions, and with all her love comes over a thing to whose smallness she must first accustom herself! (Rilke, *Diaries of a Young Poet* 203).

Rilke now starts evolving a new poetics of shapes, lights and images:

*EVERYTHING felt; in plastic shapes and actions*

*It becomes infinitely large and light,*

*I'll nor rest until I have reached that one goal:*

*To find images for my transformations.*

*The spontaneous song no longer will suffice.*

*I must venture now with all my strength*

*To make visible for those outside*

*What barely happens in a premonition.-*

(Rilke, *Diaries of a Young Poet* 194).

Worpswede provided Rilke with the basic lessons of painting. He was constantly learning and realizing the skill of an artist.

For sculpture one other requirement is crucial: that the work of art come to an end within itself. With painting there can never be a gazing-out-of- the- picture, insofar as before the figure in question the space of the picture is always extendable (foreground), to the same degree that it is behind that same figure, so that the figure's gaze always remains within the picture and is separated from the observer as if by a nonconductive vacuum. Sculpture, which exists in the same atmosphere as the

observer, must achieve its “looking away” more strongly as on its own. i. e. it must be entirely centered on itself (Rilke *Diaries of a Young Poet* 243-44).

He concentrated more on the technique and how to read a piece of art while gazing at Corot’s *Girl*.

I feel as though I am only just now learning how to look at paintings.... But the pleasure in some small detail within the painting, in some portion of a foot, for instance, or in a fabric fold that stands in especially subtle relation to its surroundings: this way of looking was foreign to me before my intercourse with these rigorous and excellent painter people, who get so unbelievably close to their pictures (Rilke, *Diaries of a Young Poet* 195).

Rilke’s visit to Worpswede just after Russian encounter strengthen his perception on God and the effect of the sacred was still permeating “there are days when I cannot speak of myself without naming God, the solitary God in whose shadow my words darken and shine. (Rilke, *Diaries of a Young Poet* 196):

*Prayer*

*AND again my deep life rushes louder,  
as if it moved now between steeper banks.  
things seem ever more akin to me,  
all images more intensely seen.*

*I’ve grown more at ease with the nameless,-  
with my senses, as with birds, I reach  
into the windy heavens from the oak,  
and into the small ponds’ broken- off day  
my feeling sinks, as if on heavy fishes. (Rilke, *Diaries of a Young Poet*196).*

His poem, *A Girl, white and before the evening hour* talks about the Worpswede landscape: “Already I can feel how with each day the solitude grows deeper, how this country abandoned by colours and shadows keeps growing vaster and vaster and becoming more and more a backdrop for wind- tossed trees in a storm” (Rilke *Diaries of a Young Poet* 200).

During his time in Worpswede Rilke wrote many poems which were inspired by the paintings of the artists especially Vogeler. In January, 1902 Rilke had to face a major financial crisis because his uncle Jaroslav stopped sending money to him. At that moment publisher Velhagen and Klasing extended their helping hand and ask him to write a monograph on Worpswede. The subject matter of monograph was decided to be the artist group of Worpswede who exhibited in Munich Glass palace in 1895. “Despite the constrains within which he had to work, Rilke managed to use the monograph project to explore his own ideas about art and landscape, so the text can be read as offering insight into what he had gained from his time in Worpswede” (Bridge 148).

Apart from Clara, during his Worspwede days Rilke shared a close bond with Paula Becker. Her sudden death in November 21, 1907, left Rilke bereft for many years. In 1908 Rilke spent some sleepless night in Paris and completed *Requiem For a Friend*, a tribute to the painter and her art.

...I will have the gardeners come to me and recite many flowers, and in their small melodious names I will bring back some remnant of the hundred fragrances. And fruits: I will buy fruits, and in their sweetness that country's earth and sky will live, again. For that is what you understood: ripe fruits. You set them before the canvas, in white bowls, and weighed out each one's heaviness with your colors. Women too, you

saw, were fruits; and children, molded from inside, into the shapes of their existence....( Mitchell).

This requiem of Rilke was a major breakthrough in his literary career. The seeds of *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, *The Duino Elegies* and *The Sonnets to Orpheus* were shown in this anxiety and pain. “Much that has hitherto been conceived as Being is now seen as itself a Becoming- the universe itself is a process, and God’s creation is a continuant” (Abrams 219). He offered his gratitude to for transforming “immature eyes” (Agee xi) in the act of seeing. “Paula taught him to read colours on painting while Clara provided him with the language of reading a sculpture. As a result of which Rilke could immerse himself in Rodin’s artistic world, whose creation “cast their bronze shadows on Rilke’s poetic productions, sometimes with nearly overwhelming effect” (Agee xi).

The Archaic world of Russia and his encounters with Tolstoy, Pasternak and Dimitrievich was a revelation for him. “Russia had transformed Rilke to the point of a changed appearance, including his habit. Simplicity was now for him the order of the day, but not at the expense of his ever- refining poetic skills that continued to strike a neat balance between sheer verbal virtuosity, experiment with form, sensuality, reflectivity and immediacy of expression” (Gorner 13). His Russian poems established a close link between visual art and celestial. The visionary insights he gathered through artist, critics and sculptors and his endeavour of integrating visual art in poetry would become more definite in his Paris years.

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## Chap IV

### The French Connection: Aesthetic Lives, Artistic Selves

In Russian travels, though the impact of Tolstoy for Rilke was mixed, later moving to Worpswede his acquaintance with the works of Rodin through Clara was added a new dimension to his learning. Worpswede was an intensification of his interest in sculpture- in the sculpture of Rodin in particular” (Bridge, “Rilke and the Visual Arts” 150). In the discussions about Rodin’s sculpture with Clara he talked about the isolation and durability of the sculptures and the “self containment and sacred existence as stone” (Bridge, “Rilke and the Visual Arts” 150). In 1902, while in Worpswede, Rilke started working as a critic for the newspaper *Das Bremer Tagblatt*. As part of his work he was assigned to write a monograph on the sculptor Auguste Rodin. Rilke was enthusiastic about the “ ‘eminent greatness and magnificence’ of Rodin’s work, describing how it transforms ‘a great inner world’ into sculptural form” (Bridge, “Rilke and the Visual Arts” 150). He stepped into the city in the mid of 1902 quite reluctantly and considered it “more of a place to die” (Rilke, *The Notebooks* 3), but eventually it turned out to be the most prolific in his literary oeuvre. Paris helped him in distinguishing his empirical judgement of disciplined craftsmanship from an aesthetic dependence on inspiration. For Rilke “Paris had been much more than Venice for Byron, or Toledo for Barres” (Stone 3).

In search of developing his aesthetics of poetics Rilke was looking for an environment that was “sympathetic to his complex and not yet fully marshalled inner self; a precise location equipped to sustain such an undertaking” (Stone viii). In Paris, Rilke’s impression of Rodin’s strict working practices with numerous assistants, side by side entertaining visitors baffled him. In a letter to Clara Westhoff on second September 1902, Rilke had mentioned how

Rodin's idea "*oui il faut travailler rien que travailler: yes, you have to work, just to work*" (Bridge, "Rilke and the Visual Arts" 151), made a great impression on him. He found out that it was not easy for a poet to adopt the differences between writing a poem and making a sculpture. "Yet the shift of emphasis away from dependence on inspiration and towards artistic creation as an active and disciplined process of forming material was one that Rilke could follow in his own work" (Bridge, "Rilke and the Visual Arts" 151).

It was the time when Rilke was able to reshape his poetic craft. The indispensable lesson Rilke learned from Rodin was the technique of representing object which was a constant struggle in Rilke's creative sojourn. "What he had learnt from Rodin was to perceive objects and to shape them through whatever artistic medium. But the main point was for the artist to do this on behalf of the object" (Gorner 15). Two key terms "*Schauen*" and "*bilden*" (Gorner 15) which means spectating and giving shape respectively became inseparable of his thought, and understanding of representation. Later Paul Cezanne's work regenerated those two imperatives in Rilke.

Working with Rodin, Rilke realized that technique and craftsmanship of artistic representation was more important than ideas. Rilke started believing that Rodin's "art was not based upon any great idea, but upon the conscientious realization of something small, upon something capable of achievement, upon a matter of technique" (Rilke, *Auguste Rodin* 7). The contact with Rodin and his work also produced more aesthetic insights:

Because of the three dimensional physicality of sculpture, Rodin's work enabled Rilke to develop a conception of artistic form as something which exists alongside the objects of the real world, but is distinct from them. Using the term 'thing' (Ding) or 'art thing' (Kunstding) to refer to a sculpture, he emphasizes its independence from

ordinary objects, as well as its special, permanent status outside the flux of time (Bridge, "Rilke and the Visual Arts" 151).

Even though Rodin's sculpture was based on the French novelists, Italian Classics and Renaissance artists, it was Rodin's creative technique which "quickly leaves this subject matter behind in order to create something objective and nameless" (Bridge, "Rilke and the Visual Arts" 151). Sculpture in Rilke's analysis, was able to give visible expression to human emotion, "not just through the 'allegory and semblance' offered by poetry or painting, but by actually transforming inner phenomena into a physical form" (Bridge, "Rilke and the Visual Arts" 151). One of the most basic understandings Rilke achieved through Rodin's work was that it was "surface" (Rilke, *Auguste Rodin* 7) of a sculpture where solidarity and dynamism lies. He considered 'surface' as the primary constituent of Rodin's work because he believed that surface consisted of "an infinite number of encounters between light and the thing" (Bridge, "Rilke and the Visual Arts" 152). Grappling with light was the foremost quality of all the impressionist artists including Rodin who were preoccupied with the luminous transient play of light on surface. Working with Rodin, Rilke developed his idea of treating "objects" from the object's point of view rather than a viewer's. Because by then Rilke assumed that physical objectification of art is self sufficient in itself.

The most dynamic outcome of Rilke's close association with Rodin was his *New Poems* which includes *The Panther*, wrote probably in November 1902. The *New Poems* having 189 poems clearly contains the names of paintings or sculptures- *Archaic Torso of Apollo*, *Early Apollo*, *Lady Before the Mirror*, *The Cathedral*, *Early Apollo*, *Portrait of My Father as a Young Man*, *The Tower*, *The Pavilion*, *The Square* to name a few of them. The striking quality of the *New Poems*, is the "interconnection of one poem with another but also the

metaphoricity of each poem, the way that within each text, poetic comparisons draw us repeatedly away from the thing described as a way of showing it to us afresh” (Waters 62). Rilke’s aesthetic judgement was not just through the rigorous study of visual arts but from a close apprenticeship with practicing artists and sculptors and a first hand experience of paintings and sculptors. “It may seem paradoxical that inspiration for poetry should come from an emphatically non- literary artistic ideal, but precisely his awareness of the differences between poetry and the sculpture or painting enabled Rilke to make his reflections on these arts productive for his own poetic development” (Bridge “Rilke and the Visual Arts” 156). Almost all the subjects of the *New Poems* are directly chosen from concrete life objects, witnessing a “debate about problems of representation and the relative virtues of the visual and the verbal arts” (Ryan 51):

*The Panther*

*His vision, from the constantly passing bars,  
has grown so weary that it cannot hold  
anything else. It seems to him there are  
a thousand bars; and behind the bars, no world.*

*As he paces in cramped circles, over and over,  
the movement of his powerful soft strides  
is like a ritual dance around a center  
in which a mighty will stands paralyzed.*

*Only at times, the curtain of the pupils  
lifts, quietly--. An image enters in,  
rushes down through the tensed, arrested muscles,  
plunges into the heart and is gone.*

(Snow 249)

Here two images- the image of a panther and the metaphorical image of freedom are balanced and questioned. But irrespective of any metaphoric implications, it is the 'thing' that has to speak for himself like the panther has declared his existence with "his powerful soft strides". Though it seems the existence of the panther and its metaphorical allegations are inseparable yet eventually the 'thing' that is more important than the concept of idea and hence Rilke's poem ascertains the "phenomenological overcoming of dualism" (Fischer 221). The tone of the poem is akin to Heidegger's concept of being because he also like Rilke "opposed the subject-object dichotomy, i.e. having things over against the self, not only for individual things but also for the whole of beings. The self is excluded from the totality, the Open, by objectification. The boundaries block out knowing death and hence access to the whole of Being or the Open (Hammett 169).

*Archaic Torso of Apollo*, the opening sonnet of the second volume of *New Poems* was inspired by Rilke's visits to the Louvre, and his constant exposure to the sculptures of Rodin, which tried to recreate the fragmentary effects of ancient statues:

*Archaic Torso of Apollo*

*We cannot know his legendary head  
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso  
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,  
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,  
gleams in all its power. Otherwise  
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could  
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs  
to that dark center where procreation flared.*

*Otherwise this stone would seem defaced  
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders  
and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:*

*would not, from all the borders of itself,  
burst like a star: for here there is no place  
that does not see you. You must change your life.*

(Snow 124)

In this sonnet he converts the “object of observation into a transcendent symbol, the observing subject and seeing object embrace” (Prill 147.) Judith Ryan has stated that the most striking factor of the poem is the “radiance that emanates from the sculpture is not an effect of wholeness, but rather of its fragmentary nature” (Ryan 80). She further added “Of all Rilke’s poetry from his Paris period, ‘Archaic Torso of Apollo’ is his most radical extension and revocation of Baudelairean tenets. Whereas for Baudelaire the fragmentariness of the modern art work is a sign of mourning for a lost perfection, the observer in Rilke’s poem responds with enthusiasm to the fragmentariness of the Apollo” (Ryan 80). Rilke was a life time admirer of Pablo Picasso and Paul Klee. “The aesthetic Rilke proposes in *Archaic Torso of Apollo* – the preference for fragmentariness over wholeness, the fascination with paradox, and the dissolution of subject-object boundaries – is moving in the direction of modernism” (Ryan 89). *Archaic Torso* also compels the reader to think about the work of art and its connection with the viewer. The final stanza, *Would not, from all the borders of itself/ burst like a star: for here there is no place/ that does not see you. You must change your life* clearly indicates the role of a viewer. The missing parts of the statue posit many questions for the viewer and at the same time emphasize the imaginative power of the same. Rilke liked to think of his *New Poems* as an attempt to put “Rodin’s aesthetic practices into effect” (Ryan 89).

Rilke studied Rossetti’s *Sonnets for Pictures* inspired by paintings of Leonardo da Vinci, Giorgione and Mantegna. Resembling Rossetti Rilke’s poem links elements of water, wind,

rainbow “combining the two tower climbs into one, and making the transition from darkness into light part of a single experience. A reference to Flemish art in Rossetti’s poem becomes, in Rilke, an allusion to Joachim Patenier” (Ryan 68):

*The Tower*

*Earth- innermost. As if the place to which  
you blindly climb were surface of the earth  
to which you mount by crooked beds of streams  
that slowly from the softly trickling search  
of darkness issue forth, dark space in which  
your face, as if arisen, pushes through,  
and which you see, quite sudden, as if pitched  
from this abyss that’s overhanging you  
and which you, as it monstrously careens  
above you in the darkening roof beams,  
you recognise, alarmed and scared, and feel:  
oh when it rises, covered like a bull –:  
Then you are taken from the narrow ending  
by windy gusts of light. Seeming almost to fly,  
brightness on brightness, now you see the sky  
and there the depths, alert and all-intending,  
and little days like those in Patenier,  
all taking place at once, with hour by hour...*

(Ryan 67)

An Indonesian statue in Auguste Rodin’s garden in Meudon inspired Rilke to write three poems on the Buddha, representing a dialogue between sculpture and poetry, between the West and the East. In his *Buddha in Glory*, Rilke goes much nearer to the empty spaces of the haikus where *shunyata* grapples up the concrete imagery:

*Buddha in Glory*

*Centre of all centres, core of cores,  
almond that encloses and sweetens itself –  
everything, reaching to all the stars  
is your fruit's flesh: Hail.*

*Look, you feel how nothing clings to you;  
now your shell surrounds the infinite  
and there the strong sap dwells and rises.  
And from without a radiance assists him*

*for high above your suns are turned,  
whole and glowing, in their orbits.  
Yet in you has already begun  
what endures beyond the suns. (Snow 349)*

Silence is again predominant in *Buddha*

*As if he listened. Stillness: something distant...*

*We check ourselves- and cease to hear it.*

*And he is star. And multitudes of giant stars*

*That we don't see stand all around him.*

(Snow 139)

A victory of transcendental over real, consciousness over image can be experienced in this because for Rilke “it is all a matter of degrees of consciousness. The conscious subject, breathing its substance away, ‘faces’ an objective world, seemingly lasting in substance” (Graff 171).

The *New Poems* goes towards a definite aesthetics of space to the concrete images which helped Rilke to “highlight the greatest strength of the verbal arts: their ability to mobilise the reader's imagination” (Ryan 52). For the two collections of the *New Poems* Rilke had chosen Rodin and Cezanne's art work as his base model.

Rilke's interest in Rodin, van Gogh, and then Cezanne, on whom he wrote extensively during 1902 and 1907, is primarily aesthetic. These artists interests him because they emphasise that the artistic process involves patience, contemplation and simplicity; that it requires the artist to ignore his or her subjectivity; and that it foregrounds the formal autonomy of the work of art (Kramer 122).

The late nineteenth century saw shifts in aesthetic and phenomenological and hermeneutics approaches influencing largely the philosophers and artists. By the year 1906- 07 Rilke's interest shifted to modern painting as Rilke realized the gap between "his own aesthetic ideals and Rodin's sculpture" (Bridge, "Rilke and the Visual Arts" 152). After Rodin, Rilke engaged himself with the works of Van Gogh and Manet. But until he visited Cezanne's painting exhibition in Salon d'automne in October 1907, his zeal for analyzing a modern painter did not come up. He visited the exhibition almost everyday and recoded his impression in letters to Clara. Which was later published as Letter's on Cezanne. The most impressive elements that Rilke found in Cezanne were "solidity" and "integrity" (Bridge, "Rilke and the Visual Arts" 154). In many points Rilke found Cezanne quite similar in terms of durability and self- restraint. Rilke was amazed to see how Cezanne created 'things' so real which could strike human mind purely with its visual quality. And very easily people tend to visualize the world in an objective way and forget any idea or conceptual facts associated with those things created. The lacuna that Rilke felt in Cezanne's work in comparison to Rodin was "intentional symbolism" (Bridge, "Rilke and the Visual Arts" 154). Asked once about the formative inspiration of his poetry, Rilke replied that since 1906 Paul Cezanne had been his supreme muse and that "after the master's death, I followed his traces everywhere" (Agee ix).

As from Rodin, Rilke learnt the technique of creating “surface” (Rilke, *Auguste Rodin* 7), so in Cezanne's paintings there was:

... a manifest separation of the material artistic medium a two-dimensional surface covered in paint from its representation of three-dimensional reality. The paintings convey both surface and depth, both plane and perspective. Although Rilke does not conceptualize Cezanne's technique in these terms, this idea is at the heart of his fascination with the painter's use of colour (Bridge, “Rilke and the Modern Portrait” 684).

The exceptional usage of vivid colours, real-life subject matter and small geometric brush strokes was a leitmotif of the Post Impressionist artists. In Cezanne's work Rilke came across a clear amalgamation and alteration between shapes and colours. The most difficult yet core technique of Cezanne's paintings was optical, playing on the variations of colour. However Rilke “did not misconstrue Cezanne's colour logic as a problem of craft and technique; he saw it as the very core of the creative process, profoundly vulnerable to intellectual interference, not to mention literary interpretation” (Agee xvi).

In some point of life Rilke wanted to write a monograph on the colour blue starting with the pastels of Rosalba Carriera and Cezanne's unique Blue. In *Letters on Cezanne* Rilke observes:

While painting a landscape or a still life, he would conscientiously persevere in front of the subject, but approach it only by very complicated detours. Beginning with the darkest tones, he would cover their depth with a layer of colour that led a little beyond them, and keep going, expanding outward from colour to colour, until gradually he

reached another, contrasting pictorial element, where beginning at a new centre, he would proceed in a similar way (Rilke, *Letters on Cezanne* 33).

For Rilke, Cezanne's ability to treat all subjects with the same objectivity from still life, landscape painting to the portrait “represents the ultimate challenge for an aesthetic based on objectivity, the autonomy of colour, and a tension between plane and perspective. The absence of 'geistige Auffassung' in Cezanne's portraits, in other words, his treatment of human beings as purely visual objects, is what makes them shocking for the public and fascinating for Rilke” (Bridge, “Rilke and the Modern Portrait” 685).

Cezanne's work helped Rilke to widen his perception on colour which was a predominant element of Post Impressionist artists including Van Gogh. Rilke after seeing Van Gogh's *The Night Cafe*, described it as a “artificial wakefulness in wine red, lamp yellow, deep and utterly shallow green, with three mirrors, each of which contains a different emptiness” (Rilke, *Letters on Cezanne* 55). Towards the last part of his visit to Cezanne's exhibition Rilke was overwhelmed by the autonomy and skilful effect of colour: “he represented apples, onions and oranges purely by means of colour” (Rilke, *Letters on Cezanne* 59). Rilke's close association with the two masters made him realize the value of the independence of form and medium. No matter whatever the medium was, an artist combined colour, form, skill, craftsmanship and essence to represent objects. The *Requim for a Friend*, a tribute on Paula Modersohn- Becker's death is almost a post impressionistic poem:

And at last you saw yourself as a fruit, you stepped out of your clothes and brought your naked body before the mirror, you let yourself inside down to your gaze; which stayed in front, immense, and didn't say: I am that; no: this is. So free of curiosity your gaze had become, so unpossessive, of such true poverty, it had no desire even for your yourself; it wanted nothing: holy. (Mitchell)

As Kramer says that the *New Poems* present “a range of encounters between subject and object, interior and exterior, man and animal, beholder and work of art, during which the boundaries of either party are being called into question. Highly self- reflexive, many of the poems refer to artistic perception and creation” (Kramer 120).

The techniques and transference of artistic medium requires a good craftsmanship where memory and consciousness play important role. Rilke wrote a poem on Cezanne’s wife inspired by his painting where the lady is seen sitting in an arm chair against a wall. Rilke in his poem describes the scene starting from the wall and gradually coming to the front and finally the woman. The usual way of looking at a portrait is replaced by a more “objective way of looking which attempts to give equal weight to everything in the picture (Bridge, “Rilke and the Modern Portrait” 686). Rilke like other modernist brought in the wholeness of the poem from the fragments and the “numerical image suggests that it also has the potential to reconstruct a whole from the individual fragments of conscious memory. (Bridge, “Rilke and the Modern Portrait” 686).

Rilke’s understanding of psychology, history and aesthetics led to his most enduring work *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Malte is a story about a twenty year old Dane who has come to Paris aiming to become a poet. Very similar to Rilke’s experience of anonymity in Paris, who had come to the crowded modern city to note down his impressions of loneliness, dislocation and alienation. Malte is a “modernist” (Macleod 404) text, where the ugliness of urban society is depicted in the form of poverty and deprivation:

This, then, is where people come to live; I would have thought it more of a place to die. I have been out. I saw hospitals. I saw one man who tottered and then collapsed. People gathered around him, which spared me the rest.

(Rilke, *The Notebooks* 1).

In its exploration of this traumatic state Malte has been seen as Rilke's persona though "his fictional protagonist was less a direct stand – in for himself than a negative alter ego" (Ryan 42). *The Notebook* occupies "a singular position in the history of modernist prose" (Huysen 74). Rilke's preoccupation with sensations is allied with a particular sense of perception, where "Seeing" becomes a predominant activity:

"Have I mentioned already that I am learning to see? Yes I am making a start. I have not made much progress yet, but I mean to make the most of my time" (Rilke, *The Notebooks* 5).

For Malte, the observer, "Seeing" becomes not an act of interpretation but an opening up of the self, where he becomes a blank screen on to which images are projected, "a heightening of the receptivity of the self to sensations from that world" (Macleod 405). This is a projection of Malte's evolving consciousness, by casting visual experience into verbal form. Malte has considered the city as a city of poverty and diseases. His fantasies of physical and mental fragmentation and the barrier between himself and world originated in his very childhood while he was dressed up like a girl by his mother loved to arrange artistically perfume bottles, cosmetic pots and needlework cases. "This preoccupation with moving fabric, costume and decorative motifs is the Rilkean equivalent of Kafka's 'pleats, pockets, buckles and buttons, with their implications of aestheticist ornamentation and disorienting detail" (Ryan 14). May be his androgynous upbringing made him fall in love with that which was feminine - sensuous fabrics and delicate laces:

Let us have a look at them, Malte,' she would say, as thrilled as if she were about to be made a present of everything in the small, yellow – lacquered drawer. And then in sheer anticipation she could not unfold the tissue paper. I had to do it every time. But I too greatly excited when the pieces of lace appeared. They were wound on a wooden

bobbin, which was quite invisible for lace. So we would unwind them slowly watching the patterns as they unrolled, a little startled whenever one came to an end. They stopped so suddenly (Rilke, *The Notebooks* 88).

These become in Rilke “metaphors for aesthetic pleasure and the free play of imagination” (Ryan 13), intoxicated by the fragrance of old drapes and their textures:

But what transported me into raptures were the sweeping cloaks, the wraps, the shawls, the veils, all those yielding, magnificent, unused materials that were soft and caressing, or so sheer that I could hardly keep hold of them, or so light that they flew by me like a wind, or simply heavy with all their own weight.

(Rilke, *The Notebooks* 68).

In 1906 Rilke became interested in the celebrated *Dame a la licorne* tapestries in Paris. In *The Notebooks*, Rilke had described – “There are tapestries here, Abelone, on the walls. I am imagining you are here; there are six tapestries- come let us walk slowly past them. But first take a step back and look at them all together. Are they not peaceful?” (Rilke, *The Notebooks* 82). Rilke visited Bern Historical Museum in 1923 and saw a collection of Kashmiri shawls upon which he wrote two poems entitled as *Shawl*:

..the primary emphasis is on pattern: the shawl’s design, perceived as constant motion around a still centre, is read as an objective correlative for the course of the viewer’s individual life. At the same time, the shawl continually unfolds an entire panoply of traditional motifs, both natural and more abstractly figural. Simultaneously an art object and a historical document, it takes us out of ourselves and demonstrates a kind of permanence our own lives can never attain (Ryan 14).

The protagonist Malte in *The Notebooks* is shattered by the brute physicality of the world. Being a sensible perceiver, he has collected and recollected every visual impression and gave them a “tactile dimension in episode after episode” (Macleod 404) in *The Notebook*. With the framing of sore reality *The Notebooks* has addressed a different type of aesthetics, “an aesthetics of ugliness” (Kramer 123), which has reversed the classical notion of aesthetics. Beauty and traditional forms can not always claim same interpretation in modern age of unrest and anxiety. Rilke, through Malte, is trying in to collect and recollect and transform what he sees and experiences in art: e.g. a decaying house, a street, a pregnant women etc. Rilke observed every small thing in the city and all of them left a deep impact on him- “I am learning to see. Why I cannot say, but all things enter more deeply into me, nor do the impressions remain at the level where they used to cease” (Rilke, *The Notebooks* 14).

*The Notebook* is a result of Rilke’s new way of seeing, where concrete reality has come up in fragments which have made the book as “quintessentially modernist text, especially when the opposition is given a specifically aesthetic inflection where the order of art is set over against the flux of existence (Macleod 404). It bears reflection of Rilke’s close connection with the assumptions, themes, and forms of the *Jugendstil* movement in art:

Like the Impressionists, artists of *Jugendstihl* were much concerned with breaking strict oppositions between surface and depth, foreground and background. The actual results are very different of course, but the rejection of a distanced, analytical mode of seeing in favour of a wilfully subjective stance is common to both (Macleod 407).

*The Notebooks* is a novel of its time- modernist and fragmented covering many mini narratives within its fold deconstructing the notion of self. Depravation, shock experiences and responses to modernity becomes in the novel, “an attempt to resolve the artistic problems associated with that response” (Kramer 122).

Although a Symbolist aesthete, Rilke tried to overcome its separation of art from life.

In order to embrace 'life' without falling back into the modes of a shallow mimetic Realism, he looked to the post- Symbolist *Ecole naturiste* which applied the Symbolist aesthetic to phenomena of 'life' and 'nature'. Rilke's attitude towards Symbolism and post- Symbolist developments is part of his attempt to develop a holistic kind of modernism (Kramer 116).

Within the context of these observations it is easily understood why Rilke's approach to aesthetics is a combination of the emotional, sacred, and constantly evaluating. Rilke was an "art historian" (Ryan 51) and his perception and artistic experimentation almost achieved his goal through mere aesthetic conversions from the visual to the verbal. At the beginning of the letter of 22 October he reflects on "the processes involved in memorizing, or internalizing, a picture and then putting what is remembered into language (Bridge, "Rilke and the Modern Portrait" 686). The interconnection between seeing, internalization, memory and imagination in Rilke's act of creation owes "a good deal to the Ruskinian model" because Ruskin advised "be your own master....and see with your own eye" (Ryan 92).

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## Chap V

### Towards an Aesthetics of Representation

The aesthetic critic is simply the perceptive critic, as aesthetic is from the Greek *aisthetikos* "one who perceives". Precisely Rilke, the romantic aesthete, a hesitant follower of the German aesthetic movement, was a constant observer of intercultural exchanges in the visual arts and literature. "His life spent in travels, his life as a search for the final illumination, fascinates us, but also his willingness to learn from Rodin and Cezanne and, later, to teach a young poet what poetry is about" (Zagajewski ix). In Prague, he visited art museums and theatres, studying architecture and monuments. This acquaintance with the visual world transformed the "awkward boy in Prague" into a full grown poet who was the "most elaborate, gilded, efficient dictating machine for recording poetry ever invented" (Paine 155). In 1891 Rilke's first published poem *The Train is now in fashion*- parodied a well known serenade into a piece of romantic irony about fashion the mysterious realms and folds of sensuous imagery which calls up memories of trauma and suffering. The Hradcany castle in Prague, to Rilke was not only was as a piece of architecture but a site for picturesque change and distance. The phrase *welcoming gaze* of "lived experience" of the everyday world brings in the memories of a shared memory. The experiment was just the starting point for his effort to merge the subject object dichotomy which was pronounced later in France. Later, his aesthetic vision was on the threshold of impressions of renewed irrationalism of the *Storm and Stress* movement. The ensuing German romanticism's striving for depth and totality of profound emotion of the picturesque and the sublime evoked feelings of anxiety and attraction in Rilke. Through these lines- *my mother came... my mother picked these flowers all of them, out of my life*, the poet explained his sense of isolation, uprootedness and unrest. In 1895, Rilke's skillfully crafted second collection of poems *Larenofen* came out which was

a tribute to Prague and contained clear images of the topography and history of the city, basically shows Rilke's intention of escaping from Prague and also from his mental dilemma of non- belonging. This collection was near continuation of his first volume *Lives and Songs* again heavily indebted to Goethe, Heine, Eichendorff. For Rilke the "work of art is essentially the internal made external, resulting from a creative process operating under the impulse of feeling and embodying the combined product of the poet's perceptions, thoughts and feelings (Abrams 22). *Land and Volk* shows the beautiful landscape of Prague and each visual that is represented in the poem symbolizes the aesthetics of everyday life. Till the publication of *Advent* and *Dream Crowned* Rilke's poems took a different turn where silence played an important role. The poems in *Advent* incorporated much of *Jugendstil* and a wide range of variety in methods starting from the Classical to the Romantic. The early Rilke poems typify that "art imitates the world of appearance and not of essence"(Abrams 8). His early poetry therefore exhibits "finely- crafted language and vivid imagery, and is more descriptive and self- referential than his later works" (Cushman 104).

Rilke maintained a good friendship with Franz Xaver Kappus and Paul Klee, which drew his interest towards multi cultural aesthetics, Russian culture, literature and history and above all towards modernism. The year 1897 was a turning point of Rilke's life when he met Lou Andrea Salome, who changed him from a "provincial talent to a cosmopolitan artist" (Delbos 39). Under Lou's influence Rilke carried out rigorous studies on art. Rilke's *Florentine Diary* can be seen purely as a piece of art criticism, full of every minute detail of Florentine art and architecture. Rilke chose art as a way of liberation and his poems are based on the rudiments of the pictorial and plastic arts. Rilke in Russia, experienced a deep mystical connection between the common people and their land. Tolstoy's Role in Rilke's life was purely a 'cultural one' and he served as an 'archetype of the eternal Russian'. Both Rilke and

Tolstoy shared some resemblances in terms of their perception of art who believed in unity between life and art. But Rilke made the main point of departure from Tolstoy regarding the autonomy of the arts. Like other modernists Rilke fully denied the didactic purpose of art, which Tolstoy considered as essential. Tolstoy's first assumption would be to say that art was a process through which what was subjective in the individual became objective for the public.

Rilke was fascinated by the city Kremlin where the environment of Easter celebration changed his aesthetic vision. He loved to listen Bach and Beethoven and his love for music led to his admiration of chiming bells in Petersburg invokes a different kind of aesthetics.

*Music: breath of statues. Perhaps:  
silence of pictures. You language where languages  
end. You time,  
standing upright upon the direction  
of vanishing hearts.  
Feelings for whom? O you transformation  
of feelings into what? -: into audible landscape.  
You stranger: music. Grown out of us, you  
heart-space. Innermost part of us,  
which, in transcending us, thrusts its way outward, –  
sacred taking of leave:  
when space from inside surrounds us as  
distance most practised, the other  
side of the air:  
pure,  
gigantic,  
no longer habitable.*

(Snow *The Poetry of Rilke* 549)

Concentrating on several ideas of symbolists in *To Music* Rilke shows his affinity with “Verlaine’s call for poetry to become closer to music in ‘L’Art poétique’ [The Art of Poetry], and Mallarme’s idea that pure poetry is really a type of silence. Both concepts emphasise form as opposed to content, and Rilke’s pared-down poem, at once ecstatic and questioning, alerts us to the problematic relationship of form and content from the very beginning” (Ryan 159). For Rilke here music becomes “merely another avatar of the metaphors Rilke had been seeking throughout his crisis period for the complex interaction of subject and object in the imaginative act” (Ryan 158).

Worpswede opened for him new vistas in the domain of the visual arts. During his Worpswede days, with the close association with sculptor Clara Westhoff and artist Paula Becker Rilke brought about a new intervention in the poetics of representation. His tribute to his friend Paula, *Requiem For a Friend*, was a mere testament of his changing and developing vision in aesthetics. Rilke was drawing near to the physical being of nature and trying to execute his own theory of writing - “write what you see and experience” (Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* 11). The ambiance in the artist colony of Worpswede brought him close to the vibrant creative process and the search for the essence and soul of art.

Working with Rodin in Paris Rilke realized the weight of the craftsmanship of representation. By the year 1906- 07 Rilke’s interest shifted to modern painting as Rilke started realizing the difficulties of representation between Rodin’s model and his own literary creation. That gap made Rilke to invest his study on Van Gogh and Manet. The most impressive elements that Rilke found in Cezanne were ‘solidity’ and ‘integrity’. In many points Rilke found Cezanne quite similar to Rodin in terms of durability and self- restraint. Rilke was amazed to see how Cezanne created ‘things’ so real which could strike human mind purely with its visual

quality. The lacuna that Rilke felt in Cezanne's work in comparison to Rodin was "intentional symbolism" (Bridge *Rilke and the Visual Arts* 151). As in Rodin, Rilke considered the technique of creating "surface" as an aesthetic model, compared to Cezanne's impact of colour. After meeting Rodin, Rilke immersed himself in an entirely new world where object was the centre of all creation.

He set about acquiring an entirely new set of working habits- forcing himself to write every day during regularly scheduled hours, wandering about Paris practicing the art of observation, taking notes, making lists of subjects for poems. Meanwhile he began to entertain the idea of a poetry that would answer to what he described as Rodin's "art of living surfaces"- a poetry that would somehow manage to belong to the world of things rather than feelings. *New Poems*, constitute one of the great instances in modern literature of the lyric quest for objective experience (Snow, "Translator's Commentary" 630).

The most essential lesson that Rilke learned from Rodin was the independency of an object, irrespective of its artistic medium. The first job of an artist was is to conceptualize art within oneself and giving it a shape to speak for itself:

In *New Poems*, the most striking transformation occurs in Rilke's language, which grows simultaneously more lucid and complex. Compression of statement and elimination of authorial self are taken to their extremes in the pursuit of an objective ideal. The interanimation of object and consciousness is , finally the great theme of the *New Poems*, in spite of their apparent worship of states of withdrawal, apartness, and fulfilled isolation. At their most radical they seek to open the dimensions of what a phenomenologist would call the "lived world", where subject and object are

inseparable aspects of an imaginatively engendered unity (Snow, “Translator’s Commentary” 631-632).

Though thing was the focus of all creation in the works of Rilke produced during his Paris years including *New Poems*, his poems on the Buddha represent a aesthetic dialogue between the West and the East, close to oriental aesthetics. His tone and temperament is quite similar to Haiku where consciousness and silence speak over image and this quality is so important to all arts linked to Zen, is that the “artistic expression of non- attachment, the result of calm realization of profoundly felt truths” (Stryk 10).

In *The Notebook*, Malte tries to narrate own dilemma and his sense of alienation. Tapestries, fabrics, laces, costumes of dancers recollected with minute visual detail giving almost a tactile dimension. Through the images of the road, the hospital, a pregnant woman *The Notebook* has addressed a negative type aesthetics, the aesthetics of ugliness reversing the classical notion of the term. In *the Notebooks* we see him worrying about the connection between “madness and creativity, dabbling in theories of sexual pathology, returning desperately to aestheticist fashions and practices” (Ryan 4).

Rilke explored the relationship between the representational qualities of a work of art and its aesthetic means. Whereas he sought to find in the surfaces of Rodin’s sculpture aesthetic representation or in Cezanne’s paintings the passionate play of colours and light. For him the visual aesthetics played a role in observing a thing or an object by emphasizing the simplest essence of perception.

While Rilke admired the early Picasso, he had no interest for Cubist works or the Cubist movement generally and tended to resist art where representation disappeared entirely. During the war years, however, he was fascinated by Paul Klee’s multi-coloured paintings.

Rilke advocates a mode of artistic creation which is unconscious, unreflective, and without intentional meaning; in other words, a form of art which is as far removed from language, closely related to cultural history. Rilke's shift to modernism is associated with his reading of the aesthetics of poetry, towards a concept of poetry as essence and a revival of the elegiac mode. Rilke developed an aesthetics which was a continuing dialogue between essence, gaze, and the evolving shift in concrete surface.

What is striking in Rilke is that he expressed an observation of a natural, often commonplace event through the skilful yet simple arrangement of words and with the use of imagery giving an effect of sparseness and space, related to transcendent unity.

Rilke's experiments with imagery are the most innovative elements in his work, beginning as early as *The Book of Hours* and continuing into his *Duino Elegies*, *Sonnets to Orpheus* and certain poems from the last years of his life. Many of Rilke's unusual images have aestheticist origins...More than any other aspect of his poetry, this network of images moves Rilke well along the path toward abstraction, despite his ambivalent relation to abstract painting (Ryan 224).

For Rilke the "pure artist" (Zagagewski x), representation remained always inadequate, where the poetics of mimesis and aesthetics was always in a flux. He frequently tried to draw attention to the fact that his images are "approximations, likeness grasped in an almost desperate attempt to render what cannot be exactly reproduced (Ryan 65).

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