

## ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: RILKE'S RUSSIAN ENCOUNTER AND THE TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT ON THE POET

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Russian culture had a pivotal role in the development of Rainer Maria Rilke's poetic perception and evolution. As late as 1922, Rilke emphatically claimed that Russian culture made him into what he is. Decades earlier, during his visits to Russia in 1899 and 1900, Rilke encountered many Russians from different walks of life: writers, artists, intellectuals and ordinary folk. Having immersed himself in the study of Russian language, literature, visual arts and religious ritual, Rilke prepared himself for a most intensive acculturation of Russia as a cultural other. This cultural encounter often has been critiqued as shallow and tainted by the poet's preconceived Western ideas. In contrast, by examining opposing critical views, this study investigates, interdisciplinarily and from the perspective of transculturation, how three central concepts of Rilke – poverty, love, and the artist's role – were substantially transformed by his absorption of Russian cultural and literary discourses.

Russia is defined here as a 'representational space,' employing Henri Levebvre's concept of geographical space consisting of both physical attributes and imaginary symbols. Using Wilhelm Dilthey's concept of 'lived experience', the study approaches Rilke's Russian encounter as a holistic intercultural experience on both conscious and

unconscious levels. Incorporating these theoretical aspects into a modified concept of transculturation, the study transcends the question of accuracy of Rilke's Russian depictions so often raised in biographical studies that insist on positivistic factuality. Instead, approached transculturally, Rilke's Russian encounter highlights the transformative changes that the poet's subjective perceptions and poetic development underwent. This is enhanced by the references to and analyses of Rilke's works informed by his Russian encounter.

Most significantly, Rilke's transculturation as informed by his transformative Russian encounter generates the development of the concept of a compassionate imagination based on the idea of universal interconnectedness. This fostered Rilke's unique view of the individual as an integral part of a universal unity, by which the individual is considered inherently worthy regardless of limiting attributes such as social class or gender. This perception channeled Rilke's idea that the tragedy of the poor and the root of modern inability to love are to be found in the constant construction of identities imposed on an individual by others. For Rilke, after his Russian encounter, art's purpose was to create awareness of the individual's place in the universal unity.

**RILKE'S RUSSIAN ENCOUNTER AND THE TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT ON  
THE POET**

By

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## Chapter 1 The Physical and Imaginary: Many Aspects of Rilke's Meaningful Experience of Russia

Rainer Maria Rilke had a most intensive encounter with Russia and Russian culture immersing himself in the language, literature, visual arts and experiencing the country during his extensive travels in 1899 and 1900. Rilke himself has given emphatic testimony about the importance of his Russian encounter<sup>1</sup> for his identity formation as a poetic being: “[. . .] was verdankt ich Rußland, – es hat mich zu *dem* gemacht, was ich bin, von dort ging ich innerlich aus, alle Heimat meines Instinkts, all mein innerer Ursprung ist *dort!*”<sup>2</sup>. The encounter has been cited in the secondary literature<sup>3</sup> as an essential experience. However, its remarkable transformative impact on the poet's self-understanding and writing has not been investigated and assessed fully in terms of a cultural encounter of the other. Furthermore, the term ‘Russia’ – both as a space and as an experience – in its significance for Rilke needs a better definition and a further clarification.

This study takes issue with the existing scholarship and the often negative views of Rilke's experience in and perceptions of Russia. Thus, the goal is to re-examine Rilke's encounter of Russia and the profound and lasting impact this crucial experience

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<sup>1</sup> Rilke himself referred to his Russian experience, along with his time at the Military Academy as “die beiden bestimmendsten Epochen meines äußeren Lebens” (in a letter of January 12<sup>th</sup> 1922 to Robert Heinz Heygrodt) citing the Russian encounter as the most significant influence on his literary work (Sandford 14).

<sup>2</sup> Letter of 21. Jan. 1920 to Leopold v. Schlözer, Briefe II: 51.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Anna Tavis states that Russia “nurtured his talent” (*Rilke's Russia* 1); In a similar way and more positively than in some of his other judgments, Lev Kopelev assesses the wide-ranging impact Rilke's Russian experience had on the poet: “Alles, was er [Rilke] als ‚russische Dinge‘ auffasste [. . .] wurde zu Dichtung. Aber seine russischen Erkenntnisse und Erlebnisse blieben nicht allein in Worten gegenwärtig, sondern wirkten auch weiter hinaus, beeinflussten manches von dem, was Rilke in anderen Ländern, in anderen Wirklichkeiten erkannte, erlebte und zur Poesie gestaltete“ (“Rilkes Märchen-Rusland” 934); James Rolleston mentions that from Russia like from Rodin Rilke “gains insights essential to his own creativity” (53)

had on the poet and the person, his work and worldview. This entails an investigation of Russia not only as a physical reality but also as a cultural space that transformed Rilke's cultural perception and poetic imagination. In contrast to previous studies, this analysis approaches Rilke's Russian encounter as a holistic experience that affected the poet both consciously and subconsciously. The question of cultural space and experience will be explored by employing the concept of 'representational space' by Henri Lefebvre and Wilhelm Dilthey's idea of 'lived experience.' In addition, a modified concept of transculturation will be used to examine the transformative impact of the encounter on Rilke's worldview, poetic imagination, and aesthetic stance as a poet. Clearly, Rilke's Russian encounter significantly changed both his sense of being in the world and his subjectivity while also transforming his creative persona and poetic activity. The Russian encounter impacted his forms of perception and shaped his modes of creativity not only during an early phase but throughout his career. Russia's importance transformed Rilke's creative approach to the world and significantly impacted the development of his imagination as a compassionate inquiry springing from the poet's concentration on the essence of being.

Methodologically, Rilke's Russian encounter cannot be subjected to the approach of traditional biographism which seeks an equation of the life experiences and the literary writings. Rather, a new paradigm of biographical methodology needs to be employed here whereby the life experiences are examined as transformative forces that impacted profoundly the poet's vision and creative process. In addition, Rilke's Russian encounter calls for the application of concepts such as transculturation, lived experience, and representational space. While appropriation often has been viewed as associated with

power and domination, transculturation allows for a more appropriate interfacing of the cultural encounter. The concepts of ‘lived experience’ and the ‘representational space’ will be employed for a better definition of Russia as the cultural other. It will be utilized to elucidate how Rilke’s encounter with this culture affected his perceptions. Clearly, an objective, photograph-like perception and memory of any entity or object is not possible. The theoretical positions taken here will allow for a revisiting of Rilke’s Russian encounter avoiding the many fallacies associated with biographism while, at the same time, illuminating Rilke’s unique transculturation as a process of remarkable cultural interfacing.

Overall, Rilke has been criticized for his views of Russia as too subjective and even shallow. However, many of his critics have ignored his position as an engaged creative writer and perceptive traveler whose visits to Russia and admiration for her people and culture were not patterned to satisfy a scientific, historical, political and activist stance. Rilke also was not a naïve tourist who needed to confirm preconceived notions or gather superficial impressions once he consummated his travels. Rilke made serious efforts to learn Russian, read many of the leading and lesser known writers, and familiarized himself with the arts, including Russian religious painting and folk art. His essays on Russian painting show a deeper understanding of the foreign culture than many of his critics allow for. Rilke’s experience of Russia is a fascinating paradigm of encountering the other on multiple levels, from the reality of travel and experience of the physical to the meeting of a multitude of people, notably artists and writers including the encounter of a great variety of cultural artifacts much of which left a deep impression on Rilke the man and poet. Affected were his intellect, creative persona and soul. From the



concrete to the sublime, Rilke was transformed profoundly as his emphatic statement about Russia's lasting role in his spiritual development confirms.

### ***Rilke's Russian Encounters***

Rilke's experience of Russian culture was manifold. Foremost it was an encounter in the imaginary realm. A significant stimulus came from contemporary and medieval literature, visual arts, the study of Russian language, and existing myths/opinions about the country as a spiritual center and intriguing nation. Rilke's wish to get to know Russia in her human and physical dimension culminated in his two trips for which he prepared himself thoroughly. The poet's first encounter with Slavic culture and literature dates back to his childhood and youth (Lehmann 99). Growing up in Bohemian Prague, Rilke witnessed the rise of Pan-Slavism which "combined in itself German romantic thought and indigenous Slavic nationalism" (Tavis, *Rilke's Russia* 2). This ideology was based on the idea of an inherent connection between Russia and other Slavic lands that were united by the "people's moral consciousness" or by a collective Slavic "soul" (Tavis, *Rilke's Russia* 2). This political climate contributed to the popularity of Russian literary figures and thinkers among the Czech. Rilke's first introduction to Russia apparently occurred via his acquaintance with the prominent Czech writer Julius Zeyer<sup>4</sup> who "saw in Russia the mythical homeland of the Slavs" (Reshetylo-Rothe, *Rilke and Russia* IX) and exposed the young poet to Russian literature.

The year 1897 marks another crucial milestone in Rilke's relationship to Russian culture: in May, Jakob Wassermann introduced him to Lou Andreas-Salomé, an author

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<sup>4</sup> Rilke met Zeyer in 1895 (Reshetylo-Rothe, *Rilke and Russia* 11).

and journalist who had just returned from Russia, the land of her birth (Azadovskii, *Rilke i Rossiia* 15). Subsequently, Rilke started his study of Russian culture (Tavis, *Rilke's Russia* 20). On 14<sup>th</sup> of June 1897, Rilke and Andreas-Salomé along with her friends Frieda von Bülow and young architect August Endell moved from Munich to Wolfratshausen. Akim Volynsky, a controversial writer and critic, well-known in the circles of St. Petersburg intelligentsia, joined them shortly, intending to assist Andreas-Salomé with research she was conducting for a variety of essays on Russian subjects (Freedman 67). Rilke's stay in Wolfratshausen proved to be emotionally turbulent, as his intense attraction to Andreas-Salomé conflicted with her great involvement in her studies. Her unwillingness to satisfy his pursuit time and again generated Rilke's depressions (Freedman 68). Nevertheless, at this time Rilke's interest in Russian culture was sparked (Azadovskii, *Rilke i Rossiia* 18). From this time on, through the visits to Russia and as a life-long friend, Andreas-Salomé played a pivotal role as an intellectual partner and guide to Rilke. She was also his one-time lover, mother figure and muse who inspired his poetic output<sup>5</sup>. While Andreas-Salomé's association with and formidable knowledge about Russia motivated Rilke, he also gained insights into Russian culture while listening to the conversations between Andreas-Salomé and Volynsky. In addition, he also made fair copies of her writings all of which dealt with Russian subjects. (Azadovskii, *Rilke i*

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<sup>5</sup> Biddy Martin, discussing the complex relationship between Andreas-Salomé and Rilke, sees Salomé "primarily" as "Rilke's anchor, friend, and analyst" in her book *Woman and Modernity: The (Life) styles of Lou Andreas-Salomé*. Cornell University Press, 1991. Print. See pp.40-47. Also, see Andreas-Salomé, Lou. "Russland mit Rainer": *Tagebuch der Reise mit Rainer Maria Rilke im Jahre 1900*. Eds. Stéphane Michaud and Dorothee Pfeiffer. Deutsche Schillergesellschaft: Marbach, 1999. Print. A discussion on the romantic relationship between Andreas-Salomé and Rilke is present in the following article: Peters, H. F. "Rilke's Love Poem's to Lou Andreas-Salomé." *Modern Language Quarterly* 21.2 (1960): 158-164. Print.

*Rossia* 18) Volynsky is usually credited with being the first person to introduce Rilke to Russian culture and literature in a thorough, comprehensive way (Certkov 4-5)<sup>6</sup>.

Rilke saw the physical reality of Russia, the land and the people, during his two trips which took place in 1899 from the end of April through mid-June and in 1900 from the end of April through end of August. (Brutzer 3) Lou Andreas-Salomé was Rilke's travel companion during both trips and exerted significant influence on his choice of places to visit and perception of Russian people and culture. The first station on his journey was Moscow where Rilke and Andreas-Salomé arrived on April 27<sup>th</sup>, shortly before the Russian Easter (Prater 52). Close proximity of his hotel to the heart of the city<sup>7</sup> allowed Rilke to closely observe and participate in the Easter festivities. Deeply impressed by the devotion of the Russian people crowding the churches, he saw this celebration as a "paragon of sincere spontaneity" in contrast to Western religious rites marked by theatricality (Tavis, *Rilke's Russia* 36). Later, Rilke referred to this Easter night as a deeply transformative experience which provided him with a feeling of belonging that was to last a lifetime<sup>8</sup>. After a few days in Moscow, the travelers went to St. Petersburg and found this city festively decorated for Alexander Pushkin's centenary celebrations (Prater 52; Kopelev, "Rilkes Märchen-Russland" 907). In St. Petersburg, Rilke visited the great art collections at the Hermitage and in private hands and later, after

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<sup>6</sup> No sources documenting the communication between Rilke and Volynsky are extant (Azadovskii, *Rilke i Rossia* 19).

<sup>7</sup> From the windows of his hotel room, Rilke could see the Iberian Gate which led to the Red Square (Kopelev, "Rilkes Märchen-Russland" 905).

<sup>8</sup> Rilke writes: "Zum ersten Mal in meinem Leben hatte ich ein unausdrückbares Gefühl, etwas wie 'Heimgefühl' – ich fühlte mit großer Kraft die Zugehörigkeit zu etwas, mein Gott, zu etwas in dieser Welt." (cited in Tavis, *Rilke's Russia* 155); „Mir war ein einziges Mal Ostern; das war damals in jener langen, ungewöhnlichen, ungemainen, erregten Nacht, da das alles Volk sich drängte, und als der Ivan Velikij mich schlug in der Dunkelheit, Schlag für Schlag. Das war mein Ostern, und ich glaube es reicht für ein ganzes Leben aus; die Botschaft ist mir in jener Moskauer Nacht seltsam groß gegeben worden [. . .] Ich weiß es jetzt: *Khristos Voskres!* [Christ is risen!]" (letter to Andreas-Salomé from March 31st 1904). Note: 'Ivan Velikij' refers to the bells from the Ivan the Great Bell Tower, the tallest tower in the Moscow Kremlin complex.

a brief return trip to Moscow, he dedicated himself to studying Russian religious art, exploring the varying icon styles and familiarizing himself with the history of this art (Prater 53).

Embarking on his second trip in the spring of 1900, Rilke did not perceive himself as a stranger to Russia anymore: he was coming as “ein Eingeweihter und Wissender in Ihrem [Russian] Kreise” and planned to stay longer<sup>9</sup>. This trip was more thoroughly planned out by Andreas-Salomé and Rilke and greatly enhanced by the help received from Sophia Schill, a friend of Andreas-Salomé's in Moscow (Lehmann 99). Their first destination was again Moscow where they spent some time in the History Museum and repeatedly visited the Tretyakov Art Gallery (Prater 61). At the end of May, Rilke and Andreas-Salomé started their 2,500-mile journey through the south and east of European Russia, first visiting the Ukraine (with a brief stay in Kiev) and then taking a ship down the Dnieper. The cities they visited include Kremenchug, Kharkhov, Voronezh, Koslov, Saratov, Samara, Stavropol, Simbirsk, Kasan, Nizhnij Novgorod, and Yaroslavl (Lehmann 99). It was during this time that Rilke experienced the majesty and endlessness of the Russian landscape. Before leaving Russia, he spent additional four weeks in St. Petersburg, this time alone<sup>10</sup>. He was a frequent visitor at the Petersburg Art Museum where he admired the paintings of Russian artists from the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>11</sup> (Kopelev, “Rilkes Märchen-Russland” 912).

While in Russia, Rilke experienced many different groups of people divided by social class and place of living. In a letter to his mother dated May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1900, he writes:

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<sup>9</sup> letter to Leonid Pasternak from February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1900 cited in Azadovskii *Rilke und Rußland* 114

<sup>10</sup> Andreas-Salomé went to Finland to visit her family.

<sup>11</sup> such as Alexander Ivanov, Fjodor Vassiljev, and Ivan Kramskoj

Dank der ausgezeichneten Verbindungen, die ich anknüpfen durfte, stehen mir alle Kreise offen: und aus einem Kreise von Arbeitern fahre ich zu irgend einem Fürsten, um mit ihm zu speisen oder irgend etwas zu besichtigen. Überall, in allen Sammlungen, Museen werden wir vom Direktor oder sonst einer orientierten Persönlichkeit empfangen [. . .] Heute werden wir unter der Leitung eines Priesters mehrere Kathedralen besichtigen und die dazu gehörigen mit Gold und kinderfaustgroßen Saphiren angefüllten Schatzkammern besuchen [. . .]. (cited in Azadovskii 37)

Clearly, Rilke cherished the opportunity of getting to know people from very different walks of life which enabled him to see different facets of the Russian society. He perceived experiences of common people just as unique and significant as those of his more affluent friends. Rilke received access to the aristocratic houses via recommendation letters of German friends<sup>12</sup> and through Lou Andreas-Salomé's connections with the Russian literary scene. He met with a variety of Russian artists some of whom became his life-long friends. Among his acquaintances were Leo and Nikolai Alekseevich Tolstoy, Vladimir Korolenko as well as minor figures of Russian literature such as Spiridon Drozhzhin and Vasily Yanchevetsky, the painters Il'a Repin and Appolinarij Vasnezov, the influential art critic Alexander Benois, the art historian Paul Ettinger, the sculptors Pavel Trubetsky and Leonid Pasternak, and the translator Friedrich F. Fiedler (Brodsky, *Russia in the Works* 23; Lehmann 99). Leonid Pasternak's son Boris later engaged in a poetically productive letter exchange with Rilke and Marina

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<sup>12</sup> E.g. Rilke was recommended to Leonid Pasternak by Pasternak's friends in Germany who asked him to introduce Rilke to Lev Tolstoy (Reshetylo-Rothe, *Rilke and Russia* 41)

Cvetaeva (Zaslavski 145). Rilke also met Princess Tenisheva, a social reformer and a well-known patroness of the arts, and Sophia Schill, Andreas-Salomé's friend and a journalist who wrote under the name Sergei Orlov. The latter volunteered to be a local guide for Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé and made many excursions and meetings possible during their stay in Moscow.

Perceiving himself not as an outsider touring Russia but as a “wanderer [...] who could be trusted with the most awkward truths”, Rilke did not limit the circle of people he came in touch with to middle and upper class Russians (Tavis, *Rilke's Russia* 52). Sophia Schill mentions that Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé “überall sprachen [. . .] mit dem Volk” (cited in Azadovskii, *Rilke und Rußland* 444). Such conversations with simple folk often took place in “little eating houses frequented by drivers and porters” where Rilke and Andreas-Salomé liked to stop for tea (Prater 61). Schill also provides a brief description of the Western guests' visit to the Pretchistensky Night courses for workers where she taught. A few times, Rilke and Andreas-Salomé had an opportunity to partake in a conversation with the workers over tea. They also came in touch with the ordinary people in the Russian countryside. Before returning to Moscow during their second trip, Rilke and Andreas-Salomé rented a peasant-cottage in the nearby village of Kresta Bogorodskoye where they spent a few days sharing “the simple life and spare meals of the friendly villagers, wandering round the flowered meadows, drinking their tea at the cottage door in the dawn light” (Prater 65). Rilke's stay at Nizovka, the native village of Spiridon Drozhzhin, also deserves a mention as a place where he enjoyed the simple pleasure of country living.

In the imaginary domain, Rilke's exposure to Russia was not limited to everyday experiences and common perceptions. He dedicated significant time and effort to studying Russian culture and displayed "sincerity, intensity, and degree of personal commitment, which surpassed the mere fashion for Orientalism" (Tavis, *Rilke's Russia* 31). Rilke's most intense involvement with the study of Russian heritage and contemporary culture, including language, falls in the period between his two Russian trips (Brutzer 13). He embarked on this project together with Lou Andreas-Salomé while being a guest of Frieda von Bülow at her estate in Bibersberg. According to their hostess, Rilke and Andreas-Salomé "hatten sich mit Leib und Seele dem Studium des Russischen verschrieben und lernten mit phänomenalem Fleiß den ganzen Tag: Sprache, Literatur, Kunstgeschichte, Weltgeschichte, Kulturgeschichte von Russland, als ob sie sich für ein fürchterliches Examen vorbereiten müssten" (September 20th, 1899 cited in Brutzer 14). Rilke's self-study was later expanded through his enrollment at the local university in Schmargendorf where he attended lectures on Russian subjects (letter to his mother from 9<sup>th</sup> of December, 1899 cited in Hendry 30). This dedication resulted in Rilke's deeper understanding of Russian culture and the ability to use the Russian language which eliminated his dependency on translation and allowed him a more direct access to Russian literary and philosophical works and thought. As early as 1899, he reads extensively in Russian:

Ich war nicht ganz träge, verbrachte manche Stunde in Gesellschaft einer Grammatik und bin dabei, Puschkin und Lermontov im Original zu lesen [ . . . ] Ich habe auch sonst viel gelesen Tolstoj, dessen kleine Skizze ‚Luzern‘ mir besonders imponiert hat, Dostojewski (in dessen ‚Brüder

Karamazow' ich noch lese) hat mich mit seinen ‚Weißen Nächten‘ [. . .] entzückt, und Garschin hat auch begonnen, mich zu gewinnen! (Letter to Elena Woronina from Julz 27, 1899 cited in Azadovskii 101)

Among other Russian authors that became especially important to Rilke are Nikolai Nekrasov, Ivan Turgenev, Afanasij Fet (letter to Alfred Schaer, 1924), and Sergei Aksakov whose *Family Chronicle* Rilke read with great interest years later in 1919 (Azadovskii, *Rilke i Rossia* 105)<sup>13</sup>.

Rilke's progress in the mastery of Russian language is well documented in his letters and evident in his translations from Russian and his own Russian poems. For instance, in a letter to Leonid Pasternak from February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1900<sup>14</sup>, Rilke again states his excitement about being able to read Lermontov and Tolstoy in the original and asks his friend to respond in Russian. Towards the end of his second Russian trip, Rilke attempts writing in Russian as his Russian letters to Leonid Pasternak and Sophia Schill indicate<sup>15</sup>. An entry from November 29<sup>th</sup>, 1900 in Rilke's diary contains his first poem written in Russian, which he dedicates to Lou Andreas-Salomé<sup>16</sup> (Brutzer 16). Within the next ten days, he spontaneously created additional five poems all of which were recorded in his diary and later sent to Andreas-Salomé (as a separate fair copy) (Brodsky, *Russia in the Works* 44). Two more Russian poems, dating from April 1901 were recently discovered

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<sup>13</sup> Rilke read a German version of Aksakov's work.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Azadovskii *Rilke und Rußland* 113

<sup>15</sup> Sophia Schill responds to Rilke's first Russian letter written without any assistance in the following manner: "Ihre Fortschritte sind gerade zu verblüffend und wenn man von den Fehlern absieht, so muß man in Wahrheit sagen, dass Ihr Brief stellenweise einfach ausgezeichnet geschrieben ist" (August 25th, 1900, originally written in Russian, cited in Brutzer 15); Leonid Pasternak's response to Rilke in January 1901 contains a praise of Rilke's Russian language ability: „In einem Jahre eine so schwierige Sprache erlernen und sie so schnell beherrschen, dass man imstande ist, russisch zu korrespondieren, - das ist so verblüffend, dass ich immer von Neuem über Sie staune und immer wieder Ihren Brief meinen Bekannten zeige, die Sie auch alle bewundern!“ (translated by Arthur Luther, cited in Brutzer 16).

<sup>16</sup> Lou Andreas-Salomé found his poems "aus tiefem Verlangen und obwohl grammatikalisch arg, doch irgendwie unbegreiflich dichterisch" (*Rainer Maria Rilke*)



on a loose sheet of paper in a book of the letters by the Russian painter Ivanov. Rilke's Russian poems reflect his remarkable, self-taught proficiency, but also his limitations as a speaker of Russian. There are, notably, multiple morphological and syntactical errors in these texts<sup>17</sup>. However, Rilke's ability to compose lyrical works in Russian after roughly one year of language study is quite striking for the seriousness of intent and the success albeit limited in his acquisition of Russian.

Another facet of Rilke's occupation with Russian language and literature is his extensive translations which range from a host of poems through prose works and a dramatic play (Naumann 167-177). Among his early translations are two poems of the Russian peasant poet Spiridon Droshin, the poem *Vesna I Notch'* (*Spring and Night*) by Konstantin M. Fofanov, a novella *Tscherviak* (*A Worm*) by Fyodor K. Sologub, Michail Lermontov's poem *Molitva* (*Prayer*), the story *Petition* by V. Yantshevetsky, passages from Fyodor Dostoevsky's first novel *Poor Folk*, and Anton Checkov's play *Tschaika* (*Seagull*)<sup>18</sup>. Rilke also intended to translate a two-volume history of contemporary Russian art by Alexander Benois (Tavis, *Rilke's Russia* 75) the publication of which was announced in 'The German Literary Calender' as forthcoming in 1905<sup>19</sup> (Reshetylo-Rothe, *Rilke and Russia* 309). Roughly at the same time, Rilke completes his most successful and ambitious translation of the Russian medieval text *Slovo a polku Igoreve* (*Lay of Igor's Campaign*). His version, entitled *Das Igorlied*, was finished in Rome in 1904 after two years of work. This translation placed a greater demand on Rilke's

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<sup>17</sup>Soloveitchik, Samson, Gladding Everett. "Rilke's Original Russian Poems." *Modern Language Notes* 62.8 (1947): 514-522. Print.

<sup>18</sup> Rilke also intended to translate another Checkov's play – *Uncle Vanya* – but his wish was never materialized (Brodsky, *Russia in the Works* 38); in addition, his attempts at receiving Tolstoy's permission for translating his play *Living Corpse* were unsuccessful (Naumann 171-172).

<sup>19</sup> There is no evidence that the book has been published but this piece of information indicates Rilke's involvement with the project and intent to publish it.

language skills as he relied on a copy of the original medieval text among other sources<sup>20</sup> (Brodsky, *Russia in the Works* 31). Then after a fifteen-year long break, Rilke returns to translating from Russian by creating a German version of Michail Lermontov's poem *I Go Out to the Road Alone* (*Vychozu odin ja na dorogu*). This translation has been viewed as possessing "amazing formal accuracy and deep penetration of the original's spirit" and serving as a "classic example of an adequate re-creation of a poetic work in a different language"<sup>21</sup> (Azadovskii, *Rilke i Rossiia* 105). Rilke's later translations also include verses by Alexei Tolstoy, Tyutchev, and Zinaida Hippuis (translated in 1919) which were requested by Fega Frisch for the German version of Sologub's play *Life's Hostages* (*Zalozschniki zschizni*) she was working on at the time (Azadovskii, *Rilke i Rossiia* 105).

The Russian language continued to play a role in Rilke's life until his death. Late in his life, in his last letter to Pasternak, Rilke attempts to write in Russian again. Without adequate practice, his earlier ability is lost and he has to switch to German to complete the letter. However, he states that he is still able to read Russian quite well: "...ich kann es noch recht gut, komme nur leider selten dazu..." (letter to Pasternak, 14<sup>th</sup> of March, 1926, cited in Brutzer 17).

The Russian visual arts were central to Rilke's personal rendering of his impressions of Russia and served him as a means of transcending the language commonly used by Western commentators (Tavis, *Rilke's Russia* 75). In his mind, these experiences were of "stiller, intimer, unliterarischer Art" (Letter to Gerhart Hauptmann, 1901). Russian imagery, including both impressions from his travels and artistic

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<sup>20</sup> Rilke also used a modern Russian prose version and several poetic renderings by Russian writers. For a discussion of sources see: Gronicka, Andre von. "Rainer Maria Rilke's Translation of the 'Igor Song' (Slovo): With Introduction and Notes." *Memoirs* 42 (1947): 179-202.

<sup>21</sup> Translation from Russian is mine.

depictions such as paintings, served as the material for Rilke's essays on Russian themes, his translations from Russian and his Russian poems. In addition, original literary works such as *Geschichten vom lieben Gott*, early sections of *Das Stunden-Buch*, and some poems in *Das Buch der Bilder* were inspired by his fondness of Russian (Webb 240). Being an ardent student of Russian visual arts, Rilke served as a mediator of Russian painting in the West<sup>22</sup>. His interest ranged from Russian medieval religious painting through the works of contemporary Impressionist artists such as Korovin, Malyavin, Serov, Benois and Somov (Brutzer 22). Rilke's catalog of the Tretyakov's Art Gallery in Moscow reveals his special interest in Russian painting of the 19<sup>th</sup> century containing notes on Venezianov, Fedotov, Petrov, Aivasovski, Shishkin, and others. His first essay on Russian art, *Russische Kunst* (1899) focuses on Victor Vasnetsov (1848-1926), one of the founders of the Russian Revival movement<sup>23</sup>. After seeing Ivanov's canvas *Christ in the Wilderness*, Rilke was inspired to write his second essay *Moderne russische Kunstbestrebungen* (1900), in which he analyzes the works of Russian modern psychological painters such as Kramskoi, Ivanov, Isaak Levitan, Il'ja Repin, and Nikolai Gay (Tavis, *Rilke's Russia* 77). The majority of the artists Rilke focuses on are seeking an authentic Russian way of expression. Rilke's interest in Russian visual arts was not, however, limited by the artists' occupation with national traditions and reality as his appreciation of Karl Brüllow<sup>24</sup> and Mikhail Vrubel<sup>25</sup> indicates (Brutzer 21, 26).

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<sup>22</sup> For instance, Rilke planned to write full-length biographies of Russian painters Ivan Kramskoy and Fjodor Vasilijev (Tavis 75) and organize an exhibition of Russian paintings (Brutzer 30). Rilke's plans remained unrealized. However, his letter exchange with his Russian friends, including Benois and Pasternak, indicate that he put a significant effort into these endeavors (Brutzer 35-37).

<sup>23</sup> For a comprehensive analysis, see Tavis 75-78

<sup>24</sup> Brüllow was an Italian and stood under the strong influence of the classicistic Russian Arts Academy. He is viewed as the founder of the Russian School of romantic painting (modeled after the Italian).

<sup>25</sup> Brutzer compares Vrubel's art to that of Klinger and Böcklin

Rilke's study of Russian visual arts and literature goes beyond close scrutiny of literary and visual works, as he was interested in the authors' and artists' philosophical approach to art and their understanding of the artist's role in society. In Rilke's views of Russian artists the incorporation of their letters, biographical information, essays and reviews played an important role. For instance, Il'ja Repin's letters published in the Russian journal *Ptschela* (from the years 1875-1876) informed Rilke's perception of the Russian artist as aiming at perfection however elusive, as possessing "gigantische Absichten" and "Pläne[...], die über Jahrtausende geplant sind". In his letters, Repin expresses concern about unrealistically high standards of Russian art which may lead to the loss of motivation and any type of productive creativity. Rilke finds a positive answer to this concern (Brutzer 24-25) perceiving an artist not as a lonesome being who is prone to lose purpose in life but as someone inherently connected with society. His essays on Russian art, *Russische Kunst* (1901) and *Moderne Russische Kunstbestrebungen* (1902) are to be viewed as a response to an earlier encounter with Russian artistic philosophical thought (Tavis, *Rilke's Russia* 75). During his stay in Wolfratshausen as a guest of Lou Andreas-Salomé (in 1897), Rilke discovered the writings of Nikolai Leskov which contained a concern about reconciling the artist's uniqueness and societal responsibilities. Rilke indicates in his essays that in spite of possessing a free spirit, an artist should remain true to his origins.

### ***Rilke's Russia: Review of the Scholarly Debate***

Both Rilke's contemporaries and subsequent scholars agree that his Russian encounter was of great importance to the poet. However, one persistent criticism

concerns Rilke's subjective view of the realities he experienced in Russia. Lew Kopelev is quite critical in his evaluation of Rilke's limited perceptions of Russia and her complex realities: "[Rilke] kannte nur einzelne Erscheinungen des alltäglichen geistigen und materiellen Lebens in Rußland; er verklärte, idealisierte und mythologisierte alles, was er wahrgenommen hatte, verdichtete es märchenhaft, ohne sich um Wirklichkeitstreue zu sorgen" ("Rilkes Märchen-Russland" 934). However, this sweeping assessment needs qualification and reconsideration. Rilke is not a mere subjective impressionist, but does stand in a tradition of outside perception of the Slavic lands and his views have been "anticipated by the entire development of European ideas about Russia since the days of Peter the Great" (Tavis, *Rilke's Russia* xiv) including philosophical thought of Herder, Hegel, de Vogue, and Nietzsche<sup>26</sup>. This cultural attitude also had its Russian counterparts in the Slavophile ideology embraced by such thinkers as Ivan V. Kireevskij, Aleksej S. Chamyakov, Konstantin S. Aksakov, and Fyodor Dostoevsky (Lehmann 101). In Rilke's mind and imagination, Russia is viewed as the antithesis of the fin-de-siècle West. He views this country as the land of the future, where the first day, "der Tag Gottes, der Schöpfungstag" (*Russische Kunst* KA 4:153), had not yet passed. Considering the land inhabited by patient, humble, close to God people, Rilke noticed the "werdende Weltanschauung einsamer Menschen" that encouraged a slow but steady process of development (cited in Hutchinson 61)<sup>27</sup>. Under the term "Russian people", Rilke

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<sup>26</sup> This perception was also institutionally promoted by such popular European journals as the German *Die freie Bühne* and *Neue deutsche Rundschau* and the French *Revue des deux mondes* (Tavis, *Rilke's Russia* xiv)

<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche praises Russia in similar terms: "Russland, die einzige Macht, die heute Dauer im Leibe hat, die warten kann, die etwas noch versprechen kann – Russland, der Gegensatz-Begriff zu der erbärmlichen europäischen Kleinstaaterei und Nervosität [. . .] Der ganze Westen hat jene Instinkte nicht mehr, aus denen Institutionen wachsen, aus denen Zukunft wächst (cited in Meyer 871).

understood foremost the vast majority of the Russian folk, the peasants who lived close to the land and led a simple way of life (Lehmann 101).

Rilke's allegedly subjective image of Russia became the focus of a heated debate that centered on the validity of Rilke's perception and depiction of the country and its culture. Negative evaluations of his attitudes can be traced back to his contemporaries from the circles of Russian European-educated intelligentsia who sharply criticized Rilke's apparent disregard of Russian contemporary reality and his allegedly effusive admiration of the Russian people. He was criticized for his "naïveté" in believing in "die Seele des Ackerbauern, die noch nicht endgültig verstümmelt ist durch die Stadt und die Arbeiterkaserne" (Schill cited in Azadovskii, *Rilke und Rußland* 444). Rilke's uncompromising critics saw education as the solution for the social misery and they perceived the poet's idealization of the peasantry as a "threat to the proletarian leadership of Russian historical 'progress'" (Tavis, *Rilke's Russia* 31). Letters and memoirs by Sophia Schill, Lidija Lepeschkina, and Nikolai Storoshenko reveal their disappointment and at times irritation with Rilke's lack of desire to acknowledge Russian "slavery" (Azadovskii, *Rilke i Rossiia* 52), the dirt and poverty of the Russian village:

Sie [Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé] sahen im Volke nur Reines und Lichtes, und das entsprach der Wahrheit. Aber sie wollten nicht das andere sehen, das ebensowohl der Wahrheit entsprach, dass das Volk in Unrecht, in Elend, in Unwissenheit vorkommt; dass in ihm die Laster der Sklaven keimen: Faulheit, Schmutz, Betrug, Trunkenheit. (Schill cited in Azadovskii, *Rilke und Rußland* 448)

The negative assessments of Rilke's seeming blindness vis-à-vis the social reality of Czarist Russia are compounded by scholars who view Rilke's physical presence in Russia and his involvement with Russian culture as having had no significant impact on the set of pre-conceived notions he had acquired in the West. This tradition of critiquing Rilke's Russian encounter as lacking substance started in the 1930s with the work of Lilly Zarncke who stated that Rilke "hat im wesentlichen nicht Neues aufgenommen, sondern er hat sich selbst, seine eigene innere Welt, in Rußland bestätigt gefunden" (111). Since the 1940s, E. M. Butler supported such assessment claiming that Rilke's involvement with Russia was reminiscent of Lawrence of Arabia's and Lady Hester Stanhope's obsession with the Middle East:

We do not know the laws of Rilke's Russia, we have never met its mythical inhabitants, the dreaming, inarticulate peasant-poets, fit temples for the Russian soul, humble incarnations of God [...] To read about it [...] is to be steeped once more in the unconvincing glamour of some Never-Never land" (cited in Tavis, *Rilke's Russia* xvii).

Some forty years later, Gert Mattenklott maintains that Rilke used his Russian experiences "um eine Konstellation zu bebildern, die er zuvor schon mehrfach zu bezeichnen versucht hatte" (23) and cites Rilke's *Florenzer Tagebuch* and his essay *Notizen zur Melodie der Dinge* (1898) as already containing Rilke's Russian image that presumably was not modified later (23). Mattenklott's contention that Rilke merely illustrates the artistic position he gained in Florence when experiencing Russia is overlooking the crucial impact the Russian encounter had on Rilke and his poetic development, notably his compassionate imagination. The experience of Russia and its

transcultural assimilation came between the Florence position inspired by Nietzsche's image of the self-concerned super-human artist and the Cézanne experience in 1907. Contemplating Cézanne's paintings intensively, Rilke developed his approach to the "Dingwerdung" (KA 4:608, 1003) or 'thingness' that he found realized in the painters portrayal of the visible world. But the Russian encounter gave Rilke another dimension in his development, the experience of a culture that fostered his compassionate imagination<sup>28</sup>.

Hans-Christoph Graf v. Noyhauss assesses Rilke's perception of Russia even more negatively stating, to the extreme, the poet's inability to absorb any new, unfamiliar facets of this culture and chiding his egotistic concentration on the greatness of his own persona which is critiqued as self-aggrandizing:

Russland dient Rilke nur dazu, dem eigenen Ich als Künstler in seiner Göttlichkeit nahe zu kommen [...] Rilke bemühte sich nicht, sich mit den Fremdkulturen auseinanderzusetzen, sie verstehen zu lernen und sie zu respektieren. Er verharrt beim Ausbau seiner eigenen Individualität und Gottähnlichkeit. (80-83)

However, other scholars, such as Bisserka Raceva, view Rilke's physical encounter with Russia as beneficial to his growth as a poet<sup>29</sup>, while they deny that exposure to the physical reality of this country changed his attitudes towards Russia or affected his perceptions of this and other cultures or of historical and social phenomena.

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<sup>28</sup> See discussion on p. 158ff.

<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Erika Greber underscores that the Russian encounter along with his exposure to other cultures served Rilke as a means to self-discovery necessary for his poetic development: "Der Rußlandbezug bedeutete für den jungen Rilke zweifellos ein Mittel der Selbstfindung im Anderen. Nach der russischen eignete er sich weitere fremde 'Heimaten', andere Sprachen an. Diesen notwendigen Durchgang durch fremde Kulturen bezeichnete er später mit dem emphatischen Begriff der 'Vaterlandslosigkeit'" (161).



For Raceva, Rilke's experience with Russia was foremost an encounter with his own self, i.e. "Wendung ins Eigene" (208) where Russian culture serves the poet as a fertile ground for attaining self-assurance and gaining the sense of direction in his poetic endeavor (208). Recognizing that the Russian experience was of paramount significance for the formation of Rilke's core aesthetic principles, Raceva denies the possibility that the Russian objective reality could be of much importance to Rilke. It is Rilke's projection of preconceived ideals onto this foreign to him culture that she perceives as the catalyzer in his development:

Zunächst dient es (das Bild des Russen) auch nur als Kulturmodell, das eine zeitlich und geschichtlich ungebundene Geistesentfaltung glaubhaft macht. Daran werden vorerst epochentypische Züge einer Zwiespältigkeit des Zeitbewußtseins wie der spezifische Versuch ersichtlich, negative Geschichtserfahrungen ins Positive zu wenden, indem man bewußt eigene Wunschvorstellungen im verbindlichen Beispiel der fremden Kultur wiedererkennt. Sobald diese Projektion das Eigene legitimiert, entwickelt sie sich unbewußt zu einer Art individuellem Mythologem, aus dem Rilkes künstlerisches Werk sich weitgehend speist. (225)

Contrary to these negative views of Rilke's abilities to experience otherness in any productive way, other scholars recognize among Rilke's characteristics an "extraordinary openness to new influences" (Dürr 2). This sweepingly positive assessment corresponds to Rilke's own statements about experience and the creative process. As Rilke reflected on the intersection of experience and writing, he saw experience of empirical reality, including exposure to unfamiliar cultural contexts, as the

key to the poet's ability to create productively. In *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, this view is expressed in the belief that true poetic creation is only possible in the mind and imagination of an experienced, traveled and perceptive individual:

Denn Verse sind nicht, wie die Leute meinen, Gefühle (die hat man früh genug), - es sind Erfahrungen. Um eines Verses willen muss man viele Städte sehen, Menschen und Dinge [. . .] Man muss zurückdenken können an Wege in unbekanntem Gegenden, an unerwartete Begegnungen und Abschiede, die man kommen sah [. . .] an Tage in stillen, verhaltenen Stuben und an Morgen am Meer, an das Meer überhaupt, an Meere, an Reisenächte, die hoch dahinrauschten und mit allen Sternen flogen [. . .] Man muss sie [Erinnerungen] vergessen können, wenn es viele sind, und man muss die grosse Geduld haben, zu warten, dass sie wiederkommen.  
(3: 466-467)

In Rilke's engaging and effusive view of writing, experiencing the unknown and the unexpected, absorbing the unfamiliar through travel account for clearly transformative dynamics that are foundational to the creative process.

Starting in 1970s, a strong attempt to vindicate the poet's cosmopolitanism has been made by Joachim W. Storck, who saw in Rilke's at times exaggerated affinity to Russian culture, the poet's protest against the German ideology of ethnic superiority and Austro-Hungarian imperialism (cited in Tavis, *Rilke's Russia* xvii). A great number of Rilke's contemporaries<sup>30</sup> and quite a few of today's scholars consider(ed) him a post-

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<sup>30</sup> E.g. Paul Valéry states the following in his memoirs about Rilke: "[...] vereinigten sich doch in diesem Sonderfall eines Dichters slawische und deutsche Substanzen; dazu war er mit skandinavischen Gestalten sehr vertraut, auch von französischer Kultur erfüllt. Der Spross einer alten Familie aus einem Landstrich der Adria war ja ehemals Freund und Vertrauter von Rodin gewesen. Aus all diesen Elementen bildete er

Nietzschean and European by pointing to his extensive travels, familiarity with several cultures and proficiency in multiple languages<sup>31</sup>. Rilke's supranational consciousness and openness in matters of culture and national identity is also evident in his letters. In 1920, he writes to Leopold Schlözer that "die offene Welt" was "die einzig mögliche" for him; in a letter Reinhold von Walter from 1921, he makes an even more direct statement saying: "Mir liegt, seit ich denken kann, das Nationale unendlich fern" (cited in Storck 220). Given Rilke's exposure to multiple different cultural environments, his political attitudes and belief in the importance of the first-hand experience of multiple life phenomena, some scholars, such as Volker Dürr and Anna Tavis, suggest that Rilke's subjective image of Russia may entail more than simple replications of Western perceptions and stereotypical notions fashionable at the time.

Depicting contemporary reality objectively as many of Rilke's critics deemed necessary was never the poet's intention. This does not preclude the existence of an acute awareness of and sensitivity to his environment. In Dürr's view, Rilke was driven by a resolution "to accept nothing at face value, but to transform whatever he took up. This radical device, a legacy of Nietzsche's 'revaluation of all values,' determined his conceptions of God, reality, love, life, and death as well as time" (Dürr 2). Employing these key concepts, Rilke's image of Russia was not limited by the Western perception of this Slavic land. Cognizant of Rilke's intense immersion in and resulting familiarity with Russian culture, Anne Tavis restores validity to Rilke's perception of this country:

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sich zu einem wesentlich Europäischen Menschen" (cited in Engel and Lamping 7).

<sup>31</sup> Rilke lived in four countries (Austrian-Hungarian Empire, Germany, France, and Switzerland), traveled through Russia, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, and Italy establishing contacts with important figures within artistic and intellectual circles abroad. He wrote in three languages and translated from eight (Engel and Lamping 7).

[Rilke] had read literature on so broad a range of subjects that most of his evocations of Russia could, in fact, be seen as a form of cultural quotation. Rilke, a poet, allowed himself to represent as much as to invent, to imitate as much as to appropriate the culture he had claimed his own [...]

Subjectivity became Rilke's main virtue. (*Rilke's Russia* xiv-xv)

Conceiving of Rilke as an engaged cultural interpreter, Tavis noticed that the poet "witnessed and chronicled the Russian Revival", a period that was "lost in the historical turmoil of the Russian Revolution and the following years of the Communist state" (*Rilke's Russia* xiv). Also, Tavis explores biographical and textual evidence, including Rilke's actual and symbolic encounters with Russian literary figures between 1898 and 1926, to state Russia's special importance in shaping the poet's aesthetic perception.

### ***Metamorphosis Through Cultural Exchange***

Tavis rightly emphasizes that Rilke's encounter with Russia had a transformative impact on his creative self. In absorbing and appropriating elements of Russian culture, Rilke engaged in acculturation which subsequently changed his creative subjectivity. The term 'cultural appropriation' evokes an association with power and prompts negative connotations which, combined with colonial rule, have been critiqued extensively in a signature work of cultural studies<sup>32</sup>. Discussion of cultural appropriation as a form of seeking cultural dominance can, for instance, be found in the work of Edward Said, the scholar who first theorized 'Orientalism' as a cultural discourse. In his discussion of the

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<sup>32</sup> For a comprehensive review of different types of cultural appropriation including cultural exchange, dominance, and exploitation, see Rogers, Richard A. "From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation." *Communication Theory* 16.4 (2006): 474-503.

Western perceptions of the Arab world, Said states that the process of appropriating cultural elements of the other by western Europeans is to be seen as a rhetoric of western self-fashioning:

The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences [. . .] Perhaps it seemed irrelevant that Orientals themselves had something at stake in the process [of the civil war of 1975-76 in Beirut], that even in the time of Chateaubriand and Nerval Orientals lived there, and that now it was they who were suffering; the main thing for the European visitor was a European representation of the Orient and its contemporary fate. (1)

Rilke, too, has been described as fitting the image of the European observer focused on by Said. Along these lines, addressing the poet's travels to North Africa, Lisa Gates sees Rilke's descriptions of the Egyptian culture as a "projection [. . .] of western consciousness" (64), emphasizing, perhaps too emphatically, that he "invest[ed] the exotic other with qualities of grace and primitive, non-intellectual beauty" (66) and inserted landscapes and people he encountered "into his own cultural matrix" (64). Undeniably, Rilke could not exit from his Western subjectivity, though his openness and willingness to converge in cultural encounters needs to be stressed.

This openness and lack of a dominant cultural stance is evident in Rilke's encounter with Russia that followed its own path of interculturalism. Given Rilke's supranational consciousness, his extensive study of Russian culture, and acquaintance and friendship with Russian people from different social strata, the poet was not prone to

a cultural appropriation of Russia without cognizance of the otherness he encountered. As some recent analyses suggest, cultural appropriation operates on different levels and results in diverse forms and effects.<sup>33</sup> Rilke's relationship to Russian culture is best described in terms of 'transculturation'<sup>34</sup>, i.e. as a process involving a fusion of elements from multiple different cultures and leading to the creation of hybrid cultural concepts and forms.<sup>35</sup> Richard A. Rogers defined 'transculturation' as a process where "cultural elements [are] created from and/or by multiple cultures, such that identification of a single originating culture is problematic" (477)<sup>36</sup>. Importantly, transculturation "is not inherently or necessarily a minority or oppositional theory [. . .] The term applies not only to other colonized or dominated cultures, but [. . .] to dominant ones as well." (Taylor 93). In contrast to other categories of appropriation which "engage entwined pairs of entities"<sup>37</sup>, the concept of transculturation questions the existence of 'pure' cultural forms and is based on the premise that cultural boundaries are not easily definable. They are, "at best, multiple, shifting, and overlapping" (Rogers 491). Appropriations from and by multiple cultures are a continuous, "circular" process that allows for combining and

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<sup>33</sup> Ashley, K., Plesh, V. "The Cultural Processes of "Appropriation". *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 32.1 (2002):1-15. Print. 5-6.

<sup>34</sup> The term 'transculturation' is sometimes used in the secondary literature as equivalent to the concept of 'cultural dominance.' For instance, M. L. Pratt states that 'transculturation' describes "how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture." (6). In comparison, R. A. Rogers defines 'cultural dominance' as "the use of elements of a dominant culture by members of a subordinated culture in a context in which the dominant culture has been imposed onto the subordinated culture, including appropriations that enact resistance." (477)

<sup>35</sup> Transculturation as a concept was firstly theorized by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in 1940 to describe the transformative process a society goes through while acquiring foreign cultural material (Taylor 91).

<sup>36</sup> Rogers cites appropriation of hip-hop music by Native American youth as an example of 'transculturation': "[. . .] musical forms appropriated by the [U.S.] culture industry from urban African American culture (e.g., hip-hop), forms already structured in multiple cultural traditions and matrices of power, are in turn appropriated and localized by Native American youth living on rural reservations" (491).

<sup>37</sup> Cultural exchange involves two equals, cultural dominance and exploitation engage the dominant and the subordinate. These three categories of appropriation are based on the perception of culture as a living organism that "cannot survive radical environmental shifts, loss, and /or replacement of substantial elements, or radical hybridization" (Rogers 491-492).

modifying various elements from several cultures over time. Such ongoing appropriations result in unique cultural products that contain elements creation of which was only possible via combination and blending of multiple cultures.

Following the definition of ‘transculturation’ by Rogers and Taylor, the present analysis uses this term to describe a transformative process, where elements from many cultures, notably Austrian-Bohemian, German, Russian, and French, were combined, fused, and modified in the mind and imagination of Rilke who acts as a free agent in his interculturalism that brings about a convergence of diverse cultural elements in the intercultural communication. Rilke’s encounter with Russian culture is significant since it allowed him to appropriate certain cultural elements in his intercultural efforts that later affected his perception of other cultures and channeled the development of his concept of the universe.

As a poet and a sensitive and perceptive individual, Rilke engaged in transculturation both in his perceptions and imagination<sup>38</sup>. When he first encountered Russia, he was not untraveled and inexperienced in foreign cultures. As a complex human being with a host of experiences and ideas, his inner world was rich and full of perceptions that formed his pre-Russian world view. This inner world then came into contact with what the Russian culture had to offer: new images, ideas, philosophies, and people, from the ordinary to the artists and writers. Naturally, Rilke’s taking in Russian reality was affected by his pre-Russian perceptions. However, the poet’s pre-Russian inner world was subsequently modified by the elements of Russian culture he

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<sup>38</sup> Rilke chose to appropriate certain cultural products but paid less attention to others which implies his active role in the process. By definition, cultural appropriation requires an active involvement of the agent involved in it. The etymology of the word itself underscores the act of taking: the word originates from the Latin verb *appropriare* which translates as “to make one’s own” and consists of two other words: *proprius*, ‘own or personal’ and *ad*, ‘to’ with the notion of ‘rendering to’ (Nelson, Robert S., Shiff, Richard. *Critical Terms for Art History*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1996. Print. 117).

encountered. As Fernando Ortiz points out transculturation “does not only imply the acquisition of culture [...] but it also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of one’s preceding culture, what one could call a partial *disculturation*”<sup>39</sup>. Rilke reflects on the dialectics of acquisition and loss when, in a letter to Elena Voronina from July 27<sup>th</sup>, 1899, he states that German things become more and more foreign to him (“Ich entfremde den deutschen Dingen immer mehr” cited in Azadovskii *Rilke und Rußland* 102), which points to the dual transformational process of transculturation. According to Ortiz, such loss of one’s preceding culture results in the “subsequent creation of new cultural phenomena that one could call *neoculturation*” (cited in Taylor 92). Having fused the elements of Russian culture with his pre-Russian perceptions, Rilke transformed, interculturally, his concepts of the world and self.

While in contemporary culture transculturation is “inescapable” due to a unique set of conditions, such as globalization and transnational capitalism (Rogers 491-492), Rilke actively sought exposure to multiple foreign cultural landscapes. As Rilke was an individual open to experiencing and amalgamating new cultural contexts, while voluntarily remaining largely outside the dominant cultural discourses that surrounded him, his outsider status within his own culture constitutes an intellectual exile. Intellectual discourses on exile often associate this concept with negative aspects, such as alienation, inability to find one’s place in a new cultural context, and even emergence of extreme nationalistic feelings.<sup>40</sup> Edward Said, one of the major theorists of exile, referred to this state as “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place,

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<sup>39</sup> cited in Taylor 91-92; in a letter to Elena Voronina from July 27<sup>th</sup>, 1899, Rilke states that German things become more and more foreign to him, which may be viewed as a form of *disculturation*; he also feels more distant from his culture of origin by acquiring a feeling of belonging, finding his ‘Heimat’ in Russia (letter to Suworin from March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1902).

<sup>40</sup> Said, Edward. “Reflections on Exile.” *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ., 2000. 173-186. Print.



between the self and its true home” which produces “essential sadness [that] can never be surmounted” (*Reflections* 173). Said’s analysis of intellectuals forced into exile due to social and/or political dislocation is applicable here only with significant modification. His discussion on intellectual exile in a “metaphorical sense” is most appropriate in this context. According to Said, “Intellectual exile in the metaphorical sense” refers to an intellectual’s conscious and voluntary decision to remain in the “state of never being fully adjusted, always feeling outside the chatty, familiar world inhabited by natives (so to speak), tending to avoid and even dislike the trappings of accommodation and national well-being” (*Intellectual Exile* 116-117). Such denial of “comforts of privilege, power, being-at-homeness”<sup>41</sup> is viewed by Said as positive since it provides an ability to escape conventional thought and perception patterns. The state of being an intellectual exile allows for a so-called “double perspective”, i.e. it fosters the ability to view objects, ideas and experiences “in terms of what has been left behind and what is actual here and now [...] never seeing things in isolation.” Such juxtaposition of experiences and ideas encourages a different way of looking at them, which is at times unpredictable. Another advantage of being marginalized is gaining a perception that situations are contingent upon each other. They are seen as a “series of historical choices” and not as unchangeable, God-given conditions.

Other scholars, such as Julia Kristeva perceive marginal existence not only as fostering intellectual activity but also as a necessary condition for independent thought: “How can one avoid sinking into the mire of common sense, if not by becoming a stranger to one’s own country, language, sex and identity? Writing is impossible without

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<sup>41</sup> Said, *Intellectual Exile* 121.

some kind of exile”.<sup>42</sup> In concord with Kristeva, Richard Ashley and R. B. Walker see social margins as a fertile ground for intellectual endeavor:

Ambiguity, uncertainty, and the ceaseless questioning of identity – these are resources of the exiles [...] Here, where identity is always in progress and territorial boundaries of modern life are seen to be arbitrarily imposed, the limits authored from one or another sovereign standpoint can be questioned and transgressed, hitherto closed-off cultural connections can be explored, and new cultural resources can be cultivated thereby. Here it becomes possible to explore, generate, and circulate new, often distinctly joyful, but always dissident ways of thinking, doing, and being political<sup>43</sup>.

Rilke found himself on the margins of the dominant culture due to both his wish to do so as well as to some fortuitous circumstances. Born into a family belonging to the elite German-speaking minority in Prague, Rilke was not a typical member of the German intellectual world but rather an “exotic representative of Germany’s Slavic diaspora” (Tavis, *Rilke’s Russia* 31). Such cultural marginality gave him early on a perspective of an outsider and fostered his singular intellectual mobility as he did not become affiliated with any modern artistic movement. Rilke chose to remain in an intellectual exile all his life as he lived in four European countries and traveled extensively within and outside Europe. He wrote in German, Russian, and French and translated from eight different languages. His exile from the land of his childhood was

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<sup>42</sup> Kristeva, Julia. “A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident.” *The Kristeva Reader*. Ed. Toril Moi. New York: Columbia Univ., 1986. 298. Print.

<sup>43</sup> Ashley, Richard and Walker, R.B.J. “Speaking the Language of Exile: Dissident Thought in International Studies.” *International Studies Quarterly* 34 (1990): 259-268. Print. Page 263.

“self-imposed, permanent, and necessary to his existence as a poet.”<sup>44</sup> The necessity of placing oneself outside of the familiar sphere can be traced in Rilke’s writings, such as

*Briefe an einen jungen Dichter*:

Wir sind einsam [...] Wieviel besser ist es aber, einzusehen, dass wir es sind, ja geradezu, davon auszugehen. Da wird es freilich geschehen, dass wir schwindeln; denn alle Punkte, worauf unser Auge zu ruhen pflegte, werden uns fortgenommen, es gibt nichts Nahes mehr, und alles Ferne ist unendlich fern. Wer aus seiner Stube, fast ohne Vorbereitung und Übergang, auf die Höhe eines grossen Gebirges gestellt würde, müßte Ähnliches fühlen [...] aber es ist notwendig, dass wir auch das erleben. Wir müssen unser Dasein so weit, als es irgend geht, annehmen; alles, auch das Ungehörte, muss darin möglich sein. Das ist der einzige Mut, den man von uns verlangt: mutig zu sein zu dem Seltsamsten, Wunderlichsten und Unaufklärbarsten, das uns begegnen kann. (KA 4:541)

### ***Defining Russia as a Space and as a Lived Experience***

The significance of Russia for Rilke cannot be fully appreciated if this country is perceived as a purely physical space with its historical changes and political and social developments. The role of her culture becomes clearer if it is not reduced to a mere product of the poet's imagination. Rilke's work was created and born out of the era of modernity, i.e. in the era defined as the "experience of shock", as "experiences that register as unresolved [...], traumatic experiences that elude memory and cognition"

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<sup>44</sup> Baron, Frank. "Introduction." Rilke, *The Alchemy of Alienation*. Lawrence: The Regence Press of Kansas, 1980. VII. Print.

(Baer [2000] 1)<sup>45</sup>. Rapid urbanization and industrialization, the advance of capitalism, and altering familiar and social life changed the "field of the senses [...] at breakneck speed" (von Alphen 342). Everyday experiences could no longer be made sense of by relying on the familiar world order. In such an unprecedented environment, the concept of space gains a greater significance and serves as a "central category with which to register and track the changes wrought by modernity" (Jaimey Fisher & Barbara Mennel 11). Time lost its place as the prime category against which to record human experience<sup>46</sup>, and the belief in the steady progress of the society over time has been challenged. Both Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer – key figures in theorizing modernity - moved away from the spatial-temporal divide and effectively "spatialized time" (Gregory 234 cited in Fisher & Mennel 11). Kracauer perceived urban spaces as "the materialized unconscious of Germany's rapid modernization" (Fisher & Mennel 12), while Benjamin's work underscored the contribution of space to the formation of cultural and social history (Fisher & Mennel 12). The present analysis proposes a re-definition of Russia as a space employing the theory by Henri Lefebvre, decidedly an opponent of the space-time dichotomy and, by extension, of the subjective-objective divide while proposing an exclusive role for the concept of space.

Lefebvre's theory divides space into three major categories: *spatial practices*, *representations of space*, and *representational spaces* (Lefebvre 38-40). He defines *spatial practices* as mappable spaces or concrete spatial forms as studied in cartography or geography. The term *representations of space* is on the opposite side of the spectrum and is used to describe an imagined or conceptualized space: "Arcane speculation about

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<sup>45</sup> Cited in Modernism, ed. Astradur Eysteinnsson 341.

<sup>46</sup> on the discussion of the importance of time vs. space see Soja 18-20

Numbers, with its talk of the golden number, moduli and ‘canons’, tends to perpetuate this view of matter” (Lefebvre 38). Up until 1960s, spatial discourse has been dominated by these opposite perceptions of space (Soja 18)<sup>47</sup>. Such an approach that juxtaposes the physical and the imagined forms of space also appears dominant in Rilke scholarship. As discussed earlier, Rilke's Russia has more often than not been seen as an imagined place for which Russian physical reality was irrelevant. Hence, Rilke's lack of objectivity and historical accuracy in the depiction and perception of Russia as a physical space has been criticized and too often the poet was accused of having only an imaginary concept of the country and culture. The present analysis places Rilke's Russia in Lefebvre's third spatial category which moves away from the dichotomy of the imagined and the physical. This third spatial category or *representational space* is a combination of the concrete and the imagined: “space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’ [...] This is the dominated – and hence passively experienced – space which the imagination seeks to appropriate and change. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects” (Lefebvre 39). Lefebvre elucidates this concept with the example of the medieval spatial practices. At that time the *representations of space* were heavily influenced by Christianity as well as Aristotelian and Ptolemaic conceptions: the world was divided into the Earth, the underground world, and the Heaven. *Representational spaces*, such as “the village church, graveyard, hall and fields, or the square and the belfry” were “interpretations, sometimes marvellously successful ones, of cosmological representations” (45).

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<sup>47</sup> Besides Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault greatly contributed to retheorizing space with his work “Of Other Spaces” (1986)

A parallel can be drawn to Rilke's Russia. Before his Russian travels, Rilke had an image of the country heavily influenced by Western thought in general and by Lou Andreas-Salomé in particular. The resulting concept constructed its own representation of space. Once he experienced the physical encounter with Russia, Rilke began to transform the construction of a representation of space into a representational space: the hotel where Rilke stayed, teahouses where he met simple Russian people, the art studio of Leonid Pasternak, endless Russian fields, and Leo Tolstoy's estate: all these facets became part of Russia as a representational space in the mind of the poet. His relation to and, hence, perception of Russia had been changed.

Importantly, Rilke's encounter with Russia cannot be equated with some isolated events, locations or with meeting certain people, but must be looked at as a whole experience. Such an experience is twofold: it manifests itself as an immediate objective reality, i.e. as something that an observer is consciously aware of, and it enters the domain of the unconscious. Russia, a new representational space in Rilke's mind, became a part of his *lived experience*<sup>48</sup> in terms of Wilhelm Dilthey's theory. As such, it was not limited to "something perceived or represented" (Dilthey 223) but constituted a reality that "manifest[ed] itself immediately" to the poet. Based on Dilthey, humans are "reflexively aware of [such experience] in its entirety" (224), i.e. it affects an individual on the unconscious level<sup>49</sup> and may have lasting effect on his/her future perceptions. A past lived experience is not to be seen as "something [that] stands over against the experienced state of the present" or exerts an influence on the present (226). Rather,

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<sup>48</sup> Dilthey uses the German term *Erlebnis*

<sup>49</sup> In a letter to Otto Modersohn, 1900, Rilke acknowledged that not all of the Russian memories are readily available to his conscious thought process comparing them to precious textiles locked in a chest: "Als ob ich kostbare Gewebe in Truhen hätte, die ich nicht öffnen kann, weil ungeordnete Tage wie schwere Gefässe auf ihren Deckeln stehen".

“lived experiences are related to each other like motifs in the andante of a symphony: they are unfolded (explication) and what has been unfolded is then recapitulated or taken together (implication)” (227).

The analysis and position developed here does not assume that Rilke’s Russian encounter eliminated all previous perceptions and ideas in the poet’s mind, nor does it claim that all consecutive experiences had no weight in the formation of Rilke’s poetic perception. Rilke’s physical encounter with Russia consisted of multiple experiences related to various aspects of the physical and contemporary reality, such as social injustice, religious practice, but also works of art as manifestations of creative processes. These experiences became mental images and attitudes. They were incorporated into the poet’s perception of the present, became fundamental in forming new lived experiences as the poet himself attested. Dilthey underscored in his theoretical writings that a lived experience “already contains past and future within its consciousness of the present” (225). Lived experiences are not stored in the memory as static constant entities; rather, such memories of lived experiences get incorporated into each other (hence, modified) producing new ways of interpreting and perceiving new situations possible only with this particular set of lived experiences. Stating that Rilke’s encounter with Russia produced an unchanging set of perceptions that lasted the poet’s lifetime would not be fully consistent with Dilthey’s theory. What the present analysis claims is that Rilke’s occupation with Russian culture resulted in a set of lived experiences, memories, perceptions that directed the course of the poet’s later development. Clearly, Rilke’s worldview has been constantly enriched and modified by his post-Russian experiences,

but Russia made a significant contribution to how he approached these new situations and which aspects he perceived as most important.

### ***Holy Icons, Sacred Time, and the Unity of the Opposites***

While Rilke's cultural encounter and its lasting importance in the poet's life have been examined and discussed by many scholars in terms of biographical information, however, the significance of his Russian experience for molding his aesthetics and creative process from the early to the later works has hardly been investigated. The vast majority of scholarly works exploring Rilke's exposure to and involvement with Russia are biographical works<sup>50</sup>. Others focus primarily on direct references to Russian culture in Rilke's writings<sup>51</sup> – allusions, themes, motifs, and philosophical attitudes, – while again others address Rilke's encounters with particular members of the Russian literary world. All these works offer significant contributions to the analysis of Rilke's Russian encounter, but they usually attempt to find a direct correlation between the poet's work and his personal experience. The limitations<sup>52</sup> of these approaches are noteworthy as these studies usually do not venture beyond certain simplifications, namely the equation of biography and literary meaning. They fail to grasp Rilke's complex relationship to Russian culture and the transformative impact his encounter had on his poetic subjectivity and development as a metamorphosing poet.

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<sup>50</sup> Prater, Brutzer.

<sup>51</sup> E.g. Brodsky, Tavis, Reshetylo-Rothe.

<sup>52</sup> For instance, Victor Ehrlich argued that “what may seem on the surface to be a reflection of psychic reality may at closer range turn out to be an aesthetic formula superimposed on this reality; the whatever experience [...] finds expression in poetry is always formed or deformed in line with the exigencies of the given poetic genre” (135); Roland Barthes in his famous essay *The Death of the Author* states that “to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing”.



There are few studies in Rilke scholarship, mainly articles and parts of book chapters, which explore the poet's experience of Russian reality and cultural heritage addressing the life-long, fundamental changes this encounter produced in Rilke and his work. A review of these pieces of analysis reveals that they tend to revolve around two aspects of Russian culture; scholars either concentrate on the significance of the Russian religious art, or they debate a possible influence of Russian philosophical and literary works on Rilke's worldview but, on the whole, they do not further a comprehensive view of the significance of the Russian encounter for the poet's transformation and development.

### *The Russian Icon*

There is no consensus among the scholars regarding the significance of any single aspect of Russian culture for Rilke. For example, the Russian Orthodox icon has been attributed a wide spectrum of possible influences on Rilke ranging from lacking any significance through being an object capable of expressing his poetic method through triggering the transformation of the poet's worldview. Karl Webb draws attention to the fact that Rilke was an ardent adherent of *Jugendstil* prior to his involvement with Russian culture. This scholar points out that Rilke's *Stundenbuch* and *Das Buch der Bilder*, i.e. works that directly address the Russian subject contain features reminiscent of *Jugendstil*, such as “ornate and decorative style” (248), “overwhelming concern for creative inspiration” (249), and an artist figure who “dwells in solitude”, is pale, and whose “means of communication is based solely on his “Fühlen” and “Sinnen” (252). Stating that Russia was not “the exclusive or even predominant force” that shaped Rilke's

thinking, Webb concludes that the Russian influence on Rilke's work cannot be analyzed without taking the poet's experience with *Jugendstil* into consideration:

Rilke was not exclusively and irretrievably altered by his exposure to Russian culture, nor did he separate himself from his past frame of reference. Rather [...] he absorbed the new influences by means of the old frame of reference so that [...] his perception of Russia and her art were always distinctly colored by the art and theories of the *Jugendstil*. (249-250)

Webb's opinion is counterbalanced by quite a few scholarly studies which view the Russian religious experience including the icon as leaving an indelible mark on the young Rilke. Researchers such as August Stahl, Daria Reshetylo-Rothe, and Bisserka Raceva see a link between the icon and a certain poetic technique which permeates Rilke's work written after his Russian travels. Like the Russian monk from Rilke's *Das Stunden-Buch* who painted to “conceal his God rather than to reveal Him” and the iconostasis that physically separates the altar, i.e. the seat of God from the people in the Russian churches, Rilke chose to omit important points of reference from his poems (Reshetylo-Rothe xiii-xiv). By doing this, he removes his works from immediate life experience and adds a new degree of complexity. In a way, Rilke makes a choice similar to that of the Russian icon painters. Realizing that much cannot be reflected by words or images alone, he decides to place certain constraints on his ways of expression:

[Das Regelsystem der Ikonenmalerei] ist ihm [Rilke] ein hilfreicher Formenschatz und zugleich ein Zwang zum Verzicht [. . .] auf eine unangemessene Annäherung an das Heilige und unangemessene (und

schließlich auch unmögliche) Festlegung des Göttlichen [. . .] Sein Stilwille, der davon ausging, daß vieles, nicht nur das Göttliche, sondern auch wesentliche menschliche Erfahrungen, daß vieles unaussprechlich sei und allenfalls andeutungsweise und symbolisch anzurufen, fand in den Ikonen mit ihrem Stil des Verzichts eine Bestätigung eigener Positionen [. . .] Beispielweise ist dann die Ikone als Form der Vergegenwärtigung des Abwesenden (*présence absente*) und als Raum auch für die schöperische Sehnsucht. (Stahl 87-89)

The presence and celebration of such an icon-inspired poetic technique has been traced by Bisserka Raceva in one of Rilke's later works, the "Twentieth Sonnet" (*Sonnets to Orpheus*). Her article offers a new reading of this work that interprets the depicted image of a galloping horse "nicht mehr als erinnerte Begebenheit, sondern eher als dichterisches Sublimat dessen, was die Projektion vom 'auserwählten Land' [i.e. Russia] für Rilkes Dichtkunst erbracht hat" (227). Persuasively arguing that the process of poetic creation and the attainment of a perfect "image" in Rilkean sense, i.e. achievement of a poet's self-fulfillment are celebrated in the poem, Raceva states that Rilke's late poetry harks back to his Russian experience with regard to his construction of poetic language (217). Since the stallion image depicted in the sonnet is being celebrated as the ultimate poetic achievement, the manner how the language is used in this work is to be seen as an approximation of the ideal way of expression. Raceva elucidates the similarity between the perception Rilke's sonnet seeks to evoke and the religious experience enabled by looking at an icon. Both Rilke's language and the Russian religious painting communicate

a message beyond their standard means, i.e. a description and a depicted image of a saint respectively:

Der zentrale Begriff ihrer selbstreflektierten Machart [Rilkes Sprache im Sonett] ist der des Erinnerns; er bezieht sich also nicht primär auf die Sprache. Ihre eigentlichen Implikationen sind grundsätzlich Zeitliches und Subjektives. Sprache vermag aber bekanntlich temporale Bezüge nicht unvermittelt auszudrücken. Das Medium des Erinnerns soll andererseits ein Anschauliches, ein „Bild“ sein, das heißt räumliche und imaginative Bezüge herstellen, die den sprachlichen Ausdrucksmitteln geradewegs zugänglich sind. So bestimmt sich die Machart des Gedichts als ein Verwandeln des Räumlichen in Zeitliches. Was mit sprachlichen Mitteln erzeugt wird, behauptet sich selbst als ein über die eigentliche Ausdruckskraft der Sprache Hinausgreifendes. (221)

More recent research, such as Jennifer Cushman's analysis reveals a possible connection between the Russian Orthodox perception of religious images, including the color symbolism, and a greater emphasis in Rilke's poetry of the post-Russian period on the visual as opposed to object descriptions. Comparing Rilke's poem "Zauber" from his *Larenopfer*, which was written before the poet's Russian involvement, and his *Stundenbuch*, Cushman notes:

The declamatory wall of the Romantic old house gives way to the "Sobor", or Russian cathedral walls which, rather than merely "tell" the scene to the poet, in the western Christian manner, now *show* their meaning through the "Gestalten" of Orthodox icons from which they

themselves “wachsen” [. . .] Rilke [. . .] used the spiritual blue to evoke rather than describe the holiness of Mary. (91-92)

It has also been suggested that the influences of the Russian icon go beyond shaping Rilke's poetic technique. For instance, Cushman links Rilke's insistence on “the reader's responsibility to contemplate, reach revelation, and transform his or her life” to the demands placed by the Russian Orthodox liturgy on the congregation of believers (104). Likewise, Erika Greber argues that the Russian Orthodox experience of viewing an icon served as a trigger in the development of Rilke's concept of the “empty middle space” (“der leeren Mitte”), i.e. a space that requires a reader/observer to actively engage with an object and co-create a meaning. Since many of the Russian Orthodox icons are centuries old and have been darkened by the smoke and soot coming from the candles over the years, images that they depict are often hard to see. The bright ‘oklad’, i.e. a frame made from either gold or silver that covers the whole image except for the face and hands, contrasts the dark painting and makes it even harder to recognize. Due to this (and according to Rilke), Russian Orthodox believers must create their own image of what the icon is supposed to represent: “Bei Rilke heißt der leere russische Ort: hohle Ikone, leeres Oval. Die vorsätzliche Evakuierung des Raums dient einer imaginativen Fülle, einer Zunahme möglicher Bedeutungsproduktion” (Greber 184). The encounter between a believer and God does not occur within the icon or in the profane space; it happens in a “space in between”.

Cushman also sees a connection between Rilke's late poetry, i.e. *Duineser Elegien*, and the spirituality and aesthetics of the Russian Orthodox in the transcendence of objective reality. Like the Dormition/Assumption icons, which portray death as rebirth,

fuse grief and joy, and hence “sustain paradoxes of space and time”, Rilke's *Elegies* “transcend the boundaries of the delineated world and break down the border between external and internal reality” (100).

Moving away from the icons per se, yet still referring to Rilke's perception of the Russian religious experience, Raceva argues that Russia could have laid the foundation to Rilke's concept of time. The duality of the profane, i.e. linear and the “sacred”, i.e. detached from the historical progression of time is seen by scholars, such as Anthony Stephens and Raceva, as an inseparable part of Rilke's work. Raceva points out that in contrast to Rilke's early aesthetics, where “sacred” time is understood as “eine vom Kunstschaffenden ausgehende Unterbrechung des kontinuierlichen Geschichtsablaufs im Kunstwerk und durch das Kunstwerk”, his later aesthetics aims at the transposition of linear time into the realm of the “sacred” (223). Taking these modifications in Rilke's aesthetics in consideration, Raceva underscores the continuity in the poet's perception of time as dualistic. She brings to attention that Rilke first defines the essential elements of “sacred” time when he discusses Russian cultural history in his essay *Russische Kunst* (1900):

Seine Reflexionen über Rußland kennzeichnen weit weniger das Land selbst als vielmehr den eigensinnigen Entwurf eines überzeitlichen, autonomen Geisteslebens [ . . . ] [Russland ist] das Idealbild einer Entwicklung, die sich im Gegensatz zur linearen Zeit vollzieht und in der alle Zeitdimensionen, einschließlich der biblischen, zugleich gegenwärtig sind. (223)

The ability of this country to develop independently from the historical timeline is closely connected in Rilke's mind with the spiritual potential of its “vorigottesken Volkes” (Rilke *Russische Kunst* 4:154), i.e. its people that possesses intact communion with God and spontaneous ability to artistically create. Not only Russia as a space but also its people are perceived by Rilke as belonging to the realm of “sacred” time: “Dank seiner unverschütteten Gottesnähe wie seiner eingeborenen künstlerischen Veranlagung ist der russische Mensch nicht der seiende und nicht der vergangene”, sondern “der dauernde, ewige, *immer mögliche* wunderbare Mensch” (Raceva 224). A Russian person as the embodiment of an inherently artistic, deeply religious individual simultaneously unaffected by the passage of time also serves as a link between artistry and the state of being beyond time. According to Raceva, this image lays the foundation of the artist concept in Rilke's early aesthetics where the artist is perceived as “Mittler zwischen Zeitlichkeit, Ewigkeit und Transzendenz” (226).

It can be added to Raceva's discussion that Rilke's reflections on Russia and Russian people are reminiscent of the poet's belief that objects, including true works of art are capable of enabling an individual to transcend the reality and find the passageway to the higher forms of existence. The state of being beyond time and close to the Essential Being, which Rilke thought was encouraged by Russian culture, is captured in quite a few of his poems, such as *Blaue Hortensie* (1906), *Römische Sarkophage* (1919), and *Archaischer Torso Apollos* (1908).<sup>53</sup> Described in the secondary literature as ‘epiphany’, albeit not in Christian terms, this state constitutes “die Erscheinung des Göttlichen unter den Menschen“ and “eine Überhöhung des Realen, wobei [. . .] die Durchbrechung der empirisch-konventionellen Wirklichkeit [stattfindet]” (Müller 304). Clearly, Rilke saw

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<sup>53</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Müller 304-305/

the experience of epiphany as an integral part of the existence of Russian people due to their harmonious relationship with God and their past. Consequently, they served as a living example of experiencing this state and potentially encouraged Rilke to develop and/or elaborate on the modern concept of epiphany<sup>54</sup>.

*The Russian "Prophets": Rilke's Encounter of Russian Literary and Philosophical Thought*

As indicated above, Rilke's comprehensive study of Russian literature and his many personal encounters with members of the Russian literary scene have been well-researched. However, like the research on how Rilke embraced Russian religious art, scholarly opinions on the poet's attitudes towards Russian literary and philosophical thought and their significance for his work differ greatly. Out of the large number of Russian writers whose work Rilke occupied himself with, only two received considerable scholarly attention in conjunction with their potential influence on Rilke's development as a poet: Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky.

The vast majority of scholars who have explored the question of possible influences which Tolstoy could have had on Rilke's worldview and poetic perceptions conclude that the encounter with this great Russian writer remained insignificant. Citing Rilke's letter to Herman Pongs from the 21<sup>st</sup> of October, 1924, where the poet discusses his differences with Tolstoy, Azadovskii concludes that any attempt to find traces of direct influence of Tolstoy's work on Rilke will inevitably remain "fruitless" (97). A similar conclusion is reached by Butler who claims that "the revelation of the tormented soul of Tolstoy bore no poetical fruit" (*Rilke and Tolstoy* 221). The analysis by Anna

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<sup>54</sup> Müller mentions that a similar concept of epiphany can be found in the works of other modern authors, such as Joyce, Woolf, Hofmannsthal, and Broch (304).



Tavis (*Rilke's Russia*) still leans in the direction of denying Tolstoy any lasting impressions on the young poet, but it expresses a thought that this Russian writer served as a stepping stone in forming Rilke's concept of the artist. Compared to Rodin and Cézanne, who encouraged Rilke's conversion "from the Russian model of 'art for life's sake' to the French model of 'art for art's sake'" (86), Tolstoy's significance is to be seen as a "starting point in his [Rilke's] career" (87). On the other side of the spectrum is a thorough analysis by Ada Berezina that proposes a deeper interaction between Rilke's worldview that constantly gained in complexity after his encounter with Tolstoy. Similarly to other authors writing about Rilke's encounter with Tolstoy<sup>55</sup>, Berezina stresses that Rilke's attitude towards Tolstoy's ideas and Tolstoy as a person was extremely multifaceted ranging from admiration to complete rejection. However, in contrast to other scholars, Berezina sees Rilke's both positive and negative attitudes towards Tolstoy as productive for his maturation. This encounter supplied the young poet with certain philosophical reflections he chose to embrace modifying some of them to a greater and some to a lesser degree. Among such ideas Berezina names Tolstoy's thoughts about the necessity and ability to receive "one's own death", without fear, only after living "one's own life" as an ethical individual<sup>56</sup> that possesses integrity and the Russian's uncompromising denial of the religious dogma coupled with his perception of faith as an ethical foundation (126-127). She also gives Rilke's familiarity with Tolstoy's

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<sup>55</sup> E.g. Anna Tavis' book chapter "The Predicament of Influence: Rilke and Tolstoy"

<sup>56</sup> Rebecca M. Painter expresses a similar thought comparing Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* and Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. She states that both works place emphasis on sustaining personal integrity in spite of living in the uprooted modern environment: "They [Malte and Ivan] point to the inner reality that we must cope with most acutely these days, when the authority of church, state, objective reason, and societal tradition is no longer the guiding light of personal growth and fulfillment [...] Perhaps their essential message lies in the power of caring for the quiet signals of personal conscience amidst the barrage of loud, distracting directives bombarding our senses daily in a world where we are busy merely with coping" (189-190).

work credit for “saving” the young poet from the “extremes of the decadent worldview”, i.e. for encouraging him to preserve the connection between life and art (92). The fact that Tolstoy’s image and his work served as a contradictory way of living and thinking provoked Rilke to articulate his own ideas, as, for instance, about art, and pushed him to turn to deeper philosophical questions (99).

Similarly to Tolstoy, the significance of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s work for molding Rilke’s worldview started to be explored back in the 1930s. It produced a wide range of opinions and conclusions. Working with a vast amount of previously unpublished biographical material, Sophie Brutzer<sup>57</sup> draws attention to Rilke’s diary and his letters, where he expresses his admiration for the Russian writer. Brutzer also states – without developing her argument or supporting it with concrete examples, – that parts of Rilke’s *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, such as the story of Nikolai Kusmitsch, “[sind] ohne Dostojewski nicht zu denken”<sup>58</sup> and credits Dostoevsky and his *Poor People* with providing a prototype for Rilke’s idea of the genuine Russian (46-47). Such a favorable evaluation of Dostoevsky’s role is not shared by Lilly Zarncke, a contemporary of Brutzer. After conducting a somewhat superficial comparison of Rilke’s and Dostoevsky’s ideas presumably expressed in their work, this scholar concludes that Rilke’s high regard for Dostoevsky can be explained in the same manner as his admiration for Russia: “Er hat im wesentlichen nicht Neues aufgenommen, sondern er hat sich selbst, seine eigene innere Welt in Rußland bestätigt gefunden [...] Diese Art [...] wird auch hinter seiner Begeisterung für Dostojewskij stehen [. . .] (111)” Not

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<sup>57</sup> I am referring to her dissertation *Rilkes russische Reisen* written in 1934

<sup>58</sup> Later research, as for instance, Crowhurst, Griselids W. “Malte Laurids Brigge, Nikolaj Kuzmitsch und die Trägheit der Materie.” *Acta Germanica* 8 (1973): 101-16, do not mention any connection between this episode from Rilke’s novel and Dostoevsky; Frederick Garber mentions in his article “Time and the City in Rilke’s *Malte Laurids Brigge*” (1970) that the Kusmitsch episode is “obviously influenced by Dostoevsky’s *Double*” (332) but does not explain in which sense.

Dostoevsky's work but Rilke's projection of his own ideas onto this writer are seen by Zarncke as the key to understanding Rilke's appreciation of the Russian author. More recent research, such as studies conducted by Temira Pachmuss (1978) and Lada Syrovatko (2001) are more in agreement with Brutzer's conclusions. Having conducted a thorough comparison of Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen* and Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, Pachmuss concludes that "the influence of Dostoevskii's ideas and narrative technique is evident" (*Dostoevskii and Rainer Maria Rilke* 400). Such influence is palpable across the following parameters: both authors reveal the inner world of their heroes via depicting the outward signs of their inner state (399); they both insist on avoiding the exclusive reliance on reason and on embracing one's intuitive faculties; and they stress the importance of perceiving human suffering as "one of the mysteries of God's Creation" through which a person "reaches truth and spiritual happiness" (400-401). Speaking about a broader influence of Russia on Rilke<sup>59</sup>, Pachmuss states that Rilke received an essential message via this cultural encounter: "[...] that the world of finite experience should not be rejected, but transformed and transfigured by man's spirit becoming pervaded with the spirit and universal compassion" (393). This scholar elucidates that the thought of such "organic unity" of the material and spiritual becomes of paramount importance to Rilke and is present even in his latest work, such as *Duineser Elegien* and *Sonette an Orpheus*. Syrovatko reveals similarity in the aesthetics of the two authors. Like Rilke, who rejected the value of any well-structured and -formulated philosophical theory due to its vulnerability of becoming a dogma and being exploited and misinterpreted, Dostoevsky never formulated his thoughts as abstract ideas. Rather, he conveyed them via depicting their expressions, i.e. their consequences in his works, as

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<sup>59</sup> including the work of Dostoevsky

N.N. states: “Das Geistige (“Idee”) materialisiert sich, nimmt Gestalt an, das Vernünftige wird ästhetisch, das Abstrakte wird als Bild konkretisiert” (60-61). Syrovatko briefly mentions the similarity between such “Idee-Gefühl” and Rilke's understanding of how the image of a thing (“Ding”) gradually forms within an individual. Likewise is the organic development of Rilke's “Ding-Bild”, “Idee-Gefühl”, das sich auf ein Schönheitsideal [of Christ and Madonna] stützt und ‚nicht in Worten ausgedrückt werden kann‘, wird im Menschen ‚organisch‘ reifen, wird von ihm ‚erlebt’” (62-63).

In addition to philosophical ideas that Rilke could have gleaned from reading Russian literary works, some Rilke research noticed similarities between the poet's worldview and the thoughts of some leading Russian philosophers, such as Vladimir Solovyov and Nikolai Berdyaev<sup>60</sup>. Rilke was skeptical about philosophy in general as he expressed unequivocally in a letter to Alexander Benois from the 28<sup>th</sup> of July 1901:

Ich [. . .] habe jede Philosophie, so sie mir begegnete, wie eine Dichtung behandelt, mit zu viel ästhetischem Bedürfnis und zu wenig Fanatismus und Gewissenhaftigkeit [. . .] Wo aus der philosophischen Entwicklung eines einzelnen ein System erwächst, da habe ich das fast betrübende Gefühl einer Beschränkung, einer Absichtlichkeit und versuche jedesmal den Menschen dort zu finden, wo die Fülle seiner Erfahrungen noch unzusammengefaßt und gesondert sich auslebt, nicht beeinträchtigt durch die Beschränkungen und Zugeständnisse, welche jede systematische Einordnung verlangt. (cited in Azadovskii *Rilke und Russland* 293)

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<sup>60</sup> Scholars also discuss how Rilke's ideas differ from the theories of Russian philosophers. For instance, Robert Andelson points out that Rilke and Berdyaev differ in their understanding of the nature of the creative act.

'The metaphysics of love' (Pachmuss 393) is one aspect of the Russian philosophical thought that has been discussed in conjunction with Rilke's poetic development. Pachmuss briefly mentions that Rilke's *Duineser Elegien* and *Sonnette an Orpheus* contain ideas which closely resemble the message of Vladimir Solovyov, Dostoevsky, and Hippius; this message revolves around the "brotherhood and fellowship in God", i.e. the idea of embracing one's community and transforming it through love. This connection is explored to a greater extent in a recent dissertation (2011) by Ia Pachomova. Her analysis compares and contrasts the concept of love present in Rilke's creative output with a cultural discourse about this topic among the Russian intelligentsia of the "Silver Age". Pachomova reveals that akin to Rilke's work and in contrast to Freudian ideas popular in the West, love is perceived by such Russian philosophers as Vladimir Solovyov and Nikolai Berdyaev as the possibility of closeness to God, as an ethical and spiritual betterment, as enabling creative output and development. For both philosophers, love is greater than a personal feeling: for Solovyov, love equals joining with the "world soul", while Berdyaev thought that a human (microcosm) is connected with the macrocosm through love. Pachomova compares these ideas to Rilke's image of an ideal beloved that never existed as a concrete woman but encompassed the perception of nature's beauty, the feeling of belonging to the cosmic creation and the pleasure of being artistically productive. Hence, love is perceived in all cited sources as a door to a better awareness and a deeper understanding of the world and as an invaluable experience for artistic development and creativity. Yet another similarity lies in the perception that true love can only exist when joined by mutual respect of each other's freedom.

Pachomova points out that in Russian literature and philosophical thought the experience of love is always perceived as positive and valuable even when this feeling remains unrequited. Drawing a parallel to Rilke's "große Liebende", she states that "in the West, the fulfilled love has been celebrated: Abelard and Heloise, Tristan and Isolde, Franzeska and Paolo, Romeo and Juliet, Faust and Gretchen, while in Russian literature the archetype of love is set by Pushkin's Tatiana<sup>61</sup>... Unfulfilled love is satiated with spiritual Eros, it exists as an eternal wound in Tatiana's heart, in Onegin's soul - and in this shared pain and godly unhappiness they belong to each other" (80).

### ***Goal of the Thesis***

Considering the previous discussion on Rilke's Russian encounter in scholarship and employing the above-mentioned theoretical frameworks, this study is focused on Russia as a complex experience of the cultural other for Rilke. This study does not define Russia as a purely physical space or as a mere product of the poet's imagination. It also avoids the dichotomy of the subjective-objective divide. Subsequently, the discussion of whether Rilke's perceptions and depictions of Russia were 'objective' or merely 'subjective' is replaced by a different consideration. Rilke's Russian encounter calls for a supportive theoretical framework. Considering the impossibility of storing accurate images of objective reality in memory and employing the theory of space by Henry Levebvre, the present analysis defines Russia as a *representational space*, i.e. a space that Rilke directly experienced not only via its physical presence but also via images,

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<sup>61</sup> Onegin denies Tatiana's love after she expresses her feelings to him in a letter. Only later, after she marries another man, does he realize that he truly loves her. During their last conversation, Tatiana admits that she still is in love with Onegin but refuses to break the bond of marriage or become unfaithful to her husband.

symbols, and discourses associated with it. As Levebvre's theory indicates, physically living in a space affects a person's perception of it and cannot be equated with mere products of this person's imagination. Rilke's extensive travels in Russia, which encompassed not only Moscow and St. Petersburg but many other cities and regions, clearly modified his image and understanding of this country. Importantly, Rilke's study of Russia was not limited to Western representations of this culture. Essential for the poet was his extensive study of Russian visual arts and literature, his mastering of the Russian language, becoming acquainted with and befriending many Russians of different walks of life and, finally, exploring many diverse areas within Russia. These significant and transformative encounters with Russia as a cultural space constitute Rilke's *lived experience*. As theorized by Wilhelm Dilthey, a *lived experience* refers to an immediate manifestation of reality to an individual which changes him/ her also on the subconscious level.

The present analysis does not equate Rilke's Russian experience with isolated events, specific locations, or the poet's acquaintance with particular people. Rather it proposes to view the poet's encounter with this culture as an extremely multifaceted and transformative experience which encompasses images and sound as well as the encounter of the other both in the physical and imaginary domain. Possessing a supranational consciousness and being a well-travelled, very perceptive and sensitive individual, Rilke clearly escaped the mindset later criticized by the theories of Orientalism. Rather, he engaged in the process of transculturation fusing in his mind and imagination his previously acquired perceptions and concepts with the elements of Russian culture. As the poet attested himself, his Russian encounter deeply affected both his creative and

individual persona. As some studies indicate, Russian long-lasting contributions are evident in Rilke's poetic technique of omitting important points of reference, his perception of time, and his emphasis on the necessity of co-creating a meaning when coming in touch with a work of art. Rilke the artist is also indebted to Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy, whose philosophies he engaged.

As the present analysis traces the formation and the development of Rilke's attitudes towards the essence and the mission of the artist, social injustice, and the human community enabled by the presence of God and united by love, it assesses the experience of Russia as a vital component. Of great importance in this regards are: Rilke's pre- and post-Russian biographical information, his creative output and theoretical writings within the framework of transculturation theory as well as the concepts of lived experience and representational space.



## Chapter 2 Russia's Role in the Metamorphosis of Rilke's Poverty Concept

Rilke oeuvre reflects a careful choice of themes with a penchant for topics that related to his concept of life. Parker (276) states: "Rilke's themes [...] were determined by his answers to the Modernist quest toward a new meaningful totality of life, which he saw in a fragile harmony between the world of tangible objects and the world of the unspeakable"<sup>62</sup>. According to this statement, Rilke's answer to finding a new harmony is to some degree informed by his perception of social injustice. He engaged himself with the theme of poverty from early on addressing it throughout the years in many of his works and depicting its many variations. In Rilke's mind and imagination, Russia served as the positive alternative to the declining, inconsonant Western civilization. Consequently, his image of poverty, which he saw as a facet of life's totality, was informed by the impressions left by Russian destitution and the Russian discourses about it. This chapter focuses on defining Rilkean concept of poverty, tracing its transformation via comparison of his early and late works and exploring the role of his Russian experiences in this process.

Paris is usually perceived as the location where Rilke "began to experience a poverty that does not necessarily lead to spirit" (Bly 11). The encounter with urban destitution in the French capital has been viewed by scholars as the main impetus for Rilke's addressing social injustice in his works as evidenced in his writing during that time:

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<sup>62</sup> *Who's Who in Twentieth-Century World Poetry*

Closely beneath the surface of these strangely celebratory reflections on poverty and death [in *Das Stundenbuch*] lie, of course, the very real incidents that brought such poems to the fore in Rilke: the horrors the poet experienced during his first months in Paris, when he had sunk particularly low in his never-ending financial crisis and was forced to live among the poorest and sickest. (Bruhn 25)

However, regarding Rilke's stay in Paris as the single eye-opening experience that encouraged him to write about poverty neglects the poet's involvement with this topic in years prior to the Paris stay. Also, Paris was not the first and only city in Rilke's life where the poor were subjected to extremely deteriorated living conditions. Bohemian Prague and the two Russian metropolises, Moscow and St. Petersburg, deserve special attention. The years of Rilke's visits to Russia – 1899 and 1900 – were a very turbulent time for this country, marked by overpopulation and resulting social problems: rapid industrialization, urbanization, and extreme contrasts in the living conditions of different social classes. Land shortage, financial burdens on the peasants in the form of redemption debts<sup>63</sup> and indirect taxation<sup>64</sup> coupled with primitive methods of cultivation produced stagnation in agriculture and forced people to leave the villages and seek any form of work and usually inferior habitat in the industrializing cities (Seton-Watson 109)<sup>65</sup>.

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<sup>63</sup> After the abolition of serfdom in 1861, peasant became free citizens and could purchase land from the landowners' estates. "The State advanced the money to the landlords, and recovered from peasants fixed annual sums. This became known as the "redemption payments" (Seton-Watson 43). The prices of land at the time of Reform were considerably lower than the amount of money peasants were required to pay.

<sup>64</sup> At the turn of the century, taxation was the principal form of government revenue in the Russian Empire. The poorest class suffered under it the most since taxes were placed on the items consumed by the whole population (Seton-Watson 109).

<sup>65</sup> Rilke, in spite of his emphasis on the spirituality of the Russian village, cannot help noticing its destitution. In the letter to Sophia Schill from 29<sup>th</sup> of August 1900, he writes: "Glauben Sie nicht, hochverehrte Sofija Nikolaewna, daß ich die dörflische Lebensweise idealisiere; ich weiß wohl, dort gibt es viel Kummer und Not [...]" (cited in Azadovskii *Rilke und Russland* 190).

Employment in the factories, especially in the metallurgical area in St. Petersburg and in the textile region around Moscow were common options. Yet joining the emerging class of industrial workers did not fulfill the hopes of the dislocated peasants, as is indicated by multiple strikes at the factories. About 1000 strikes which engaged 430 000 workers have been registered in the years 1900-1904 alone (Orlov 315)<sup>66</sup>. In spite of several concessions to labor in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, such as reducing the length of the work day to 11.5 hours in July 1897 or forbidding labor of children under 12 in 1882, “the general trend of government policy was hostile to the workers and supported employers” (Seton-Watson 126). For instance, employers could receive a special permission from the Ministry of Finance which allowed them to avoid adhering to the abovementioned reforms. As compared to the Western European industrial workers at the turn of the century, Russian people had the lowest wages, the longest work day (11-14 hours), and the most unfavorable living conditions (Orlov 314).

The constant influx of people to Moscow and St. Petersburg produced a housing crisis. Historian Walter Moss concisely summarizes the state of living accommodations the lower class had access to in the Russian Empire at the turn of the century:

[...] the poor lived in factory dormitories, slums, or attics or basements of buildings whose other occupants were better off. As migrants streamed into the big cities and housing became more scarce, the practice of renting out small corners of rooms, often in basements, became increasingly common. By 1900, about one-sixth of Moscow’s population lived in such corners. The conditions were similar in St. Petersburg. (121)

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<sup>66</sup> One of the largest demonstrations took place on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1900 in Charkov, in the same month as Rilke’s second visit to Russia.

Misery of the city poor, especially of those who lived in St. Petersburg, has been captured by such authors as Fyodor Dostoevsky and Nikolai Nekrasov<sup>67</sup>. Both authors have been poverty-stricken for a number of years and experienced Russian urban destitution first-hand. Precise literary illustrations of the poor living conditions at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century can be gleaned from Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, where his main protagonist Raskolnikov lives in a "tiny cupboard of a room" that was "so low-pitched that a man of more than average height was ill at ease in it and felt every moment that he would knock his head against the ceiling" (15). Dostoevsky also notes unsanitary conditions<sup>68</sup> and moral deterioration of the overcrowded urban dwellings<sup>69</sup>. A representative example of the poor visible on the city streets comes from Dostoevsky's novel *The Insulted and Injured*<sup>70</sup>:

It was a small, thin little girl, not more than seven or eight, dressed in filthy rags; she wore torn shoes on her little bare feet. She was struggling to cover her shivering little body with a sort of ancient semblance of a tiny jacket, long outgrown. Her pale, sickly, wasted little face was turned

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<sup>67</sup> E.g. in his essay "The Petersburg Corners", which is a part of a larger essay collection *Petersburg: the Physiology of a City* focused on the living conditions in St. Petersburg in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: "The yard itself was absolutely filthy. A puddle had gathered at the gate. It had spilled into the yard, joined forces with the puddles that were standing at each and every door [...] two pigs and a dog were busy digging holes [...] the periphery of the yard seemed higher than the middle [...] since it was made up of mounds of garbage, poured (or thrown down) from the windows by the residents who lived there" (131-133).

<sup>68</sup> The following depictions of St. Petersburg comes from *Crime and Punishment*: "[...] the airlessness [...] and dust all about him [Raskolnikov], and that special Petersburg stench, so familiar to all who are unable to get out of town in summer [...] The insufferable stench from the pot-houses, which are particularly numerous in this part of town, and the drunken men whom he met continually, although it was a working day [...]" (2).

<sup>69</sup> For instance, in *Poor Folk*, Dostoevsky's protagonist Makar Devushkin, who is renting a kitchen corner in St. Petersburg, says: "[...] hardened though I am, it astonishes me that men with families should care to live in this Sodom" (16).

<sup>70</sup> Another available translation of the novel is *Humiliated and Insulted*. Trans. Ignat Avsey. Alma Books, 2012. Print.

towards us; she looked timidly and mutely at us, and with a look of resigned dread of refusal held out her trembling little hand to us. (57)

In 1899, Russian industry entered the period of depression which exacerbated already unfavorable conditions for the factory workers (Seton-Watson 129).

Exposure to the urban filth, uneasiness, and destitution of Moscow and especially St. Petersburg did not go unnoticed by an observant Rilke. While spiritual life of the Moscow-dwellers took precedence over other aspects of city life in Rilke's eyes, his experience of St. Petersburg was far less positive and evoked the feeling of fatigue; life and any purpose seemed senseless in this city that gave the feeling of restlessness. The unpleasant impressions left by St. Petersburg on Rilke can be gleaned from his letters. In May of 1899, Rilke writes to Hugo Salus: "The nights become uneasy and sleepless, and maintain a secret gleam, which is the bridge from day to day. And there is an activity in everything that won't allow itself to rest" (Brodsky 194). About a year later, in August 1900, he confirms his dislike of the city to Lou Andreas-Salomé:

It was inexpressibly frightful to live these days [...] after this unexpected and hurried departure and with the most hostile impressions of this heavy city [...] You can't believe how long the days can be in St. Petersburg. And yet not much can be fit into them. Life here is a continual being-underway, under which all goals suffer. One goes, goes, drives, drives, and wherever one arrives, the first impression is that of one's own tiredness (cited in Brodsky 194).

A few years later, in 1908, a poem dedicated to St. Petersburg appears in Rilke's *Der neuen Gedichte anderer Teil*. This poem titled *Nächtliche Fahrt* does not contain any

naturalistic imagery of the city life, but it precisely captures the oppressive feeling left by St. Petersburg on its visitor. Reminiscent of Malte's Paris, filled with fear, the enigmatic, and overpowering strength, this city is likened to a mirage brought about by a mental illness:

damals hörte diese Stadt  
auf zu sein. Auf einmal gab sie zu,  
daß sie niemals war, um nichts als Ruh  
flehend; wie ein Irrer, dem das Wirrn  
plötzlich sich entwirrt, das ihn verriet,  
und der einen jahrelangen kranken  
gar nicht zu verwandelnden Gedanken,  
den er nie mehr denken muß: Granit –  
aus dem leeren schwankenden Gehirn  
fallen fühlt, bis man ihn nicht mehr sieht. (KA 1:551)

In a similar way to how the secondary literature focuses on Rilke's time in Paris as the primary experience of urban destitution, the analyses of Rilke's attitudes towards and depictions of poverty generally concentrate on the poet's later works, especially on *Das Buch von der Armut und vom Tode* and *Aufzeichnungen*<sup>71</sup>. Yet, already his first two poetic cycles *Leben und Lieder* and *Larenopfer* depict people "who, as it seems, cannot adorn a poem's line" (Berezina 29). A review of secondary literature on Rilke's portrayal of social injustice reveals that it has been received skeptically and often is disregarded as kitsch or as an attempt at the aestheticization of poverty. The former assessment is usually

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<sup>71</sup> For instance by Patrick Greaney and Reinhold Grimm.

found in the analyses of Rilke's early works, while the latter primarily refers to his poetic cycle *Das Buch von der Armut und vom Tode* and to *Aufzeichnungen*.

In his book *Rene Rilkes Prager Jahre*, Peter Demetz claims that poverty images in Rilke's early poetic cycle *Larenopfer* lack authenticity largely due to the language barrier which separated Rilke and the Bohemian poor:

Nachdem schon Renes erster Gedichtband "Leben und Lieder" Portraits der Armen und Alten enthalten hatte, irren die "Larenopfer" noch um ein Stück weiter in der Sackgasse einer Kunst, die in Prag keine Möglichkeiten hatte. Wer hier als Dichter deutscher Zunge proletarische Not abbilden wollte, mußte zunächst die Sprache und die Welt der tschechischen Proletarier kennen; [. . .] (122)

Because of the language difference, Rilke might not have been able to understand the Czech natives very well or even communicate with them. However, the poet was an engaged and empathetic observer and his observations and writing are not without realistic authenticity even when he stylizes the poor in his imaginative ways of poetic portrayal.

In contrast to the harsh, qualifying remarks by Demetz stands the reading of a prominent Russian researcher Ada Berezina. This scholar emphasizes the importance of viewing individual poems as pieces of a larger cycle (18). In general, an analysis which disregards contexts is limited and does not allow an appreciation of the work's complexity. Berezina's holistic approach reveals that Rilke develops the social theme throughout *Larenopfer* step by step. He starts with a "faint hint" (Berezina 18), or a brief mention of a beggar-child in the poem *Im Dome* and then continuously revisits this theme

depicting its variations and building new associations. The poem *Das arme Kind* once again depicts a child. It is a glimpse into life of a young girl who is estranged from this world and its joys. Born to a loose woman and an unloving father, she was deprived of her childhood and subsequently suffered poverty, hunger, and lack of a loving family. This poem is reminiscent of naturalist writings: it offers the conditions and environment where the girl grew up and is living as an explanation for her behavior and thought process: “Die Armut blieb ihr treu die Jahre, / und Hunger war ihr Angebind; / so ward sie ernst” (KA 1:31). Schoolfield suggests that “it is hinted in this naturalistic lyric, [that the girl] may follow her mother’s primrose path” (58). Not accepting her mother’s way of living and not seeing an alternative model, the girl hopes for an early death.

These images of unfortunate children are followed by a contrasting depiction of the city poor. The poem *An der Ecke* contains a portrait of a self-sufficient, dedicated, kind, and known by all old Czech woman who sells chestnuts at the corner. Her image stands in a stark contrast to the sad, undernourished children: “Ihr Anlitz schaut aus einer Tücherspalte / Froh und gesund” (KA 1:30). The fervor with which “die alte Toni” attends to her duties – roasting chestnuts, - is communicated in a cheerful way. Rilke even allows himself a “naughty joke: she is married to her bow-legged stove, and sternly demands ‘heiße Pflicht’ from her husband” (Schoolfield 70). Similarly to maintaining a happy marriage which demands continuous effort, Toni’s occupation is described as a routine life’s necessity. Its demands might at times come with a strain, but it does not mean that this type of activity should be perceived as negative or oppressive. The old woman takes pride in what she does. There is no mention that this type of labor is tedious or of limited financial gain.



A very different image is painted in the next poem focused on a social theme. *Hinter Smichov* depicts a group of workers, broken and benumbed by humanly impossible labor, who are returning home after a long day at the factory. Individuals are not separated from their group here. Rather their miserable existence and harsh labor left the same indelible mark on all their faces: “auf ihre niedern, dumpfen Stirnen/ schrieb sich mit Schweiß und Ruß die Not. / Die Mienen sind verstumpft; es brach / das Auge [...]” (KA 1:43). It is important to consider the poem’s close proximity to the poem *Freiheitsklänge*, where Rilke gives a tribute to the wishes of liberation of the Czech people and simultaneously warns against violence (Schoolfield 71). Read in the context of the whole cycle, *Hinter Smichov* clearly communicates a warning of social uprising and a potential plea for intervention. The fact that the eyes of these workers are “broken” [“es brach das Auge”] can be read as pointing to their state of not being capable of seeing potential consequences of violent actions. Such a politically engaged image of poverty, where attention is drawn not only to the oppressed state of the destitute but also to the potential danger of violent revolt, is not typical for Rilke. His later works will be more focused on poverty’s significance for an individual and not on the potential consequences of the presence of the oppressed in a society.

In spite of the diversity of poverty depictions in *Larenopfer*, all of them differ greatly from the abstract and estranged poor in Rilke’s later works. These early images are very concrete and do not attempt to transcend the immediate reality. Many scholars noted their similarity to the works of naturalism, or “durch naturgetreue Abbildung der Wirklichkeit unter Ausschaltung jeder Stilisierung und aller geistigen Faktoren gekennzeichnete Kunststil” (von Wilpert 611). Berezina states that “one cannot help

noticing the influence of Naturalist ideas [in Rilke's early work]. Sympathy with the oppressed, interest in the life of the social bottom, the appearance of the theme of harsh labor in *Larenopfer* mercilessly break romantic clichés [...]” (30). Similarly, Peter Demetz refers to Rilke's focus on poverty poems from *Larenopfer* as “naturalistische Gedichte” (122)<sup>72</sup>. The concreteness of Rilke's images is furthered by the presence of people and place names (e.g. die alte Toni, Smichov).

Reminiscent of naturalism, Rilke's early poems provide the reader with a significant amount of background information, which explains the current condition of a poetic figure. In such poems as *Im Dome*, *Das arme Kind* and *Hinter Smichov*, the external circumstances leave an indelible mark on individuals. There is no mention of possible solutions from within and no advocacy for spiritual strength as a means for overcoming material adversity. Indeed, none of the abovementioned poems depict poverty as a catalyst for deeper understanding of the world in general and human condition in particular (as it will be the case in *Die Aufzeichnungen*); instead, material deprivations lead to psychological and spiritual numbness. The child from the poem *Im Dome* is completely estranged from any messages the splendid cathedral was built to communicate: “Von dem ganzen Glanze floß ihm / in die Brust kein Fünkchen Segen...” (KA 1:13). The word “Segen”, i.e. blessing, elucidates that the misery of poverty prevents this child not only from participation in the sumptuous ritual, but it intervenes with his spirituality. Pressing material necessities do not allow this child to build a connection with God and thus gain inner strength in the face of adversity. Similarly, the environment where the girl from *Das arme Kind* grew up serves as the cause of her

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<sup>72</sup> Angela Esterhammer makes a similar observation about Rilke's early prose noticing the “elements of naturalism in the Prague stories” (xxxix).

irresponsiveness to life's positive facets. Her "seriousness" is reflected in the state of mind dismissing the totality of life and in concentrating on the limitations of her circumstances:

[. . .] Das Lenzgold rinnt  
umsonst in ihre Haare.

Sie schaut die lächelnden Gesichter  
der Blumen traurig an im Hag  
und denkt: der Allerseelentag  
hat Blüten auch und Lichter. (KA 1:31)

Unhappy childhood in impoverished conditions deprived this child from acquiring the sense of community and faith in her own future. The workers from the poem *Hinter Smichov* are even more estranged and appear to have lost their humanity. They are an anonymous group identified only as "aus den Fabriken, Männer, Dirnen." Focus on the body parts further dehumanizes their portrait. These people are not holistic individuals anymore; their perceptions of the world around them are impeded by extreme mental and physical fatigue. In addition to mental numbness, all of the abovementioned characters are portrayed as an inseparable part of the larger community. Each poem involves direct communication with these characters: the beggar boy from *Im Dome* addresses the lyrical I directly, the first line from the poem *Das arme Kind* – "Ich weiß ein Mädchen" – points to the lyrical I's acquaintance with the poor child, while the workers from *Hinter Smichov* are associated with "Gejohle." There is nothing mysterious or metaphysical about these poor. They are a palpable, concrete group of people suffering from material

deprivations to the point of losing their humanity and individuality. Poverty is clearly defined as a negative, destroying force.

Rilke's subsequent poetic cycles – *Traumgekrönt* (1896), *Advent* (1897), and *Mir zur Feier* (created in 1897) – move away from the theme of poverty and contain only a few sporadic images of the destitute. For instance, *Advent* contains a brief mention of a crippled organ grinder who serves as an identification figure for an unhappy child:

Und deine Tage waren bleiern,  
die Mutter krank, der Vater roh;  
und manchmal kam ein Krüppel leiern, -  
dann lauschtest du und weintest so. (*Die Gedichte* 128-129)

The emphasis here is not on the misery brought about by social injustice, but on the wounded sensitivity of a deeply perceptive child. The poor man becomes a symbol for sadness, lack of compassion and understanding, and loneliness all of which reflect the internal state of the depicted young girl.

Rilke revisits the theme of poverty with his poetic cycle *Das Buch von der Armut und vom Tode* painting a strikingly different portrait of the poor. This and Rilke's later poverty depictions are marked by abstractness which prompted a negative reception and an accusation of aestheticization of the disadvantaged. Such assessment can be gleaned from Rainer Homann's statement about *Das Buch von der Armut und vom Tode*<sup>73</sup>:

Wenn Künstler sich mit Armut befassen, geht es ihnen in den meisten  
Fällen darum, Armut als Material für ihre Kunst zu betrachten, dabei wie  
bspw. der im Titel zitierte Dichtorfürst *Rainer Maria Rilke* (1875-1926),

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<sup>73</sup> Homann, Rainer. "Denn Armut ist ein Glanz aus Innen...": Armut und Kunst". *Handbuch Armut und Soziale Ausgrenzung*. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2008. 166-179. [Print]

versuchend, den wahren Kern der Armut zu entdecken. Ob den „Glanz aus Ihnen“ alle Armen an sich haben, sei dahingestellt. Das Zitat soll schlaglichtartig klarmachen: Es geht ihnen nicht darum, die Armut zu zeigen, wie sie ist. Das wäre höchst unkünstlerisch [. . .] im Falle der Armut als Kunstgegenstand gilt es, aus der Armut etwas Schönes zu machen [. . .] (167)

Egon Schwarz expressed similar ideas a few decades earlier enveloping his statement in a somewhat acerbic criticism of Rilke’s presumed views on poverty. Based on this scholar, Rilke’s position on poverty is characterized by “radical, individualistic solipsism”:

[Poverty] is only an end in itself for the person burdened by misery, an activity that provides him with some sort of soulful stimulus [...] Poverty is a phenomenon that has nothing to do with the social world, a phenomenon for which it makes no sense to search out causes and try to do away with them [...] poverty is a combination of religious and aesthetic elements [and is] viewed as a private matter with which one cannot temper without the risk of bringing about more ill than good [...] Rilke sees the aesthetic component of this doctrine in the “impartiality” of poverty and wealth [...] (65)

Schwarz’s position is subject to criticism since it reveals a strikingly different sense of poetry as compared to Rilke. “Searching out causes” of poverty in the pursuit of social change is more compatible with political activism than with Rilke’s understanding of the poet’s task. For Rilke, “art is hardly moral or immoral” (Wojcik 571). The poet should aim to “give permanence to what is fleeting, for in language, his special realm, the stamp

of the eternal is impressed on the ephemeral” (Rickman 174). Striving to recognize and capture the essence of the things around him, Rilke believed in holistic depiction of reality where repudiating any facets of life, regardless of their seeming ugliness or insignificance, cannot be justified. In his *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter*, Rilke writes: “Wenn der Alltag Ihnen arm scheint, klagen Sie ihn nicht an, sagen Sie sich, daß Sie nicht Dichter genug sind, seine Reichtümer zu rufen; denn für den Schaffenden gibt es keine Armut und keinen armen, gleichgültigen Ort” (KA 4:515). Depicting the poor in purely political or social terms would disregard Rilke’s perception of them as complex individuals who cannot be limited by their role in the society<sup>74</sup>. Simultaneously, Rilke’s poverty imagery cannot be diminished to a “private matter” that lacks any connection to the social world, as Schwarz advocates, since his poor are both the faceless individual (lost self) and the anonymous masses.

In contrast to the evaluations by Homann and Schwarz, a recent analysis by Patrick Greaney draws attention to Rilke’s language, specifically the heavy usage of simile in *Das Buch von der Armut und vom Tode*, to call “into question any aestheticization of the poor and, indeed, the very possibility of representing them at all” (100). The central figure of this work, the Poor One, is called upon to save the urban poor from their impersonal deaths and their way of living where humans are replaceable and resemble items of mass production. According on Greaney, Rilke underscores the inability to capture the essence of this being with language: the Poor One is “wie ohne Namen”, which indicates that He indeed possesses a name but that this name is not

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<sup>74</sup> In *Die Aufzeichnungen*, Rilke cautions against interpreting social and historical phenomena without any regard for an individual: “Ist es möglich, daß die Vergangehnheit falsch ist, weil man immer von ihren Massen gesprochen hat, gerade, als ob man von einem Zusammenlauf vieler Menschen erzählte, statt von dem Einem zu sagen, um den sie herumstanden, weil er fremd war und starb?” (KA 3:469)

known or is beyond human comprehension. As Greaney states, such indeterminate state of the Poor One is further emphasized through his lack of attributes:

The negative comparison with the wind gives an image for the central figure's poverty, and, like the metaphors in the first stanza, the negative comparison with an orphan's clothing stresses once again the inadequacy of the poem's description of the Poor One. The first stanza's metaphors present the difficulty of saying what or where the Poor One is, and the second stanza intensifies the questioning of the poem's ability to identify the Poor One, who remains free of any definite attribute except "poor," which may be nothing but a term for his being without attributes. (102)

The depiction of the Poor One's illusive nature is mainly achieved via simile which "assigns characteristics and, at the same time, emphasizes the estrangement from them with its "like" that separates vehicle and tenor" (Greaney 102). Rilke's description of the urban poor relies even more heavily on similes: they are "verrufen wie ein Blatternbette, / wie Scherben fortgeworfen, wie Skelette, / wie ein Kalender, dessen Jahr verran..." (KA 1:243). Later in the poem, their tentative nature is further elucidated via the subjunctive: "Betrachte sie und sieh, was ihnen gliche" (KA 1:245). This weakens "comparison's already fragile grasp" (Greaney 104). In response to those critics who see glorification of poverty in Rilke's description of the bodies of the poor, Greaney states that even the moments where the poor appear "so schön. . ./ so leidenschaftlich und so wundersam" are contradicted via the "cycle's foregrounding of its own inability to present the poor at all" (108).

At first glance, it seems that the Rilkean poor are so estranged from the world around them that they cannot belong to any type of community. The state of being stripped of all what defines a normal and distinct human being seems to make any common identity impossible. A thorough analysis by Patrick Greaney of Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen* contradicts such impression and reveals a new form of community based not on a "shared identity or purpose" but on a "shared estrangement and exposure" (124). What terrifies Malte during his encounters with the urban beggars is not their destitute sight but the recognition of such community and his own belonging to it<sup>75</sup>. Malte, who is separated from his family, homeland and even own name, and the outcasts are completely estranged from each other: *Die Aufzeichnungen* does not contain a single address or a dialog between them, not even in Malte's imagination. His belonging to them is only palpable through showing, as in the episode where a poor woman shows him a pencil, and through seeing, when, for instance, Malte sees a dying man in the creamery. Yet, he clearly realizes that his relation to the living and former destitute residents of the city is "zu Hause in [ihm]". Furthermore, such relation already existed prior to Malte's encounter with the Parisian beggars, as is indicated by his fright at the sight of a half-demolished building in the 43<sup>rd</sup> *Aufzeichnung*: "...the immediacy of Malte's reaction shows us how the terror emerges less from the wall itself than from the realization of the intimacy of the relation to the wall that somehow seems to predate its actual sighting" (Greaney 120-121). Realization of such unification via detachment leads towards estrangement from one's own self, necessary for achieving a new way of seeing and writing. Arriving at the state of complete estrangement has one more requirement, which makes it truly frightening: achievement of a new way of seeing is contingent upon

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<sup>75</sup> For a comprehensive analysis, see Greaney 120-133



complete acceptance of life's various facets no matter how horrifying or repulsive they may be.

A community based on estrangement differs greatly from any Christian spiritual fellowship united by a common goal and aimed at mutual well-being. Some scholars, such as Reinhold Grimm, read Rilke's concept of poverty as reminiscent of the Franciscan tradition: "In ihm [Franz von Assisi], dem Gründer des typisch städtisch ausgerichteten Bettelordens . . . fallen sämtliche Aspekte und Motive nicht nur des *Buchs vom Armut und Tode*, sondern des *Stunden-Buches* überhaupt, samt seiner dichterischen Verklärung, ja Selbstverklärung des Dichterischen, endgültig zusammen" (25). Some similarities between the community of outcasts and the Franciscan concept of fraternity include Rilke's depiction of the poor engaged in the traditional Franciscan activity of feeding the birds and the thought that dissolution of all other bonds is necessary for entering a new fellowship (Greaney 136). Such understanding of Rilke's poverty concept is, however, undermined by the fact that Rilke's poor are not bound by any mission and by their state of being abandoned by Christ (Greaney 136). A simplistic understanding of the Christian doctrine, where the poor are rewarded for their suffering on earth after their death, is also not applicable to Rilke's works. Drawing a brief comparison to Kierkegaard's *Christian Discourses*, a work which Rilke knew, Patrick Greaney persuasively argues that:

Rilke's poor are in no way rich – neither like the bird, which Kierkegaard says is rich without knowing it, nor like the Christian, whose wealth in Heaven increases as his poverty on earth intensifies [...] The only position in Kierkegaard's text that can be related to Rilke's poor is that of the

heathen [...] Rilkean poverty [...] inseparable from the interrupted language of similes that presents it, cannot be transformed into a possession or into a new kind of wealth. (111-112)

Greaney's thesis persuasively refutes the idea of poverty aestheticization by Rilke, but it does not capitalize on the poet's aesthetics of empathy and sincerity. Rilke's poor cannot be equated with mere objects marked by incomprehensibility and resulting difficulty of representation. They are, above all, beings who can be empathized with. As Sabina Becker notices, Rilke's Malte differs greatly from the historical city observer, the flaneur, who is engaged in "pleasurable-seeing and detached looking"<sup>76</sup>:

Statt mit dem Gemüt reagiert der Großstädter also im wesentlichen mit dem Verstand auf die ihn bedrohenden "Strömungen und Diskrepanzen seines äußeren Milieus". Nicht so doch Malte. Als Flaneur, der in jeder Wahrnehmung das sieht, "was die ganze Sache für [ihn] gewesen ist" und somit jede Wahrnehmung "tiefer in sich hinein geh[en] läßt", setzt er sich der großstädtischen Reizüberflutung ohne jeden "Reizschutz" aus und gibt sich jedem Reiz mit einer Intensität hin, die ihm ein Überleben in einer Großstadt des 20. Jahrhunderts unmöglich macht. (Becker 130)

Originally theorized by Edgar Allen Poe and Charles Baudelaire, the classic city walker "can reap aesthetic meaning and an individual kind of existential security from the spectacle of the teeming crowds" (Tester 2). In *The Painter of the Modern Life* (1863) Baudelaire stated: "The crowd is his [flaneur's] domain, just as the air is the bird's, and water that of the fish"<sup>77</sup>. In contrast to the flaneur who feels at home in the city, Malte

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<sup>76</sup> Beicken 4

<sup>77</sup> Cited in Tester 2

lacks any confidence that would allow him to keep a distance from the overstimulation of the metropolis and the suffering of its inhabitants. He embraces every emotion and feeling evoked by the presence of urban destitution and experiences a strong desire to improve the condition of the suffering. Malte's encounter with an epileptic reveals his complex attitudes towards the city poor. While he does not physically help the sick man, he silently follows the epileptic who collapses and is encircled by the crowd. At that point Malte invests all his mental energy to assist the epileptic who succumbs to intensifying seizures:

Der Augenblick mußte kommen, da seine Kraft zu Ende war, er konnte nicht weit sein. Und ich, der ich hinter ihm herging mit stark schlagendem Herzen, ich legte mein bißchen Kraft zusammen wie Geld, und indem ich auf seine Hände sah, bat ich ihn, er möchte nehmen, wenn er es brauchte. Ich glaube, daß er es genommen hat; was konnte ich dafür, daß es nicht mehr war. (KA 3:503)

This *Aufzeichnung* reveals a striking difference in reactions towards the sick man between Malte and other people on the street who find the involuntary motions of the epileptic amusing.

Rilke's distance from certain elements of any religion led Adriana Cid to conclude that the poet "nicht als religiös einzustufen ist" (132). Yet, in spite of his non-belonging to any organized religion, Rilke cannot be viewed as irreligious. Rather his religiosity should be described as "eine Religiosität ohne Kultformen" (133). Firm belief in God without acknowledgment of ritual and a concept of poverty reminiscent of Rilke's works have their counterparts in the writings of Meister Eckhart, whom Rilke had a high regard

for. The similarity of their perceptions is underscored by Rilke in a letter to Countess Luise Schwerin from the 5<sup>th</sup> of June, 1905: “Sie werden... eines Tages sehen, wie sehr ich, *ohne von ihm zu wissen*, schon seit Jahren dieses Meisters [Eckharts!] *Schüler und Verkünder war*. (cited in Mendels and Spuler 218).

Eckhart makes a clear distinction between two different types of poverty: poverty as a lack of material possessions and the poverty of spirit, or “Armut im Geist” (Eckhart 34). The latter type of poverty refers to a person “der nichts will und nichts weiß und nichts hat” (34). Such poverty restores the Self to its original existence before it was shaped by God into a creature. Achieving it requires repudiation of all desires, including the wish to please and discover God, and silencing one’s will:

Als ich in meiner ersten Ursache stand, da hatte ich keinen Gott: ich wollte nichts, ich begehrte nichts, denn ich war nur ein Sein und wollte kein ander Ding [. . .] Aber als ich herausging aus meinem freien Willen und mein geschaffenes Wesen empfing, da bekam ich auch einen Gott [. . .] da war Gott nicht mehr allein in sich selber Gott, sondern er war Gott in den Kreaturen [. . .] und hat genauso viele Allmacht und Reichtum, als sie in ihrer geringen Kreatur zu fassen vermögen. (35)

Eckhart encourages eliminating any connotations associated with and ideas about God from one’s mind since their presence only interferes with the Divine presence inside the Self. Human mind is too weak to even distantly grasp the greatness of God, and true blessedness can only be achieved via discarding all knowledge and own identity thus merging with the eternal being:

[ . . . ] Gott ist mit seinen Werken nicht der Meinung, daß der Mensch in sich eine Eigenstätte habe, worin Gott wirken möge. Denn das erst ist Armut des Geistes, daß der Mensch Gottes und all seiner Werke so ledig stehe, daß Gott, wenn er in der Seele wirken wollte, er selber die Stätte sein müßte, darinnen er wirken will. (37)

Eckhart's poverty of spirit as freedom from pre-conceived notions of God and dissolution of identity, which is to a great degree constructed by society and its expectations, allows for a new reading of Rilke's *Das Buch von der Armut und vom Tode*. When Rilke calls for letting the poor be as poor as they really are, when he employs the simile to avoid painting a concrete image, he strives to avoid any formula of how these people should be and how they should live. Material deprivations are a lesser burden compared to the myriad of negative connotations attached to the state of being destitute. Having the opportunity to enjoy a clear mind, free from humiliation associated with poverty, would allow an individual to find inner peace, avoid mental anguish, and potentially better evaluate the situation which could lead to its improvement. Just as Eckhart's believers are capable to achieve unity with God via understanding the limitedness of societal constructions of the Divine, Rilke approaches any classification of individuals based on their material income with skepticism. Placing people within certain frame and communicating to them that they are powerless will not produce any positive lasting change.

Eckhart's poverty definition and its praise by Rilke elucidate the poet's understanding of this concept. However, ideas of this medieval theologian cannot be credited with shaping Rilke's poverty perceptions. As can be gleaned from the already

quoted letter to Luise Schwerin, Rilke claims to have been Eckhart's disciple without realizing it, i.e. he came to a similar poverty definition before becoming familiar with Eckhart's works.

Rilke's Russian encounter, which preceded his involvement with Eckhart's works, could channel the development of the poet's perceptions of poverty in the direction of Eckhart's philosophy. Two aspects of Rilke's encounter with Russian culture are of particular interest here: his experience of simple yet very powerful religiosity found in the Russian poor and his thorough study of Russian literature and its spirituality.

Rilke's participation in the Orthodox Easter festivities placed before his eyes a new model of the poor. Despite their scarce material possessions, these people were capable of transcending their misery and of constructing themselves as valuable members of the community in its broadest sense. In a letter to Jelena Woronona from July 27<sup>th</sup> 1899, Rilke writes: "Vor der kleinen Kapelle der Иверская (Iverskaia) in Moskau: dort sind die Knieenden größer als die, welche stehen, und die sich verneigen, richten sich riesig auf [ . . . ]" (cited in Azadovskii *Rilke und Rußland* 102). It can and has been argued that Rilke borrowed the ideas of "eine[r] tief vertrauende[n] Einfalt und eine[r] menschliche[n] Passivität" of the Russian peasant<sup>78</sup> from Lou Andreas-Salomé and projected it onto the Russian pilgrims (Mattenklott 26-27). Yet Rilke's perceptions of the Russian peasants engaged in prayer are not limited to their presumed naïveté and passivity. In Rilke's eyes, communication with God served these people as a means to construct the sense of self as respectful, worthy members of the society regardless of their

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<sup>78</sup> The border between a peasant and a worker was still blurry in Russia at this time. When previously engaged in agriculture peasants moved to occupations in trade or industry "temporarily or permanently, part-time or full-time, in the city or in the countryside, most of these workers officially continued to be classified as part of the peasant estate" (Moss 133).

social standing. Being in the Orthodox Church allowed each individual to distance him- or herself from their current hardships and reminded of the eternal truths. According to the Russian Orthodox teachings, everyone is equal before God which implies personal worthiness of each individual along with his or her responsibility to live in concord with Christian values, i.e. moral code applicable to each member of the society. Rilke's perception of a prayer as a very personal, meaningful, enriching experience and not a mere participation in a ritual is exemplified by his discussion on the Russian icon. In his essay *Russische Kunst*, he refers to the icon as "nur eine Möglichkeit [...], der Raum, in welchem der Schauende wiederschaffen muß, was der Künstler zuerst geschaffen hat, das erfüllt sich im Rahmen dieser Bilder durch die Frömmigkeit derjenigen, die davor beten". It is only via an active spiritual engagement of the believer that the goal of such prayer – elevation in "die reifen Wirklichkeiten seiner Seele" – is achieved. Rilke emphasized the significance of prayer for the well-being of an individual. It allowed the peasants to find inner balance and not feel tormented by their circumstances:

Ist das etwas nach außen Beabsichtigtes, wenn so ein russischer Bauer sich vergneigt?, bewahre; er geht in die Kirche, und wie er sich neigt und neigt, beginnt er den Gott in sich zu wiegen mit seiner Bewegung, wie ein Kind, das sich beruhigen soll; denn sein Gott ist in ihm wie ein liebes Kind in der Wiege [ . . . ] (Letter to Jelena Woronina from 27th July, 1899, cited in Azadovskii *Rilke und Rußland* 103)

Rilke's observation of the Russian religiosity cannot be dismissed as a mere projection of pre-conceived ideas since historical analyses of Russian social life at the turn of the century reveal that spirituality was of great significance in the lives of this

people. In spite of the presence of atheist and nihilist ideas in the Russian Empire at the time of Rilke's visit, the vast majority of Russians were still thinking in the same categories as the previous generations. This was true even for factory workers who like peasants involved in agricultural labor suffered from material deprivations. According to the Russian historian Yuri Kirianov, only a "small percentage of workers [around 1900] were sympathetic to the ideas of radical socialists, but most workers, while dissatisfied with their low pay and working conditions, were still loyal to [...] their traditional religious beliefs" (Moss 131). Rilke's first-hand encounter with deep religiosity of the Russian peasants was enhanced by a powerful cultural interpretation of its significance by the Russian thinkers.

Russian literary discourses on poverty deserve special attention since Rilke read and thought highly of several Russian works focused on social inequality and its consequences for an individual. The significance of Russian literature for Rilke is two-fold. On a more superficial level, his later works contain multiple inter textual references to the images of destitution created by Russian authors. On a deeper level, his understanding and perception of poverty moves away from his earlier naturalistic images and develops in the direction of the Russian thought. Emphasis on spiritual growth and integrity takes over the importance of meeting the material necessities in Rilke's later works as it is the case in Dostoevsky's and Tolstoy's writings<sup>79</sup>.

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<sup>79</sup> On the opposite side of the spectrum is the Western tradition exemplified by Käthe Kollwitz's *Bilder vom Elend* created in 1907-1909, roughly at the same time as Rilke wrote his *Die Aufzeichnungen*. The main emphasis here is that extreme "Armut verstoße gegen Menschlichkeit" (Homann 170) Also, the authors of Vormärz, such as Georg Büchner, Ferdinand Freiligrath, and Heinrich Heine focused on the political and social reasons of poverty and explained their protagonists' miserable state (e.g. Woyzeck's) as a direct result of their living conditions. Some decades later, Bertolt Brecht sets satisfaction of material needs as a pre-requisite of an individual's morality and spiritual well-being (e.g. in *Die Dreigroschenoper*).



Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen* that contains some of his most vivid poverty imagery serves as an example for the former argument boasting multiple ties to the portrait of the poor created by Russians. The setting of this work – Paris at the turn of the century – led scholars to conclude that the “experiences of Rilke’s Paris years are vividly evoked in his only novel”<sup>80</sup>. Bettina Müller writes: “Sein erster Aufenthalt in Paris von August 1902 bis Juni 1903 prägte ihn so nachhaltig, dass er bereits am 8. Februar 1904 in Rom mit seinen Aufzeichnungen began” (3). In contrast to this claim, comparison with Russian literature, especially with the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky, reveals that scenes from Rilke’s only novel are often based on Russian urban reality. Malte’s Paris, with its combination of realistic detailed images and surreal experiences is reminiscent of a rich, long Russian tradition of city depiction. As St. Petersburg, much disliked by Rilke, was chosen by multiple Russian authors as the urban landscape they wrote about, their works were grouped under the category “Petersburg Novel”<sup>81</sup>. Reminiscent of Rilke’s Paris and Malte’s relationship to this city, this genre has been described as follows:

Die ‘Peterburger Novelle(n)’ werden alle durch einen gemeinsamen Ausgangswiderspruch vereint, der auf allen Ebenen des künstlerischen Ganzen betont wird: der Held, der Stadtbewohner, Einzelgänger, Außenseiter, “kleiner Mann” (ein Offizier, Beamter, Student, ein nicht anerkannter und verfolgter Literat), der mit einer besonderer Aufrichtigkeit seine beichtende Erzählung über sich selbst führt, steht dem Koloss, der Stadt, gegenüber, die blinde, feindliche und misantrophische

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<sup>80</sup> From the note about the author. Rilke, R. M. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge: A Novel*. Trans. Stephen Mitchell. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. Print.

<sup>81</sup> Some representative works are Nikolai Gogol’s *Nevsky Prospect* (published in 1835) and *Diary of a Madman* (1835), Dostoevsky’s *White Nights* (1848) and *Crime and Punishment* (1866), Nikolai Nekrasov’s *Petersburg: Physiology of a City* (1845), and Andrey Bely’s *Petersburg* (1913)

Kräfte der Geschichte verkörpert [. . .] Noch eine wichtige Charakteristik des „Petersburger Textes“ betrifft die paradoxe Vereinigung von konkreten Zügen und Vereingemeinerungen, von äußerst detaillierter Realität und Phantastischem [. . .] von “Fremdem” und “Eigenem.” (Syrovatko 65)

The beginning of Rilke’s novel is reminiscent of Dostoevsky’s *White Nights* and *Crime and Punishment*: like the protagonists from these novels, Malte takes a walk in a city and “nimmt an vielen alltäglichen menschlichen Dramen teil, versucht aber gleichzeitig, Abstand von ihnen zu wahren und die Undurchsichtigkeit seiner Persönlichkeit zu behalten” (Syrovatko 72)<sup>82</sup>. In addition to the overall structure of the novel, some of the most striking, key scenes from *Die Aufzeichnungen* hark back to Dostoevsky’s works. Patricia Brodsky notes that “much of the external form and a number of details in [Rilke’s] crucial cremerie episode come from *The Insulted and the Injured*” (157). Protagonists in both works encounter an old, extremely estranged person in a cheap café – cremerie in Rilke’s and the Müller’s in Dostoevsky’s texts –, whose impending death they manage to recognize. It produces the feeling of extreme discomfort in the protagonists and serves as a turning point in the texts. In their descriptions of these poor elders, both authors concentrate on certain physical traits, such as hair, dress, and an empty gaze which betrays the old men’s detachment from their surroundings. Rilke writes:

Er saß da in einem dicken, schwarzen Wintermantel, und sein graues, gespanntes Gesicht hing tief in ein wollenes Halstuch [. . .] es war nicht möglich zu sagen, ob seine Augen noch schauten: beschlagene, rauchgraue

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<sup>82</sup> For other parallels between Dostoevsky’s and Rilke’s works see Syrovatko’s article *Rilke and Dostoevskij* (2001).

Brillengläser lagen davor und zitterten ein wenig [. . .] und das lange Haar über seinen Schläfen, aus denen alles weggenommen war, welkte wie in zu großer Hitze. (KA 3:489)

Dostoevsky's portrait prefigures many facets of Rilke's image:

His tall figure, his bent back, his death-like face with the stamp of eighty years upon it, his old grey coat torn at the seams, the battered round hat, at least twenty years old, which covered his head – bold but for one lock of hair not grey but yellowish-white – all his movements, which seem performed, as it were, aimlessly [...] His large lustreless eyes, set as it were in blue rims, always stared straight before him, never looking to one side, and never seeing anything – of that I feel certain. (4)

Both authors draw attention to their characters' reduced or absent ability of perceiving. Dostoevsky's character appears to be "never seeing anything" which further underlines the dying man's estrangement from his environment. Rilke's emphasis on the uncertainty "ob seine Augen noch schauten" harks back to his poem "Der Panther" where the state of captivity creates a similar state of mental numbness. The panther who was deprived of personal freedom along with the necessity to provide for the self is incapable of translating visual imagery into meaningful objects and events: Dann geht ein Bild hinein,/ geht durch der Glieder angespannter Stille -/ und hört im Herzen auf zu sein". In both excerpts, Dostoevsky and Rilke depict the lack of eyesight and vision as both physiological and symbolic for the diminished being and their imminent deaths.

Other similarities include the fact that both protagonists have writing as their occupation (Malte is a poet, Ivan is a novelist), their poverty, recent arrival at and the

feeling of isolation in a big city, and the time of year (spring)<sup>83</sup>. In addition, “the authors make a point of a person being displaced from his usual seat” (Brodsky 158). While Malte’s seat is taken by the dying man, Ivan mentions that the strange old man sat by the window since his favorite place by the stove was taken. Brodsky interprets the dislocation of Dostoevsky’s old man as being “pushed to the periphery of the warm human circle in the café, as if in preparation for the coming final displacement” (158). It can be added that Malte also experiences a “final displacement” in this scene; he remains alive but recognizes his steady estrangement from the familiar which he himself associates with death:

[. . .] und doch habe ich jenen Mann begreifen können, weil auch in mir etwas vor sich geht, das anfängt, mich von allem zu entfernen und abzutrennen. Wie graute mir immer, wenn ich von einem Sterbenden sagen hörte: er konnte schon niemanden mehr erkennen. (KA 3:490)

Another example is the image of a poor organ-grinder who is accompanied by her children in the task of begging. *Die Aufzeichnungen* contains a brief but very memorable episode:

[. . .] ein kleiner Handwagen, von einer Frau geschoben; vorn darauf ein Leierkasten, der Länge nach. Dahinter quer ein Kinderkorb, in dem ein ganz Kleines auf festen Beinen steht, vergnügt in seiner Haube [. . .] Von Zeit zu Zeit dreht die Frau am Orgelkasten. Das ganz Kleine stellt sich dann sofort stampfend in seinem Korbe wieder auf, und ein kleines Mädchen in einem grünen Sonntagskleid tanzt und schlägt Tamburin zu den Fenstern hinauf. (KA 3:466)

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<sup>83</sup> For a more detailed discussion including differences between the two works see Brodsky 156-159.

Such sight of a destitute organ-grinder with her children was a part of the Petersburg urban landscape as it is captured by Dostoevsky in *Crime and Punishment*:

[ . . . ] she [Katerina Ivanovna] will take the children and go into the street with a barrel-organ, and the children will sing and dance, and she too, and collect money, and will go every day under the general's window [...] she means to carry a tin basin and make it tinkle, instead of music [...] (333)

These examples indicate that Rilke's poverty portraits were not sole reflections on his Parisian experiences but appear as images which Rilke gathered in his encounter with Russian culture. Clearly, the destitution of Russian cities left an indelible mark in the young poet's mind and imagination. In spite of the fact that Rilke does not address urban poverty in a separate work set in Russia, his experiences found their expression a few years later when Parisian streets reminded him of the less glorious facets of Russian life. In a letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé from August 1903, Rilke emphasized the significance of his Russian experiences during the years in Paris: "Ich bin in Paris Rußland nicht ausdrückbar näher gekommen [ . . . ]"<sup>84</sup> The presence of Rilke's Russian experiences in his Parisian novel is reminiscent of his statement on how memories should be translated into poetry. It is his French novel, *Die Aufzeichnungen*, which contains the following message:

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<sup>84</sup> Rilke's continuous involvement with Russian experiences is also manifested by reviewing and publishing his works on Russian themes in Paris; his poetic cycle *Die Zaren* was originally composed in 1899 but first reviewed for publication during Rilke's stay in France. It was published in 1906. Erika Greber points to the necessity of moving to a new cultural context for Rilke in order to gain the ability of grasping and reflecting on his Russian experiences: "Rilkes Umorientierung nach Frankreich verbindet sich mit dem Verlangen, aus der Rußlandreise poetisches Kapital schlagen zu können [...] In bezug of den *Zaren-Zyklus* hieße es, daß in französischen Kontext die affinen Aspekte zutage gefördert werden sein könnten. Die Neubearbeitung bedeutet, daß die die russischen Sujets des *Zaren-Zyklus* nicht anders denn französisch angefärbt zugänglich sind" (163).

Man muß sie [Erinnerungen] vergessen können, wenn es viele sind, und man muß die große Geduld haben, zu warten, daß sie wiederkommen. Denn die Erinnerungen selbst sind es noch nicht. Erst wenn sie Blut werden in uns, Blick und Gebärde, namenlos und nicht mehr zu unterscheiden von uns selbst, erst dann kann es geschehen, daß in einer sehr seltenen Stunde das erste Wort eines Verses aufsteht in ihrer Mitte und aus ihnen ausgeht. (KA 3:467)

This statement along with the presence of Russian imagery in Rilke's poverty depictions from *Die Aufzeichnungen* elucidate that the poet's Russian experiences ceased to be mere memories during his Parisian time becoming integrated into his very perceptions and imagination.

For Rilke, the significance of Russian depictions of poverty goes beyond borrowing imagery. A comparative analysis of Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen* and a work of Russian literature, Dostoevsky's first novel *Poor Folk*, one of the most influential for him, reveals similarities in perceptions and understanding of the essence of poverty. A testimony to Rilke's overtly positive reception of this work comes from several sources, such as his letter to Benois from the 28<sup>th</sup> of July, 1901 (*Azadovskii Rilke und Rußland* 292)<sup>85</sup> or his Schmargendorf diary where he states, "Ich weiß kein Buch, welches ich daneben nennen könnte" (qtd in Schoolfield 109). Rilke scholarship documents knowledge and significance of *Poor Folk* for Rilke, but it offers little more than a few brief statements as to why the poet held it in such high regard. Anna Brodsky briefly mentions that Rilke "found in the loving, self-sacrificing, and ultimately isolated

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<sup>85</sup> Rilke writes: "ich habe Ihnen, glaub ich, selbst gesagt, wie hoch ich Dostoevski stelle. Die „Insel“ bringt demnächst das schöne Bruchstück aus «Бедные люди» (die Geschichte des Studenten Покровский) in meiner Übersetzung, auf welche ich viel Sorgfalt gewendet habe".

characters of this novel an urban variation on the theme of the humble Russian” (30). This statement is contradicted by Dostoevsky’s satire in the depiction of his protagonist, lowly titular councilor Devushkin, whom some critics perceived as a ludicrous figure: “as a consistent and persistent loser, as a perennial failure, Devushkin generates a laughter of *Schadenfreude*, a laughter of secure superiority [by the reader]” (Terras 248).

Another possible explanation of Rilke’s praise comes from Reinhold Grimm who concludes that Rilke admired Dostoevsky’s novel due to its aesthetic image of the poor as well as to its “absolute Prädestination und passive Hinnahme der einem von Gott verordneten ‘Varietät’” (68), i.e. its emphasis on acceptance of social hierarchy. This statement assumes the aestheticization of poverty by Rilke, which is contradicted by the poet’s use of language along with his demonstrated capacity for empathy and deep identification with the poor. In addition, it does not do justice to the complexity of Dostoevsky’s work and its groundbreaking stance within Russian literature. As Frank (*Dostoevsky: a Writer* 79) states in reference to Dostoevsky’s “piercing vision of the contrasted lives of the rich and the poor”, that *Poor Folk* captures the destitute foremost as human beings worthy of respect and possessing their own voice:

[The work creates] an image of the same unavailing struggle to keep afloat humanly in the face of crushing circumstances, the same treasures of sensibility, sensitivity, and moral refinement appearing in the most unlikely places – unlikely, at least, from the point of view of previous Russian literature. Everywhere poverty and humiliation, the exploitation of the weak and the helpless by the rich, powerful, and unscrupulous – all this in the midst of crowded St. Petersburg slum life, with its nauseating

odors and debris-littered dwellings. *Poor Folk* combined these picturesque merits of the best of the physiological sketches with a new and unerring insight into the tortures of the humiliated sensibility. The world as seen from below rather than above constitutes the major innovation of Dostoevsky vis-à-vis Gogol, whose sympathy with his humble protagonists is never strong enough to overcome the condescension implicit in his narrative stance. (Frank *Dostoevsky: a Writer* 78-79)

Both Rilke and Dostoevsky embraced the necessity of altering the degrading social standing of the poor, yet they did not believe in solving this problem solely by charity or social activism. For both authors, the root of suffering was in societal causes and self-perceptions of the destitute as well. In a letter to Hermann Pongs from October 21<sup>st</sup>, 1924, Rilke clearly cautions that any attempt at purely external actions to improve the predicament of the poor will likely limit the individual's freedom:

Es scheint mir nichts als Unordnung zu stiften, wenn die allgemeine Bemühung (übrigens eine Täuschung!) sich anmaßen sollte, die Bedrängnisse schematisch zu erleichtern oder aufzuheben, was die Freiheit des Anderen viel stärker beeinträchtigt, als die Noth selber es tut, die mit unbeschreiblichen Anpassungen und beinahe zärtlich, dem, der sich ihr anvertraut, Anweisungen ertheilt, wie ihr - wenn nicht nach außen, so nach innen - zu entgehen wäre. Die Lage eines Menschen bessern wollen, setzt einen Einblick in seine Umstände voraus, wie nichteinmal der Dichter ihn besitzt, einer Figur gegenüber, die aus der eigenen Erfindung stammt. (*Briefe aus Muzot* 330)



Rilke underlines that attempts to solve social problems systematically, without regard for the individual's need do not consider the poor as someone in a unique destiny. Rather these individuals are perceived as mere victims of social misery and are, consequently, denied their ability to act on their own. When Rilke stresses the limitation of the "freedom" of the poor, he sees the impairment to their agency. In addition, any outside solution assumes the superiority of the "helpers", who assume to have a better grasp of the poor's situation than the poor themselves. Hence the poor are not perceived as complex individuals but are rather placed in a rigid framework of societal expectations. Specific ways of living, such as proper dress or housing arrangements, become a measure of an individual's worth. Inability to meet society's standards leads to negative images of the poor and to the self-perception as helpless and ultimately unworthy individuals.

Rilke's criticism of unjust simplification of the disadvantaged created via the projection of pre-conceived ideas can also be read in his comparison of the poor with the "things." His statement that the poor "fast gleichen [. . .] den Dingen" from *Das Buch von der Armut und vom Tode* draws attention to two aspects of Rilke's poverty perceptions (304). The use of simile elucidates the difference between the poor and the inanimate objects while pointing to the similarity of how they are viewed by the society. According to Rilke, societal misconceptions of "things" lead to the distorted image of their essence, which obscures their complexity and encourages lack of appreciation:

For Rilke, the inanimate world has always been abused by humans due to the individual's feeling of his superiority over things [. . .] Thus we tend to lay a film of our expectations, our wishes and our goals on things. And by doing so we objectify things, we place them in the world of our familiar

thoughts and projections, we put them in the space that belongs to us and hence we feel that we possess the inanimate world and can exert power over it. By adopting this kind of attitude we deprive things of their boundless existence, their silent, motionless interactions, and their infinite and fleeting movement. (Roll 235-236)

Like perceptions of inanimate objects, portrayal of the poor as inferior and in need of actions of others denies them their true essence and evokes the feeling of superiority in the wealthier.

Similarly to Rilke, Dostoevsky “derided [the] notion that subversion of political and social institutions was enough to ameliorate human existence: his profound conviction was that only inner spiritual and moral renewal would work” (Marks 67). The conviction that only “Christlike spirituality” (67) expressed in deep respect for fellow humans could heal the disturbed identity of a modern person found its expression in *Poor Folk*. None of the characters from this novel are able to overcome their struggles when their financial situation improves. Touched by Devushkin’s miserable state, the General gives him a significant sum of money, which allows the main protagonist to address his most pressing needs. However, this charitable gesture does not alleviate the deepest conflict in Devushkin’s life: his inability to be with Varvara. His human problems outweigh his affliction by poverty. This seems to be true for another character, the wrongly accused state clerk Gorshkov who dies immediately after being fully vindicated and having been restored to his material well-being. According to Frank, this serves as an illustration of “human problems for which [. . .] there is no social solution at all” (Frank *Dostoevsky: a Writer* 81).

Devushkin's tragedy is not solely in his poverty but in his assuming an identity constructed by others. As Michail Bachtin notes "His consciousness about self is constantly perceived against the background of the other's consciousness of him – 'I for myself' against the background of 'I for another.' Thus the hero's words about himself are structured under the continuous influence of someone else's words about him" (qtd. in Souris 220). Brief glances into the everyday experiences of other poor characters, such as Emelia, elucidate that Devushkin is not the only figure hypersensitive to the invasive assessment by others. Having walked around in the clothes which revealed his destitute state, Devushkin concisely summarizes the attitudes and behavior towards the poor:

Poor people are subject to fancies – this is a provision of nature. I myself have had reason to know this. The poor man is exacting. He cannot see God's world as it is, but eyes each passer-by askance, and looks around him uneasily in order that he may listen to every word that is being uttered. May not people be talking of him? How is it that he is so unsightly? [. . .] It is matter of common knowledge, my Barbara, that the poor man ranks lower than a rag, and will never earn the respect of any one. Yes, write about him as you like – let scribblers say what they choose about him: he will ever remain as he was. And why is this? It is because, from his very nature, the poor man has to wear his feelings on his sleeve, so that nothing about him is sacred [...] (Dostoevsky *Poor Folk* 83).

Being identified with the poor and as a poor produces the feeling of constant anxiety. Destitution means not only the lack of the means of subsistence but it also includes such insecurity that the poor are continually in fear of the judgments and denigrations by the

others. Devushkin becomes labeled and is expected both intellectually and spiritually to correspond to a set of preconceived ideas about the Petersburg poor. His plea is reminiscent of Malte's observation of constructed deaths the urban poor experience in Paris. Death, one of the most personal events in a person's life in Rilke's view, is labeled and classified by the society, while people are seen as numbers on a statistics sheet:

Jetzt wird in 559 Betten gestorben. Natürlich fabrikmäßig. Bei so enormer Produktion ist der einzelne Tod nicht so gut ausgeführt, aber darauf kommt es auch nicht an. [. . .] man stirbt den Tod, der zu der Krankheit gehört, die man hat (denn seit man alle Krankheiten kennt, weiß man auch, daß die verschiedenen letalen Abschlüsse zu den Krankheiten gehören und nicht zu dem Menschen [. . .] Da stehen dann die Armen vor so einem Haus und sehen sich satt. Ihr Tod ist natürlich banal, ohne alle Umstände. Sie sind froh, wenn sie einen finden, der ungefähr paßt. (KA 3:458).

A "ready-to-use" death is often a conclusion of a life structured by societal expectations and limited by an individual's social role: "Eine Weile noch, und [der eigene Tod] wird ebenso selten sein wie ein eigenes Leben [. . .] Man kommt, man findet ein Leben, fertig, man hat es nun anzuziehen" (KA 3:459). Such a life was not aspired, deserved and achieved by the person who experiences it. It is a rigid pattern which does not allow for sensibility or intellectual and spiritual fulfillment but produces a distorted view of the world and the self that is imposed on the individual against his/her will.

A valid remedy to this condition is awareness of the true self hidden under multiple identity-masks constructed by society or achieving the "poverty of spirit" in the

sense of Meister Eckhart's writings. When both Malte and Devushkin start approaching this state, it requires the dissolution of human bonds and the dissipation of identity while turning to the writing process being isolated. Rilke's novel contains the idea of human liberation present in several works of Modernist Literature, such as Andre Breton's *Nadja*, which has been described as "the peeling off of the rational layers from the human subject"; the dissolution of a specific historical and social identity "forces the self to see what has always been veiled from him by his habitual attitude to life" including the construct of the self imposed by the society (Roll 229). In *Die Aufzeichnungen*, Malte's progression to this type of liberation is inseparably linked to his exposure to the destitute and to writing. Patrick Greaney notes: "The outcasts embody alterity throughout Malte's *Notebooks*, and the community that he involuntarily becomes aware of is the model for a loss of self in writing that first appears in the novel after an encounter with the dying man" (129). In Rilke's novel, despite the alterity that the outcast represents, the self is engaged in writing after the encounter with the dying man. However, as the writing self faces an overburdening outside world, the writing does not recuperate any sense of authenticity as there is an experience of loss of self rather than restoration.

In Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk*, the act of writing serves to a greater extent as a means of developing a sense of self. While Devushkin never achieves the same level of complexity in his thinking as does Malte, his progress from the state of being constantly constructed by others to the expression of personal feelings without any consideration of an audience is truly remarkable. His letters serve as a space where he talks to himself as much as he does to his correspondent Varvara (Payne 40). This engagement with writing allows him to "acquire a unique voice over the course of the narrative" (Souris 229) and

eventually distance himself from the anxiety of being looked down upon. Importantly, when Devushkin is treated as a dignified individual, his writing becomes less informed by his sense of insecurity. He is able to find some ways of expressing his own self as opposed to reflecting what he perceives as the proper image. When his employer forgives Devushkin for making mistakes in the copies he completed and shakes his hand<sup>86</sup>, Devushkin writes about it “simply, and as God may put it into my heart” (116). This shows that he is not self-conscious about his writing and the act of communicating at all is not a way of trying to gain influence. The culmination of Devushkin’s “setting aside [the] conscious cultivation of style” and finding “his own voice” is reflected in his final letter: “Style? I do not know what I am writing. I never do know what I am writing. I could not possibly know, for I never read over what I have written [. . .] At the present moment I am writing merely for the sake of writing [. . .]” (140). This letter reads “more like a journal entry” since Varvara leaves St. Petersburg having accepted an offer of marriage and Devushkin knows that she will most likely never read what he wrote (Souris 229). Having lost his only treasured personal bond, Devushkin’s writing is without pragmatic purpose, and his form of soliloquy reveals his unassuming and unimposing self.

Rilke’s later repertoire contains an image of a working class city-dweller which stands in stark contrast to his earlier depictions of urban industrial workers (e.g. in *Hinter Smichov*) and lacks any anxiety associated with being constructed by the other. The fictional author of *Brief eines jungen Arbeiters*<sup>87</sup> is a factory worker who possesses sharp intellect and enjoys a rich inner life in spite of his modest income. The financial situation

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<sup>86</sup> Due to the difference in social standing Devushkin expected to kiss the hand of his employer.

<sup>87</sup> Rilke wrote his final version of this piece in 1922, but the first manuscript is dated November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1915 (Riedel 277).

of this man's social class is manifested by his girlfriend's material difficulties who "als Heimarbeiterin beschäftigt ist, wodurch sie oft, wenn es wenig Arbeit gibt, in eine arge Lage gerät" (KA 4:741) Employment at the factory allows this young man to enjoy a greater financial stability, yet the text reveals his extensive working hours and limited education<sup>88</sup>. The title of this letter evokes expectations of a discussion about unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, tediousness of the factory work, and scarce income yielded by this occupation. Instead, the reader is confronted with the spiritual search of a young man, who attempts to grasp the essence of God and voices his opinion about Christianity and the taboos it imposes on an individual. Due to its content, this letter has been included in the analyses focusing on Rilke's Christ image (cf. Hans Graubner) or on his spatial and temporal concepts (cf. Idris Parry), but it is usually omitted in the discussion of Rilke's understanding of poverty. Thorough reading of this text reveals that its primary focus is on mental barriers that are constructed by society and prevent an individual from achieving full potential and personal satisfaction. For instance, the young worker raises the issue of condemnation and suppression of sexuality. He sees this as a hindrance to sustaining a healthy society and finding personal contentment. Eliminating the feeling of guilt associated with sexual pleasure is portrayed as the task that must be given priority over attempts to solve other problems. Furthermore, a healthy self-image will greatly contribute to the overall improvement of the quality of life:

Warum, ich frage Sie, Herr V., wenn man uns helfen will, uns so oft

Hülflosen, warum läßt man uns im Stich, dort an den Wurzeln alles

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<sup>88</sup> The young worker writes about his brief stay at Marseille: "Die Zeit war so lächerlich kurz, einem anderen hätte sie nur für wenige Eindrücke hingereicht, – mir, der ich nicht gewohnt bin, freie Tage zu verbringen, erschien sie weit"; the last paragraphs of the letter indicate this man's limited education: "Ich arbeite im Schreibzimmer, manchmal habe ich auch an einer Maschine zu tun. Früher konnte ich einmal eine kurze Zeit studieren; ich besitze nur wenige Bücher, die meistens mit meinem Beruf zu tun haben. Ein paar allerdings, die von Kunst handeln, und Historisches, was ich mir eben verschaffen konnte."

Erlebens? Wer uns *dort* beistände, der könnte getrost sein, daß wir nichts weiter von ihm verlangten. Denn der Beistand, den er uns dort einflöbte, wüchse von selbst mit unserem Leben und würde größer und stärker mit ihm zugleich [ . . . ] Was hilft alles! Die entsetzliche Unwahrheit und Unsicherheit unserer Zeit hat ihren Grund in dem nicht eingestandenem Glück des Geschlechts, in dieser eigentümlich schiefen Verschuldung, die immerfort zunimmt und uns von der ganzen übrigen Natur trennt [ . . . ] (KA 4:744)

A similar barrier which limits an individual's ability to grasp and enjoy the complexity of this world is the Christian figure of Christ. As the young worker sees it, Christ's intention was to use his "outstretched limbs [ . . . ] as signposts pointing toward the indefinite", i.e. towards the Divine Light of God (Wich-Schwarz 102). However, people disregard this gesture and concentrate instead on Christ's suffering. Emphasis on the wrong aspect of Christ's existence results in a "Zeitstau des Heils" (Graubner 588), or in a hindrance which staggers all progress in building a better relationship with God and in a personal spiritual development. The young worker writes:

Ich kann mir nicht vorstellen, daß das *Kreuz bleiben* sollte, das doch nur ein Kreuzweg war. Es sollte uns gewiß nicht überall aufgeprägt werden, wie ein Brandmal. In ihm selber sollte es aufgelöst sein. Denn, ist es nicht *so*: er wollte einfach den höheren Baum schaffen, an dem wir besser reifen könnten. Er, am Kreuz, ist dieser neue Baum in Gott, und wir sollten warme glückliche Früchte sein, oben daran. [ . . . ] Dieser Baum, scheint mir, sollte mit uns so eines geworden sein, oder wir mit ihm, *an ihm*, daß



wir nicht immerfort uns mit ihm beschäftigen müßten, sondern einfach ruhig mit Gott, in den, uns reiner hinaufzuhalten, doch seine Absicht war.

(KA 4:736)

Both sexuality and the figure of Christ are perceived in this text as positive.

However, their misrepresentation transforms them into a source of anxiety which takes away a person's ability for spiritual growth and positive self-perception. Read against the background of Rilke's earlier destitution-centered works and against the young worker's spiritual and intellectual curiosity not limited by his societal standing, this statement can be transferred to the understanding of poverty. Akin to the guilt imposed by the Christian Church on sexual pleasure and the blame for Christ's suffering, the societal condemnation of poverty leads to a conflicted perception of self. While a direct experience of sexuality without any negative societal comments allows to embrace it and make it a part of a healthy life, concentration on the positive aspects of Christ's life leads to understanding of his message. The guilt of being poor also creates a barrier between individuals and reality preventing them from seeing the facets of life that can be enjoyed without sufficient financial security. Poverty must be experienced without any negative connotations, just as the young worker does. He embraces his living conditions and is free from the burden of feeling oppressed, which allows him to appreciate his own opinion and enjoy the pursuit of spiritual and intellectual growth. Another statement from the letter links misery created by the negative perceptions of immediate reality directly to the city life: "Und wird nicht alles hier Fortgenommene, da nun doch kein Leeres sich halten kann, durch einen Betrug ersetzt, – sind die Städte deshalb von so viel häßlichem Kunstlicht und Lärm erfüllt, weil man den echten Glanz und den Gesang an ein später zu

beziehendes Jerusalem ausgeliefert hat?” (KA 4:738). “Der echte Glanz und der Gesang” is present in the city but will become imperceptible unless an individual accepts it and learns to see it.

The fact that Rilke’s poverty imagery eventually culminates in a depiction of a self-sufficient individual can be viewed as indicative of the poet’s continuous connection to the Russian reality and poverty discourses. The young worker approaches Rilke’s ideal of coping with scarce material possessions: he is not limited by societal definition of the poor/ industrial worker but is capable of finding purpose and satisfaction in spite of his modest income. Comparison to the Russian ideal poor, as personified by Sonya from Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, reveals similar ideas and ideals. Living in St. Petersburg with a drunkard of a father and a mentally unstable step-mother, this teenage girl makes a decision to prostitute herself in order to relieve the misery of her starving siblings. Reminiscent of Devushkin’s dilemma, Sonya is constantly being constructed by others who project very different identities onto her: “[...] before Sonya even utters a word, her father, Raskolnikov, and Luzin, present competing identities for her ranging from a model of Christian self-sacrifice to a common prostitute” (Blake 255). Dostoevsky’s text elucidates that this heroine’s personality does not correspond to any of these ideas. In spite of extreme hardships and the acute feeling of shame, she manages to sustain her integrity and “innocence in the midst of degradation” (Frank *Dostoevsky. The Mantle* 500). Sonya never loses her “burning purity of religious faith” (Frank *Dostoevsky. The Mantle* 500) which gives her personal strength without producing detachment from reality. The other-worldly images of Sonya projected by her father and Raskolnikov as well as the socialist ideal of Lebeziatnikov are countered by her

“practical side” (Blake 268). Her parents’ death and the appearance of a benefactor for her siblings free Sonya from the familiar responsibilities. She chooses to follow the man she loves, Raskolnikov<sup>89</sup>, an accused murderer struggling with the concept of Christian ethics and radical ideology, into Siberia. There, living in harsh conditions, Sonya finds personal happiness via her unceasing effort to improve the circumstances of others: she assists other prisoners with communication with their loved ones, provides for Raskolnikov in prison, informs his family of his life, and makes sure that he comes under the protection of authorities. Her actions are not encouraged by primitive understanding of Christian doctrine nor does she perceive her time in Siberia as transitory. Sonya exercises her agency according to her own personal convictions. She is a unique individual who is not defined by her belonging to a particular social class. Sonya’s integrity and not utilitarian benefits made possible by her efforts make her a respectable and admired member of the community:

There was another question he [Raskolnikov] could not decide: why were they all [prisoners] so fond of Sonia? She did not try to win their favor; she rarely met them, sometimes only she came to see him at work for a moment. And yet everybody knew her, they knew that she had come out to follow him, knew how and where she lived. She never gave them money, did them no particular services. Only once at Christmas she sent them all presents of pies and rolls. But by degrees closer relations sprang up between them and Sonia. She would write and post letters for them to their relations. Relations of the prisoners who visited the town, at their instructions, left with Sonia presents and money for them. Their wives and

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<sup>89</sup> Sonya’s love remains unrequited until Raskolnikov repents his deed and finds his inner balance.

sweethearts knew her and used to visit her. And when she visited Raskolnikov at work, or met a party of the prisoners on the road, they all took off their hats to her. “Little mother Sofya Semyonovna, you are our dear, good little mother,” coarse branded criminals said to that frail little creature. She would smile and bow to them and everyone was delighted when she smiled. They even admired her gait and turned round to watch her walking; they admired her too for being so little, and, in fact, did not know what to admire her most for.

Importantly, Dostoevsky’s Sonya is not to be read as an aestheticized image. Rather, this author “establishes a model for action to be emulated, not an idealized woman meant only to inspire faith” (Blake 268). As Dostoevsky’s 1877 entry to *Diary of a Writer* indicates, this author aimed for a social change when creating Sonya’s character. By depicting a destitute young woman as a strong, worthy individual, he hoped to “encourage Russians to improve social and economic conditions for women by extending to them equal access to education and employment” (cited in Blake 269). A holistic image of the poor, such as Dostoevsky’s Sonya, a multi-faceted perception of destitution can serve as an interpretation of Rilke’s words about poverty when he claims to strive “Armuth und Reichthum eine Weile mit ihren reinsten Maaßen zu messen”; consideration of any person as an individual who cannot be merely defined in political and social terms allows for appreciation of multiple walks of life: “denn wie sollte es, auch hier wieder, nicht dazu kommen, daß man beide [Armut und Reichthum] rühmt, wenn man sie recht erkennt”<sup>90</sup>.

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<sup>90</sup> Letter to Hermann Pongs written from October 21<sup>st</sup>, 1924. *Briefe aus Muzot*, p. 332.

Rilke's poverty concept has undergone a significant metamorphosis, developing from naturalistic images in his early works through the idea that destitution cannot be defined and represented objectively. Any societal definition of the poor projects a set of pre-conceived ideas on individuals, such as their helplessness, immaturity, and intellectual deficiency, which leads to a conflicted self-perception for people of limited means. Teachings of the medieval theologian Meister Eckhart, whom Rilke saw as his unknown mentor, help to elucidate Rilke's ideal of poverty in his later works. Contrary to previous interpretations of Rilke's statements as aestheticization of poverty, the present analysis proposes to view his ideal poverty as Eckhart's "poverty of spirit", or freedom from any identities, necessities, and desires imposed by society.

Rilke's encounter with Russian culture can be read as making a twofold contribution to channeling the poet's perception towards a greater emphasis on spirituality and inner strength. The sight of simple Russian believers who were capable of finding inner balance through prayer provided the poet with an alternative model of the poor. Standing in front of the icons, these people transcended their lower class identity and experienced themselves as valuable individuals connected with God and all His creation through space and time. Russian spirituality was of paramount importance in sustaining an individual at times of hardship. Rilke's extensive occupation with Russian literature also left an indelible mark on the worldview of the poet. A comparative analysis of works by Rilke and Dostoevsky reveals that some of the key poverty images in Rilke's later repertoire are based on the scenes created by this acclaimed Russian author. For instance, Malte's Paris was constructed by Rilke with imagery of St. Petersburg destitution in mind. The contribution of Russian literature to the development of Rilke's

poverty concept goes beyond simple intertextual borrowings. Dostoevsky's idea that the tragedy of the poor lies in a constant influx of identities constructed by others that are projected on a destitute individual and lead to a conflicted self-perception were apt to lead Rilke to refuse creating a concrete image of poverty. His heavy use of simile in *Das Buch vom Armut und Tode* and his attribute-less community of the poor in *Aufzeichnungen* allow avoiding a rigid definition of the poor. Rilke's late depiction of an industrial worker in *Der Brief eines jungen Arbeiters* moves away completely from discussing social problems, and is focused instead on several mental barriers. Taboo on sexual pleasure and the guilt associated with the figure of Christ serve as societal constructions which prevent inner harmony and spiritual growth. Consideration of the development of Rilke's poverty concept and his involvement with Russian culture allows for making a parallel between such mental barriers and the societal image of poverty. Negative connotations exacerbate mental anguish of the destitute and do not allow them to recognize the positive facets their lives may have. Rilke's worker is depicted as a well-rounded individual, both intellectually and spiritually, whose material circumstances do not prevent him from personal growth. Such an image evokes Dostoevsky's Sonya at the end of her spiritual journey, when her integrity prevails over material deprivations and allows her to overcome the multitude of constructed by others identities. Rilke's statements in his letters, multiple parallels between his work and the Russian poverty discourses, as well as direction which the development of his poverty concept took all point to the great significance Russia played in the formation of Rilke's perception. His journey from depicting external circumstances of the poor to the refusal of creating any negativity-laden images and the emphasis on personal integrity to a significant degree

was prompted by his Russian encounter which had a transformative impact on Rilke as he experienced the other in this representational space that fostered his process of transculturation.

### **Chapter 3 Easter Bells, Universal Unity, and Altruistic Action: Elements of Russian Culture in Rilke's Perception of Love**

Rilke's poverty perception is inseparably intertwined with yet another major concept in his mind and imagination: love. For Malte, uncovering the mystery of things requires acceptance of life's unsightly facets, including personal identification with the outcasts: "Es kommt mir vor, als wäre das das Entscheidende: ob einer es über sich bringt, sich zu dem Aussätzigen zu legen und ihn zu erwärmen mit der Herzwärme der Liebesnächte [. . .]" (*Die Aufzeichnungen* KA 3:505). Rilke refers to such a relation as "love" indicating that love has been an inseparable part of Malte's exposure to the urban misery from the very beginning (Greaney 132). Such interconnectedness between poverty and love in Rilke's imagination along with the poet's appropriation of elements from Russian poverty discourses evoke the possibility of Russian cultural contributions to Rilke's contemplations on love. At the time of the poet's encounter with Russian culture, the theme of love was at the center of the intellectual pursuit in Russia. In fact, more literary and philosophical works focused on this topic appeared within a few decades around the turn of the twentieth century than during several previous centuries combined (Pachomova 46). The present chapter explores Rilke's concept of love<sup>91</sup> and seeks to identify his borrowings from the Russian culture.

Love is one of the major themes in Rilke's oeuvre, a "Leitmotiv" which he continuously revisited throughout his artistic career developing "in der deutschen

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<sup>91</sup> This chapter refers to love in Rilke's work primarily in terms of 'agape', or a "primarily God's love, even when expressed by humans [. . .] Agape is completely unselfish; it is sacrificial giving. Agape loves the other and thereby creates value in the other". This term stands in contrast to 'eros', the "acquisitive desire" (Lindberg 15).



Dichtung einzig dastehende Liebesauffassung” (Langenfeld 33). Edwin Langenfeld concisely summarizes Rilke’s unique approach to love:

[Der] Rilkesche Eros findet seine Mitte in dem merkwürdigen Gedanken von der besitzlosen Liebe, der willentlich unerfüllten, den Geliebten freilassenden, der „verhaltenen“ Liebe, deren Wesen am schönsten formuliert in den einzigen Versen aufklingt, die Rilke den *Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* beigegeben hat: *Du, der ichs nicht sage, daß ich bei Nacht/ weinend liege [...] Ach, in den Armen habe ich sie alle verloren/ du nur, du wirst immer geboren:/ weil ich niemals dich anhielt, halt ich dich fest.* (Langenfeld 33)

According to Rilke, authentic love places emphasis on the individual freedom and spiritual growth of both engaged parties which does not allow for any type of possession of or merging with the other. The desire to possess a lover has been perceived by Rilke as an obsession that distorts and destroys the great mystery of love, as is reflected in his *Requiem für eine Freundin* (1908):

Wo ist der Mann, der Recht hat auf Besitz?  
...  
Denn *das* ist Schuld, wenn irgendeines Schuld ist:  
die Freiheit eines Lieben nicht vermehren  
um alle Freiheit, die man in sich aufbringt. (KA 1:420)

Perception of the loved one as a part of the self is not only limiting to the freedom and development of the other, but is also dangerous to one's own personality. Rilke saw “the problem of love as the problem of identity” (Williamson 386). Engagement in a love

relationship does not encourage formation of an individual – as many people hope it would – but it requires a full-fledged sense of self that can endure “the need and terror of merging, and the problems of living with another person” (Williamson 387). In Rilke’s eyes, the main mistake young couples often commit is “daß sie [...] sich einander hinwerfen, wenn die Liebe über sie kommt, sich ausstreuen, so wie sie sind in all ihrer Unaufgeräumtheit, Unordnung, Wirrnis...” (*Briefe an einen jungen Dichter* KA 4:535), which unfailingly depletes the relationship of its happiness and meaning:

Da verliert jeder sich um des anderen willen und verliert den anderen und viele andere, die noch kommen wollten. Und verliert die Weiten und die Möglichkeiten, tauscht das Nahen und Fliehen leiser, ahnungsvoller Dinge gegen eine unfruchtbare Ratlosigkeit, aus der nichts mehr kommen kann; nichts als ein wenig Ekel, Enttäuschtheit und Armut und die Rettung in eine der vielen Konventionen [ . . . ] (*Briefe an einen jungen Dichter* KA 4:535)

Rilke’s “Eros der Ferne” does not exclude the possibility of finding a form of togetherness in spite of the fact that his love ideal has been described as coming “[m]it einem selten extremer gelebten Opfer an menschlicher Gemeinsamkeit” (Langenfeld 35). Rilke was never able to build a lasting relationship based on his love ideals<sup>92</sup>, yet his contemplations on marriage led him to perceive it as positive. The philosophy of non-possession and extreme individuality calls and allows for the following kind of companionship:

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<sup>92</sup> See Alan Williamson’s article *Rilke, Love, and Solitude* for a discussion on Rilke’s unsuccessful attempts to establish a stable relationship.

In marriage, the point is not to achieve a rapid union by tearing down and toppling all boundaries. Rather, in a good marriage each person appoints the other to be the guardian of his solitude, and thus shows him the greatest faith he can bestow. The *being-together* of two human beings is an impossibility; where it nonetheless seems to be present it is a limitation, a mutual agreement that robs one or both parts of their fullest freedom and development. Yet once it is recognized that even among the *closest* people there remain infinite distances, a wonderful coexistence can develop once they succeed in loving the vastness between them that affords them the possibility of seeing each other in their full gestalt before a vast sky!

(Letter to Emanuel von Bodman from August 17, 1901 cited in Baer 36).

While emphasizing the importance of individuality and personal growth of both partners, Rilke firmly believed in inherent differences between the two genders. According to his perceptions, women have a significantly deeper understanding of love and have traditionally been a moving force behind building and maintaining relationships: “Sie haben Jahrhunderte lang die ganze Liebe geleistet, sie haben immer den vollen Dialog gespielt, beide Teile” (*Die Aufzeichnungen* KA 3:549). A man, on the contrary, not only failed to embrace the mystery of love but also impeded a woman’s natural desire to experience it “mit seiner Zerstreutheit, mit seiner Nachlässigkeit, mit seiner Eifersucht, die auch eine Art Nachlässigkeit war” (*Die Aufzeichnungen* KA 3:549). Rilke believed that harmony and personal fulfillment can only be achieved if men recognize the seriousness and difficulty of love. Revealing men as “verdorben vom leichten Genuß wie alle Dilettanten” who stand only “im Geruch der Meisterschaft”, he

calls on every man to recognize his ignorance and accept limitation in the ability to love: “Wie aber [...] wenn wir ganz von vorne begännen die Arbeit der Liebe zu lernen, die immer für uns getan worden ist? Wie, wenn wir hingingen und Anfänger würden, nun, da sich vieles verändert” (*Die Aufzeichnungen* KA 3:550). Women, on the contrary, should remain true to their nourishing and patient nature accepting love’s hardships and growing from their suffering. Rilke’s philosophy denies perception of man and woman as creatures of identical abilities and interests depicting woman’s readiness to take on man’s roles and (erroneous) thinking as a betrayal of self. Reflecting on the presence of young girls in the museums, Malte makes the following observation:

Jetzt, da so vieles anders wird, wollen sie sich verändern. Sie sind ganz nahe daran, sich aufzugeben und *so* von sich zu denken, wie Männer etwa von ihnen reden könnten, wenn sie nicht da sind. Das scheint ihnen ihr Fortschritt. Sie sind fast schon überzeugt, daß man einen Genuß sucht und wieder einen und noch stärkeren Genuß: daß darin das Leben besteht [...] Sie haben schon angefangen, sich umzusehen, zu suchen: sie, deren Stärke immer darin bestanden hat, gefunden zu werden. (*Die Aufzeichnungen* KA 3:549)

Multiple contemplations on romantic love between two concrete partners do not exhaust Rilke’s understanding of this topic. Looking through the eyes of an artist, he ultimately chooses God as the entity who can allow the experience of “besitzloser Liebe”. Such one-directional love isolates an individual from the community<sup>93</sup>. Yet it serves as a

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<sup>93</sup> Langenfeld elucidates Rilke’s emphasis on the fact that art demands a sacrifice of participation in the fellow human community: “Weil er ‚kein Schicksal haben‘ darf, betont Rilke immer wieder, er habe ‚keine Übung mit Menschen‘, er sei ein Mann, ‚bei dem niemand wirklich innerlich Zulaß hat‘, er dürfte ‚seine Herzkraft nicht am Menschlichen aufbinden‘, es sei sein Los, ‚gleichsam am Menschlichen vorbei ans

prerequisite for grasping the essence of art and personal transformation into an artist. A depiction of such metamorphosis concludes Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen* where the prodigal son "[tritt] an die Stelle der großen Liebenden" (Schings 90). The prodigal son grasps that the love of his family members poses a danger to his developing self. Living among them, he amounts to nothing more than a person "dem sie aus seiner kleinen Vergangenheit und ihren eigenen Wünschen längst ein Leben gemacht hatten" (*Die Aufzeichnungen* KA 3:630). In their eyes, his individual self is dissipated. Instead, he is seen as "das gemeinsame Wesen, das Tag und Nacht unter der Suggestion ihrer Liebe stand, zwischen ihrer Hoffnung und ihrem Argwohn, vor ihrem Tadel oder Beifall" (*Die Aufzeichnungen* KA 3:549). Emancipation from the possessive familial love allows the prodigal son to learn the art of "besitzloser Liebe"; he grasps how "den geliebten Gegenstand mit den Strahlen seines Gefühls zu durchscheinen, statt ihn darin zu verzehren" and "durch die immer transparentere Gestalt der Geliebten die Weiten zu erkennen, die sie seinem unendlichen Besitzenwollen auftat" (*Die Aufzeichnungen* KA 3:631).

Significant emphasis on individuality, understanding of love as a lifetime work process, belief in the impossibility to possess the other and the lack of necessity to do so give the perception of Rilke's love concept a unique quality. This perception is challenged by a thorough analysis of Rilke's contemplations which reveals borrowings from both Western European and Russian theories of love. Research on potential influences on and contributions to the development of Rilke's love concept focuses primarily on German-speaking philosophical and literary traditions. Hans-Jürgen Schings traces Rilke's thoughts on love back to his encounter with Spinoza's theorem of the

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Äußerste zu kommen". (37)

“Nichtwiederliebe Gottes”, which also alludes to the idea found in Goethe’s *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. Schings elucidates that Rilke became interested in familiarizing himself with Spinoza’s work after briefly reading Goethe’s homage to this philosopher in his 14<sup>th</sup> book of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. There, Goethe identifies the famous “Philines Satz” as the catalyst of his own contemplations on the “Nichtwiederliebe Gottes”:

Jenes wunderliche Wort: „Wer Gott recht liebt, muß nicht verlangen, daß Gott ihn wieder liebe“ [. . .], erfüllte mein ganzes Nachdenken.

Uneigennützig zu sein in allem, am eigennützigsten in Liebe und Freundschaft, war meine höchste Lust, meine Maxime, meine Ausübung, so daß jenes freche spätere Wort: „Wenn ich dich liebe, was geht’s dich an?“ mir recht aus dem Herzen gesprochen ist. (cited in Schings 93)

Despite Rilke’s fascination with Spinoza’s work and his lack of interest in Goethe<sup>94</sup> at that point, philosophical reflections of the latter come significantly closer to his own conclusions. Lou Andreas-Salomé notes:

Dabei entschwand ihm (Rilke), daß das für ihn eigentlich Bedeutsame an diesem Problem ganz woanders lag als im spinozistischen Verhalten eines Philosophen oder dem erotischen der großen Liebenden, die sich ans Objekt hingeben – selbst ohne Gegenliebe. Was ihn darin so tief traf, war im Grunde fast das Entgegengesetzte: durch die Gewalt der Liebe nicht nur das Abtun der Gegenliebe, sondern auch, sozusagen, des Objektes selbst. Was vulgär ausgedrückt liegt meist recht mißverständlich gebrauchten Philinenwort: “Wenn ich dich liebe, was gehts dir an!“, kann

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<sup>94</sup> Rilke’s “einzige Anspielung af Goethe” from his later works is found in *Die Aufzeichnungen* where, ironically, Goethe is being criticized as “der größte Dichter” who was incapable of understanding the love of the “großen Liebenden” Bettina von Arnim thus showing “die Grenze seiner Größe”.

so wenig „selbstlos“ liebend gemeint sein, daß es heißen könnte: „Stör mich dabei nicht!“ (cited in Schings 93-94).

Schings also argues that the development of Rilke's love concept was undoubtedly shaped by the thought of Georg Simmel, whom Rilke knew personally and whose lectures he attended in 1898-1901 and 1905. These lectures reflected Simmel's concept of unrequited love and his understanding of God both of which referred back to Spinoza's theory. His image of God was "der Gott Spinoza's, von dem, weil er selbst kein einzelnes Wesen ist, nicht verlangt werden dürfte, dass er unsere Liebe zu ihm erwidere" (cited in Schings 96). This God concept is marked by the unity of all, which is also found in Rilke's writing. Simmel wrote: "Nur dies könne man sagen, dass gerade weil Gott, unendlich und allumfassend, jedes Einzelwesen einschliesst, unsere Liebe zu ihm ein Theil der unendlichen Liebe sei, mit der er sich selbst liebt" (cited in Schings 96).

A few years later, Simmel enables Rilke to revisit Goethe with his work *Goethe*, published in 1913. Simmel's analysis left an indelible impression on Rilke as is manifested by his letter to Andreas-Salomé from 2<sup>nd</sup> December, 1913<sup>95</sup>. There, Rilke reports that he read Simmel's *Goethe* "mit ununterbrochener Zustimmung und Freude" (cited in Schings 94). This work contains a discussion on Goethe's depiction of love which stands in contrast to the conventional concept, where love is "als eine Wechselwirkung empfunden" (Schings 95). According to Simmel, in Goethe's writings love is conveyed as "ein rein immanentes Ereignis und als habe seine Innerlichkeit dessen Kosten gleichsam allein zu tragen; und es ist wundervoll, wie das Reservierte, Selbstsüchtige, ja Rücksichtslose, das mit solchem solipsistischen Erleben der Liebe sich

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<sup>95</sup> P. 319 in *Rainer Maria Rilke – Lou Andreas-Salomé. Briefwechsel*. Ed. Ernst Pfeiffer. Zürich: Wiesbaden, 1952. Print.

zu verbinden pflegt, bei ihm nie spürbar wird” (cited in Schings 95). Summarizing, Schings states that Rilke appropriated the following concept of love from the Western European tradition: “die autonome, absolute Liebe ohne Habenwollen oder Zweckrücksicht, das absolute Selbstsein als Funktion des Lebens, die Reinheit beider Reihen im Gesetz der eigenen Existenz” (95-96).

As one of the most significant sources for the formation of Rilke’s love concept, Rilke scholarship also points to the writings and persona of his “most important mentor in life as well as his lover from 1897 to 1900”, Lou Andreas-Salomé (Fiedler 20). Like Rilke, Andreas-Salomé perceived love as a force which shatters the boundaries of the familiar and encourages a deeper understanding of the universe. This idea can be gleaned from her *Lebensüberblick* where she notes that the “fragwürdige[n], von der Vernunft kritisierte[n] oder belächelte[n] Situation der Liebesüberschwenglichkeit” tends to elicit no shame but a feeling of gratitude “weil sie so verkehrte Maßstäbe anlegt; weil sie zum zeitweisen Durchbruch verhilft dem, was uns als das Notwendigste, Selbstgegebenste erschien, ehe wir uns in der Realität auskannten” (*Aufsätze* 2:26). The state of being exposed to new, induced by love thinking patterns makes the interconnectedness of all things palpable, including the underlying unity of people:

Lieband unternehmen wir aneinander gleichsam Schwimmübungen am Korken, während deren wir so tun, als sei der Andere als solcher das Meer selber, das uns trägt. Deshalb wird er uns dabei so einzig-kostbar wie Urheimat und zugleich so beirrend und verwirrend wie Unendlichkeit. Wir, bewußt gewordene und dadurch zerstückte Allweite, haben einander beim Hin und Her dieses Zustandes gegenseitig aufzuhalten, auszuhalten –



haben unsere Grundeinheit geradezu beweisend zu vollziehen: nämlich leiblich, leibhaftig. (*Aufsätze 2:27*)

The awareness of such “Grundeinheit”, however, does not and should not intervene with preserving a salient sense of self. Andreas-Salomé attributes great significance to maintaining distance between two lovers stating that “diese positive, materielle Verwirklichung der Grundtatsache [...] ist dennoch nur eine lauteste Behauptung gegenüber der nicht dadurch aufgehobenen Vereinzelung eines Jeden in seinen Personalgrenzen” (*Aufsätze 2:27*). Similar conclusions permeate her reflections on a different type of Eros, friendship, description of which comes closest to Rilke’s love concept:

Heißt „Freundsein“ hier doch das beinahe Beispiellose, das die stärksten Gegensätzlichkeiten des Lebens überwindet: dort zu sein, wo Beiden das Gottgleiche ist, und die gegenseitige Einsamkeit zu teilen – *um* sie zu vertiefen, - so tief, daß man im Andern sich selber erfaßt als aller menschlichen Zeugung Hingegebenen. Der Freund bedeutet damit den Schützer davor, jemals Einsamkeit zu verlieren an was es sei – ja auch noch Schützer von *einander*. (*Aufsätze 2:30*)

Andreas-Salomé’s contemplations on gender have likely contributed to Rilke’s idea of inherent differences between man and woman. Her essay *Mensch als Weib* (1899) serves as an illustration of her stance on this issue. There, Andreas-Salomé explores characteristics of male and female reproductive cells and creates a parallel between their biological behavior and the essence of the two genders. Reminiscent of a male gamete, a man is “wirksam mit einer Einzeltat seiner selbst, denn er lebt in fortschreitender

Sonderung aller Kräfte, die zu vielen Einzelleistungen und Einzelbetätigungen auseinanderstreben” (Andreas-Salomé *Aufsätze* 2:102). A woman, on the contrary, “rastet und ruht in dem, was es einmal in sich eingesaugt, mit sich identifiziert hat” (*Aufsätze* 2:102). For Andreas-Salomé, “das Mütterliche” resembles the essence of the female psyche “in allen ihren Äußerungsformen auf allen Gebieten, indem für sie Tun und Sein viel intimer verknüpft sind, als dies beim Mann” (*Aufsätze* 2:102). These inherent differences color the experience of love: for a man, the moment of satisfaction is at the center while for a woman love manifests itself as an all-encompassing phenomenon, the apex of her human existence (Pachomova 37-38). Like Rilke, Andreas-Salomé stresses the importance of embracing one’s gender. She cautions against disregarding its nature calling “die prinzipielle geistige und praktische Konkurrenz mit dem Mann” a dangerous and unfruitful endeavor: “ein wahres Teufelswerk, und der äußerliche Ehrgeiz, der dabei geweckt wird, ungefähr die tödlichste Eigenschaft, die das Weib sich anzüchten kann” (*Aufsätze* 2:110).

Analysis of Andreas-Salomé’s fiction leads scholars, such as H. W. Panthel, to the similar conclusion about her role in the formation of Rilke’s love concept, i.e. that she was the “Ursprung der Liebeslehre” for Rilke:

In der Erzählung *Fenitschka* – ebenfalls aus dem Jahre 1898 – propagiert Lou Andreas eine Abwandlung der ‚besitzlosen Liebe‘ in dem Sinne, daß sich die Trägerin der in dieser Erzählung geäußerten Leitgedanken für die Ehe als untauglich bezeichnet. Wie, so fragt sie, kann ein junger Mensch, der seine ganze Jugend darangesetzt hat, um frei und selbstständig zu

werden, der das Leben gerade um des Freiseins willen liebgewonnen hat –  
wie kann dieser Mensch die Ehe wollen! (156)

Andreas-Salomé's other characters manifest a similar understanding of love, different aspects of which are illuminated by various situations and protagonist personalities. For instance, Irene von Geyern from the story *Zurück ins All* (1899) strongly denies “daß die Liebe uns aus unserer Vereinzelung erlös[e]”, while Adine from *Eine Ausschweifung* (1898) is reminiscent of Rilke's great lovers due to her passionate readiness take on immense suffering: “[Adine] ging einen Weg der gewaltsamen Selbstkasteiung aus lauter hilfloser Liebesehnsucht” (cited in Pathel 156).

Although born and raised in St. Petersburg, Andreas-Salomé cannot be fully considered a representative of Russian culture due to her heritage, European education and social circle. Western European thought, as personified by Freud, Nietzsche and Spinoza, contributed greatly to her worldview. Scholars, such as A. Livingston<sup>96</sup>, argued that Karl Jung's idea of the collective unconscious played a role in the formation of her love concept. However, what is less known is her indebtedness to the Russian philosophical thought, particularly to the works of Vladimir Solovyov (Pachomova 39). In spite of the fact that Andreas-Salomé did not perceive contemplations of this philosopher as particularly insightful referring to him as someone, “der [...] in geistreichen Damenzirkeln weit besser zu glänzen versteht, als unter den Vertretern strenger Geistesarbeit”<sup>97</sup>, Solovyov epitomized in her eyes the very spirit of Russia. She calls him “eine der charakteristischsten Physiognomien des eigentlichen byzantinischen

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<sup>96</sup> Livingstone, Angela. *Lou Andreas-Salomé*. Gordon Fraser Gallery, 1984. Print.

<sup>97</sup> Andreas-Salomé. *Russische Philosophie und semitscher Geist* 251 Band 1

Rußlands”<sup>98</sup>, i.e. the representative of the culture where religion is perceived as “das Erste und Gegebene, woran die übrigen Kulturerrungenschaften zunächst anzuknüpfen pflegen”<sup>99</sup>.

At the heart of Solovyov’s philosophy lies “the image of all-oneness as the embodiment of the “universal soul” (Etkind 29). Love<sup>100</sup>, in turn, is the force and process that encourage an individual to make the first step towards recognizing the importance of the other and ultimately this universal interconnectedness of all things:

[An individual man] finds himself as an isolated element of the universal whole and he affirms this, his fragmentary existence, in egoism as the whole for himself; and he wants to be the “all” himself and exist completely separate from everything – outside the truth. As the actual practical and fundamental principal of individual life, egoism directs and permeates its entirety [. . .], in a theoretical consciousness of truth alone, it can in no way outweigh and abolish it. Until the living force of egoism meets another living force opposed to it [. . .]. The meaning and worth of love, as a feeling, is that it really forces us, with all our being, to acknowledge for another the same absolute central significance which, because of the power of our egoism, we are conscious of only in ourselves. Love is important [. . .] as the transfer of all our interest in life from ourselves to another, as the shifting of the very center of our personal lives. (Solovyov 94-100)

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 250

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 249

<sup>100</sup> Solovyov primarily focuses on “sexual love” which he defines as follows: “I call sexual love (for want of a better name) the exclusive attachment (both reciprocal and unilateral) between persons of different sex, capable of being with one another as in the relation of man and wife, not at all predetermining in this the question concerning significance of the physiological aspect of the matter” (Solovyov 100).

As Owen Barfield put it, Solovyov's love resembles a "cross with both horizontal and vertical coordinates. Its horizontal, human, one-one relation is made possible by its other vertical, all-in-one co-ordinate" (11). The light in the eyes of a loving person is to be seen as a "primitive and transient glimpse of the Divine image in another human being, and thus of God's love for man, which is itself the ground of the all-in-unity idea" (11).

Alexandr Etkind sees Solovyov's moral philosophy as the "origin of optimism" and enthusiasm of Andreas-Salomé's psychoanalytic works that differentiate them from "the gloomy stoicism of late Freud" (28). Reminiscent of Solovyov's thought, Andreas-Salomé saw the very essence of love in the "unity of subject and object that encompasses the entire universality of nature and culture" (Etkind 29). This perception encouraged Andreas-Salomé to interpret concrete phenomena significantly more positively as compared to her European colleagues. For instance, while Freud described narcissism as an "infantile condition" produced by either sickness or misfortune, Andreas-Salomé stressed the fact that Narcissus looked not in the human-made mirror but in the spring. Therefore, his love for himself should be interpreted as an "affective identification with existence": what he saw was "not the reflection of his own face but his divine oneness with the infinite world of nature" (Etkind 28-29).

Andreas-Salomé's engagement with Solovyov's work encouraged Rilke to familiarize himself with it and later to perceive this philosopher as an inseparable part of his Russian image. Solovyov's significance was also reinforced in Rilke's eyes by his Russian guide Sophia Schill who wrote in her letter to Rilke from August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1900:

Und noch ein Tod hat mich in diesem Sommer zutiefst betroffen – der Tod unseres Philosophen und Metaphisikers Wladimir Solowjow. Denn diese

mächtige Gestalt war doch nach Tolstoi die zweite Hauptfigur in unserem Leben. Sein unerschöpflicher geistiger Reichtum und seine Schönheit haben ihn in der Tat zum Übermenschen gemacht. (Azadovskii *Rilke und Rußland* 202-203)

A comparison of Solovyov's and Rilke's works reveals that their beliefs are united by certain aspects. However, their theories are not in a complete agreement with each other. The most significant difference between the thinking of these two men concerns the necessity of a concrete love object. While Rilke believed that those who embraced true love "schon mit den ersten Schritten [den verlorenen Geliebten] überholen" would project their passion onto God (*Die Aufzeichnungen* KA 3:618), Solovyov claimed that "it is possible to love only something living and concrete" (108). God in Rilke's understanding cannot be perceived as a concrete object but is rather "nur eine Richtung der Liebe [...], kein Liebesgegenstand" (*Die Aufzeichnungen* KA 3:628). Firm belief in and awareness of God's presence as well as His intimate connection with human feeling of love is also one of the fundamental elements of Solovyov's philosophy, but here God does not replace the concrete living lover. For Solovyov, faith is a pre-requisite for love since perception of a loved one as a "being of unconditional significance" can only be enabled by "affirming [him/ her] [...] as something that exists in God and in this sense possesses infinite significance" (119). Love must unite three aspects: the physical, spiritual, and socio-moral. Purely spiritual love "has to be satisfied with a dreamy and sterile tenderness devoid of any real objective and vital aim". Solovyov compares it to "one of the little angels of ancient artwork, who only have a head and little wings and nothing more". Such bodily design suggests their "little wings have sufficient strength

only for the purpose of maintaining them motionless at a certain height". Likewise, love without a concrete, corporeal object "finds itself in just such an elevated but extremely unsatisfied situation" (116).

In spite of this fundamental difference in the understanding of love, certain elements of Solovyov's philosophy most likely were appreciated by Rilke. Rilke's conception of love which requires "schwere Arbeit" and which likely cannot be grasped to its fullness during a lifetime potentially signifies his selective appropriation of Solovyov's ideas. Solovyov criticized perception of love as a "state that is endured by human being, but does not oblige one to anything" (102) elucidating his statement via a comparison with another "natural process emerging independently from us": the gift of speech. He noted that an "exclusively passive and unconscious attitude" to language would allow humans to produce "natural combinations of sounds and words for the expression of feelings and notions involuntarily passing through our soul", but "neither science nor art nor a civic way of life" would be achievable. The reason why humans were capable of creating community and culture lies in the fact that "we relate to verbal activity and to the production of speech gradually more and more consciously and by our own initiative" (103). In contrast, love has not been consciously reflected upon as a natural gift that fosters the development of humanity. Consequently, it "remains as before, completely in the dark realm of vague fits of passion and involuntary attractions" (103).

Like speech development which requires not only conscious reflection but also the presence of a community as well as involvement of many generations, love for Solovyov is not attainable by a single person, an individual couple, or even a separate generation. The ultimate achievement of love, i.e. awareness of and conscious

participation in the universal interconnectedness “can be definitely realized and embodied only in the plentitude of perfected individuals” (126). Solovyov saw personal effort in completing the task of love as a moral responsibility of each individual since disregarding it would discard combined collective labor of many generations. This approach leads to a unique perception of the other which does not allow for repudiation of any human being regardless of their social standing, sensibility or any other characteristic. The significance of the other’s well-being is no longer limited to the definition of righteousness by religious moral code but is to be sought in the inherent interdependence required for the development of the self. Hence, complete indifference to others is no longer possible.

Emphasis on individual responsibility in the work of love permeates Rilke’s work as well. Like Solovyov, he criticizes the predominant superficial attitude towards this natural gift comparing the current state of love to “ein Stück echter Spitze” that “in eines Kindes Spiellade fällt und freut und nicht mehr freut und endlich daliegt unter Zerbrochenem und Auseinandergenommenem, schlechter als alles” (*Die Aufzeichnungen* KA 3:550). Rilke calls for individual awareness of this problem and names formidable personal efforts as prerequisite for its solution: “[. . .] ist es nicht an uns, uns zu verändern? Können wir nicht versuchen, uns ein wenig zu entwickeln, und unseren Anteil Arbeit in der Liebe langsam auf uns nehmen nach und nach?” (*Die Aufzeichnungen* KA 3:550).

The thought of ultimate similarity between learning to love and new language acquisition is also present in Rilke’s writings. For instance, for the prodigal son from *Die Aufzeichnungen* the enormous demands placed on him by the task of love become tangible via its comparison to learning a new language. “Die stille, ziellose Arbeit [der



Liebe]” makes him feel “wie einer, der eine herrliche Sprache hört und fiebernd sich vornimmt, in ihr zu dichten” (*Die Aufzeichnungen* KA 3:633). It is precisely this parallel that Rilke uses to depict genuine love as an experience of the future which, reminiscent of Solovyov’s philosophy, cannot be achieved within a lifetime of a single individual: “Noch stand ihm die Bestürzung bevor, zu erfahren, wie schwer diese Sprache sei: er wollte es nicht glauben zuerst, daß ein langes Leben darüber hingehen könne, die ersten, kurzen Scheinsätze zu bilden” (*Die Aufzeichnungen* KA 3:633).

Language as speech and the intricate language of love facilitate understanding and spiritual growth. They also enable the ultimate achievement of human civilization: art. Affinity of sexual love and creative output of a human being permeates texts of both Rilke and Solovyov. Both of them perceive the general reproductive force in nature as intricately connected to and, in fact, being a part of the creative energy employed by a creating human. In accord with his all-oneness philosophy, Solovyov unites animalistic sexual drive with a spiritual engagement: “This force of physico-spiritual creativity in man is merely the transformation or *turning inward* of the same creative force that in nature, being outwardly focused, results in mindless, endless physical reproduction” (cited in Etkind 30). Rilke also perceives sexual pleasure as reminiscent of and directly correlated to artistic creativity, as is clearly expressed in his *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter*:

Denn auch das geistige Schaffen stammt von dem physischen her, ist eines Wesens mit ihm und nur wie eine leisere, entzücktere und ewigere Wiederholung leiblicher Wollust. „Der Gedanke, Schöpfer zu sein, zu zeugen, zu bilden“ ist nichts ohne seine fortwährende, große Bestätigung

und Verwirklichung in der Welt, nichts ohne die tausendfältige  
Zustimmung aus Dingen und Tieren [. . .] (KA 4:525)

Rilke's perception of love as labor which facilitates growth of the self and yet is not possible to complete during a lifetime pointed his attitude to the other in the direction of Solovyov's contemplations. For instance, his portrayal of the outcasts in *Die Aufzeichnungen* presumes unconditional worth of these individuals as well as Malte's inherent unity with them which lies beneath societal standards and purely logical reflection. Patrick Greeny notes: "Love in the *Notebooks* is first of all love for the leper and the outcast." (132). Malte's first step towards the development of his self is realization of the impossibility to repudiate anything or anyone, i.e. the awareness of the universal unity of things and people. This interconnectedness has always existed, and it is Malte's task to learn how to see it.

Solovyov's interpretation of love enjoyed positive reception by the Russian intellectual elite, including Zinaida Hippus, a "formative figure among members of the progressive Russian intelligentsia at the turn of the twentieth century" (Pachmuss *Zinaida Nikolaevna* 196). This distinguished poet, playwright, essayist, fiction writer, and critic agreed with Solovyov that "love is beyond the realm of physical time and death [...] It is triumph over death – the transformation of the mortal into immortal, the temporal into the eternal. It is higher than rational consciousness. It sublimates one's personality, for it is the actual abolition of selfishness and egocentricity" (Pachmuss *Zinaida Hippus* 63-64). Similarities between Solovyov's and Hippus' philosophies along with Rilke's familiarity with the work of the latter lead some scholars to conclude that Rilke was "inspired by Hippus' views on love" (Christa 59). For instance, Temira Pachmuss perceives Rilke's

love concept as fitting perfectly into Hippius' worldview: "Rilke wholeheartedly agreed with Hippius that love is life; through love man can transfigure the whole imperfect and fragile earth, sublimate human life in God, and elevate it to the realm of eternity and perfection" (Pachmuss *Dostoevskii* 393). Such perception appears to be supported by Rilke's oeuvre which contains a translation of Hippius' poem *Love is One* (1896), i.e. of the work where Hippius' "views on love are perhaps best expressed" (Pachmuss *Zinaida Hippius* 61). However, this fact along with Pachmuss' statement require careful analysis given some biographical data, namely statements by Rilke that contradict the assumption of the poet's complete agreement with Hippius.

Rilke's translation of *Love is One* does not reflect the poet's special appreciation of this work since he did not choose this poem himself. In March 1919, Rilke received a special request from Fega Frisch to translate several Russian poems, including two works by Hippius, for a German publication (Azadovskii *Rilke i Rossia 2011* 108). Furthermore, Rilke explicitly expressed his dissatisfaction with Hippius' poem in a letter to Fega Frisch from April 2nd, 1919: "Das Gedicht von Frau Hippius lag mir wenig, – ich mußte daher zu manchem Übergang greifen, der 'nicht dasteht'" (cited in Schmack 628).

In spite of this negative remark, Rilke still chose to translate the poem which is important considering Rilke's unique understanding of the translation process. In a letter to Duchess Aurelia Gallarati Scotti from the 9<sup>th</sup> of February 1923, Rilke states that he does not perceive translation as a recreation of the original in a different language. To him, translating "demands, as does creation itself, a poet in the state of grace – and that is something that one cannot command at will; it is a pure gift which may favor one early or late". Rilke's translations are products of his poetic inspiration and are inevitably touched

by his subjective perception. His translating activity was often a part of approaching a foreign culture and is best viewed as a two way process of reciprocal modification. While translating, Rilke mends self and the other in a free space of language where a completely new piece of literature is created. It is not to be seen as an exact copy of the original or as a purely Rilkean poem such as he could have written before experiencing its cultural context. “Übergänge”, or transitions employed by Rilke to enhance Hippius’ work elucidate his way of appropriating Hippius’ philosophy.

Rilke’s embellishment of Hippius’ poem is evident in the very first lines. Hippius begins her poem with images of fragmentation and incompleteness – a crushing wave on the seashore and capriciousness of human attraction:

Only once does a wave foam

And disperse.

The heart cannot live in treachery;

There is no betrayal: love is one<sup>101</sup>.

Instead of ‘treachery’, the Russian original contains the word *измена* [izmena], i.e. infidelity, which underlines Hippius’ primary emphasis on the experience and essence of romantic love. Unlike the breaking of waves and fleeting human passions, love is absolute. Rilke considerably changes this strophe bringing into play human will and constancy of the self:

Ein einziges Mal, wallt schäumend im Erheben

der Wille auf, der überfließt, der reine.

Das Herz vermag vom Wechsel nicht zu leben,

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<sup>101</sup> English translation of the poem by Temira Pachmuss closely captures the original and will, therefore, be used for this comparative analysis with Rilke’s version.

denn was heißt Wechsel: Liebe ist nur eine.

This contrast is even more palpable in the third line of the second strophe where Rilke translates Hippius' "Мы никогда не изменяем" ("We never commit adultery") with "Wir ändern niemals uns." The Russian language contains two very similarly sounding words, *измена* ([izmena] infidelity) and *изменение* ([izmenenie] change) which could have contributed to Rilke's misreading of Hippius' message. Hippius stressed the difference between these two terms drawing attention to the fact that *измена* [izmena] is to be equated with infidelity and "deviations from truth" while *изменение* [izmenenie] does not involve treachery. This perception can be gleaned from her letter to Khodasevich from August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1926: "I may change but I never betray, especially if some principle is involved" (cited in Pachmuss *Zinaida Hippius* 76).

Rilke's substitution of 'infidelity' with 'change' may also be seen as a reflection of his own philosophy, or one of the "Übergänge" he used to augment Hippius' work. The consecutive line in the Russian poem – "The soul is one – the love is one" – was accurately conveyed by Rilke as "daß eine Seele ist und Liebe – *eine*." Clearly both Hippius and Rilke agree on the existence of the absolute interconnectedness of all beings which can be grasped via the experience of love. The main difference between them lies in the perception of the Self and its relation to other human beings. For Hippius, understanding of the universal soul was unattainable in isolation. As Pachmuss writes: "She saw the human personality, personal love, and society as one inseparable unity [...]. Only as a participating member of the society can man realize his absolute significance on the universal scale and become an organic part of the universal unity" (Pachmuss *Zinaida Hippius* 64). Hence, the presence of a concrete love object as well as daily

interactions with others are necessary and serve as a pre-requisite for grasping the absolute love. Human actions in the physical world are of paramount importance.

In contrast to Hippius, Rilke perceived humans as inherently separated from the world around them. As Elaine Boney mentions in her analysis of Rilke's *Elegies*, Rilke thinks of a human being as someone "[who] lives in complete isolation from his surroundings, even from those beings most like himself. Love, wherein two individuals appear united, only heightens awareness of the isolation of man's inner Being, his Self" (13). Agreeing with the Russian poetess on the existence of the absolute Self, Rilke stressed the limitations placed on humans by their physical being. Humans are subject to time and space and therefore need to perceive objects as their immediate reality. This is not possible with such aspects of the absolute Being as, for instance, angels<sup>102</sup>, and, hence, prevents humans from acquiring a complete knowledge of the universe. Like Hippius, Rilke saw love as a means for discovering and grasping the absolute Self. Yet in his eyes, this knowledge requires a separation from all temporal dimensions of human existence, including connections with others within the society. Elaine Boney concisely summarizes:

The presence of the absolute within the individual and also in the world about him is signified by many symbols. Foremost among them is the lover. The lover challenges the Self to transform love and life itself into a completely spiritual form where the individual remains free from ties to the physical world. Love becomes not a goal, but a springboard for transcendence of the Self (16).

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<sup>102</sup> For a comprehensive analysis see Boney, Elaine. "The Concept of Being in Rilke's Elegies." *Symposium*. 25, 1961. 12-21. Print.

Such completely spiritual and undemanding love is incompatible with the corporeal world and is endangered by its impermanence:

[. . .] soweit sie [die Liebe] auch ihre Bahn durch die Himmel spannt, ihre Milchstraße aus Milliarden Sternen des Bluts, das Land unter diesen Himmeln liegt trüchtig. Nicht einmal die Götter, in den Verwandlungen ihrer Leidenschaft, waren mächtig genug die irdische Geliebte [...] aus den Verstrickungen dieses fruchtbaren Bodens zu befreien (Rilke *Das Testament* KA 4:716).

Rilke's perception of both Solovyov's and Hippius' works indicates that he identified with certain aspects of their philosophies, foremost the idea of the underlying unity of all beings that can be grasped via the experience of love. The Russian philosophers' insistence on the necessity of a concrete love object was subject to criticism by Rilke. In spite of his selective acceptance of the Russian philosophy of love, Rilke was deeply affected by those aspects he chose to appropriate. This can be gleaned from Rilke's own statement found in his later work *Das Testament* (1921):

Oh wenn es sie [eine ideale Geliebte] gab, dann war ihm geholfen, wie ihm damals, als Jüngling, anders geholfen wurde, da er nach Russland kam. Die Heimsuchungen seiner Kindheit hatten es mit sich gebracht, daß er, bis an das Ende seines zweiten Jahrzehnts, in der Voraussetzung lebte, einzeln und allein, einer, ihm feindseligen Welt gegenüberzustehen, ein täglich Aufgelehnter wider die Übermacht Aller. Aus dem Unrecht solcher Einstellung konnte, selbst bei echten Bewegtheiten, nur Entstelltes, Krakhaftes hervorgehen. Russland, nicht in langsamer Überredung, über

Nacht – wörtlich: über die erste Moskauer Nacht – löste ihn sanft aus dem bösen Zauber dieser Befangenheit [. . .] wie durch eine reine Herzensjahreszeit bereitete ihm das versöhnliche Land unerschöpfliche Beweise des Gegenteils. Wie glaubte er ihm; wie entzückte es ihn, brüderlich zu sein. Und wenn er auch im Bekenntnis dieses Einklangs [. . .] immer ein Angänger geblieben ist, er vergißt ihn nie, er weiß ihn, er übt ihn aus. (KA 4:718)

Rilke saw the major contribution of Russian culture to forming his identity by showing him that he was indeed a part of the universe. There is an irreconcilable opposition between him and other beings. He needs to gain awareness of the eternal interconnectedness of all. Importantly, this perception was formed in Rilke's mind and imagination after his encounter with Russian life and reality which included the deeply felt experience of sounds, such as the Easter bells on that crucial for the poet night.

Awareness of the universal unity which includes the Self allowed Rilke to find the right path towards grasping the essence of existence and approach the understanding of the Divine. Rilke's insistence on denying the necessity of a concrete love object contrasts his love concept with the love concepts developed by both Solovyov and Hippius. Yet the idea that the highest form of love does not require reciprocity or even a concrete beloved has its counterpart in other Russian discourses on love, especially in the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky. This idea is stated clearly in Dostoevsky's novel *Brothers Karamazov*, particularly in the conversation between the elder Zosima and Lise's mother, a middle-aged aristocratic woman. After observing and admiring how Zosima comforted poor



peasants and patiently listened to their concerns, Lise's mother touches on the core question of Dostoevsky's philosophy:

I love mankind so much that [. . .] I sometimes dream of giving up all, all I have [. . .] and going to become a sister of mercy [. . .] but [. . .] I close my eyes and ask myself: could you stand it for long on such a path? And if the sick man whose sores you are cleansing does not respond immediately with gratitude but, on the contrary, begins tormenting you with his whims, not appreciating and not noticing your philanthropic ministry, if he begins to shout at you, to make rude demands, even to complain to some sort of superiors [. . .] Will you go on loving or not? (57).

The elder, who has been interpreted as expressing Dostoevsky's ideals (cf. Peace 1982), elucidates the lack of necessity of and even the danger of receiving any type of reciprocity. The practice of true "active love" is undermined by expectations of praise. In his response to Lise's mother, Zosima mentions: "[. . .] if you spoke with me so sincerely just now in order to be praised [. . .] then of course you will get nowhere with our efforts at active love; it will all remain merely a dream, and your whole life will flit by like a phantom" (*Brothers Karamazov* 57). This perception is reminiscent of the plea of the Prodigal Son from Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen* who goes to great lengths trying to escape love and approval of others.

The answer to the question of Lise's mother is yes, humans must always strive to love. Yet this love, similarly to Rilke's concept of "besitzlose Liebe", is not easily achievable. Zosima says elsewhere: "Brothers, love is a teacher, but one must know how to acquire it, for it is hard to acquire, it is dearly bought, it is won slowly by long labor.

For we must love not only occasionally, for a moment, but for ever. Every one can love occasionally, even the wicked can.” Furthermore, Dostoevsky’s philosophy of “active love” calls for embracement of the whole universe, regardless of how unpleasant its certain aspects might be:

Love a man even in his sin, for that is the semblance of Divine Love and is the highest love on earth. Love all God’s creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love. (*Brothers Karamazov* 313)

Akin to Rilke’s contemplations, Dostoevsky’s concept of love is not associated with possession of the other or acquiring personal happiness. For this Russian author, “to love selflessly is [ . . . ] [foremost] to see the truth about human existence” (Montemaggi 81). It is a path to discovery of the Self and the universe. Perhaps the most important source for Dostoevsky’s philosophy was the Bible, especially the Gospel from St. John (Kjetsaa). This Gospel contains only one commandment – love thy neighbor – which is portrayed as a requirement for finding a personal connection with the Divine:

No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. We know that we live in him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit [ . . . ] If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. [ . . . ] And He has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother. (1 John 4:12-13, 4:20, 4:21)

Based upon the premise of universal interconnectedness, Dostoevsky's "active love" places great emphasis on continuous reflection on the own self and on personal responsibility. Just like a ripple in the water, internal condition of an individual along with its external manifestations, regardless how minute, can affect the world around and lead to unforeseen consequences. Zosima stresses the great responsibility each person carries by simply being in the world:

Every day and every hour, every minute, walk round yourself and watch yourself, and see that your image is a seemly one. You pass by a little child, spiteful, with ugly words, with wrathful heart; you may not have noticed the child, but he has seen you, and your image, unseemly and ignoble, may remain in his defenseless heart [ . . . ] you may have sown an evil seed in him and it may grow, and all because you were not careful before the child, because you did not foster in yourself a careful, actively benevolent love. (*Brothers Karamazov* 75)

The effect of an individual's inner state on the world around him/ her can also be gleaned from Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen* which indicates that Rilke possessed a sensitivity to the other similar to Dostoevsky's. Such sensitivity is enabled by the awareness of the universal unity. Malte describes his encounter with an unknown lady during his visit to a salon in Venice which brings to his attention his influence on the surrounding people:

Sie stand allein vor einem strahlenden Fenster und betrachtete mich; nicht eigentlich mit den Augen, die Ernst und nachdenklich waren, sondern geradezu mit dem Mund, der dem offenbar bösen Ausdruck meines Gesichtes ironisch nachahmte. Ich fühlte sofort die ungeduldige Spannung

in meinen Zügen und nahm ein gelassenes Gesicht an, worauf ihr Mund natürlich wurde [ . . . ] (*Die Aufzeichnungen* KA 3:625).

Importantly, this lady evokes in Malte's memory the image of Abelone, the great lover, "nachdem [Malte] lange an [sie] nicht gedacht hatte" (*Die Aufzeichnungen* KA 3:623).

His sensitivity to the other transpires only through an encounter with a woman gifted with the understanding of Rilkean love.

Clearly, Rilke's concept of love manifests some of the core principles of Dostoevsky's philosophy, such as denial of reciprocity, emphasis on personal responsibility, and perception of love as a gateway to understanding the essence of the universe. However, as it was the case with Solovyov's concepts, Rilke's perceptions diverge from Dostoevsky's views. For Dostoevsky, in spite of his denial of reciprocity, an individual's presence in the community, life within a society was mandatory. Zosima sends his young promising disciple Alyosha in the world advising him against joining the monastery. Being with the others and taking on a social role are of paramount importance for practicing the "active love." In contrast, Rilke's Prodigal Son must physically remove himself from the company of those who love him before he can grasp the essence of the Divine. What matters here is overcoming societal conventions of love. The Prodigal Son refuses to be loved in a way that is expected from his family members.

Similarly to the tragedy of the poor which lies in an instant influx of imposed identities, Rilke saw the main obstacle on the way of ideal love in people's desire to construct the other according to their wishes and/ or societal conventions. His "besitzlose Liebe" cannot be equated with the type of abstract love that Solovyov criticized. It is a love for an individual which refuses to place the beloved within the frame of socially

constructed expectations and which recognizes the personal limitations of human understanding of things. This love concept is already palpable in Rilke's *Das Buch der Bilder* (written in 1902 and 1906), for instance, in the poem *Die Stille* which depicts a tender address of the lyrical I to his beloved:

Hörst du Geliebte, ich hebe die Hände -

hörst du: es rauscht . . .

Welche Gebärde der Einsamen fände

sich nicht von vielen Dingen belauscht?

Hörst du, Geliebte, ich schließe die Lider

und auch das ist Geräusch bis zu dir.

Hörst du, Geliebte, ich hebe sie wieder . . .

. . . aber warum bist du nicht hier.

Der Abdruck meiner kleinsten Bewegung

bleibt in der seidenen Stille sichtbar;

unvernichtbar drückt die geringste Erregung

in den gespannten Vorhang der Ferne sich ein.

Auf meinen Atemzügen heben und senken

die Sterne sich.

Zu meinen Lippen kommen die Düfte zur Tränke,

und ich erkenne die Handgelenke

entfernter Engel.

Nur die ich denke: Dich  
seh ich nicht. (KA 1:263)

Addressing his beloved, the lyrical I avoids all words and invites her instead to listen to his “Gebärde”, i.e. non-verbal messages which escape all linguistic connotations. The very self of the lyrical I is only described by his surroundings which are imprinted with his physical motions and emotions. His presence robs the silence of its neutrality; the space is filled with the projections of the lyrical I. His perception of stars is colored by his breathing, they are “heben und senken [...] sich” “[auf] [s]einen Atemzügen”. The universe of the lyrical I clearly encompasses a beloved, an existing person whom he can address. Yet, he refuses or simply cannot create a concrete image of the beloved that would be true to her real self. The tender feeling between two people in this poem is sustained via refusal to clearly define both parties, the lyrical I and his beloved, with words.

Rilke’s later poem *Der Auferstandene* from his poetic cycle *Der neuen Gedichten anderer Teil* (1907) further develops the idea of the necessity of letting go of one’s expectations from and projections onto the beloved:

Er vermochte niemals bis zuletzt  
ihr zu weigern oder abzuneinen,  
daß sie ihrer Liebe sich berühme;  
und sie sank ans Kreuz in dem Kostüme  
eines Schmerzes, welches ganz besetzt  
war mit ihrer Liebe größten Steinen.

Aber da sie dann, um ihn zu salben,  
an das Grab kam, Tränen im Gesicht,  
war er auferstanden ihrethalben,  
daß er seliger ihr sage: Nicht -

Sie begriff es erst in ihrer Höhle,  
wie er ihr, gestärkt durch seinen Tod,  
endlich das Erleichternde der Öle  
und des Rührens Vorgefühl verbot,

um aus ihr die Liebende zu formen  
die sich nicht mehr zum Geliebten neigt,  
weil sie, hingerissen von enormen

Stürmen, seine Stimme übersteigt. (KA 1:534)

This poetic interpretation of a biblical scene delineates the difference between two ways of loving someone: the state of being a “Geliebte” as opposed to embracing love as a true “Liebende”. The former way of loving subjects an individual to being vulnerable as the last three lines of the first strophe manifest: “[...] sie sank ans Kreuz in dem Kostüme/ eines Schmerzes, welches ganz besetzt/ war mit ihrer Liebe größten Steinen”. It is also depicted as a one-way projection onto the beloved object which disregards the true essence of the other and silences his/ her voice. The beloved “[. . .] vermochte niemals bis zuletzt/ ihr zu weigern oder abzuneinen,/ daß sie ihrer Liebe sich berühme”.

The loving person of the poem manages to achieve the state of ideal love, i.e. becomes a “Liebende” only after her beloved, God’s son who possesses a greater insight into the essence of things, forbids her “das Erleichternde der Öle und des Rührens Vorgefühl”. He elucidates to her that his existence did not come to an end just because of his physical separation from her. His essence is greater than their union based on physical presence of the other and is not limited to her perceptions.

Such concept of love extends beyond Rilke’s contemplations on romantic and familial love. It is an integral part of the poet’s perception of any other human being, including the outcasts. Rilke’s emphasis on individuality and ability to identify with the poor are closely intertwined with his understanding of love. For instance, Malte’s insistence on the importance of one’s ability “[. . .] sich zu dem Aussätzigen zu legen und ihn zu erwärmen mit der Herzwärme der Liebesnächte [. . .]” points to the fact that ideal love possesses the capacity of transcending temporary circumstances and traits which may be defined as shameful by the society (*Die Aufzeichnungen* KA 3:505). Since individuals are too complex to be rightfully defined by anyone, Rilke’s love can only remain as a means of pointing a direction of one’s feelings; it lacks a clearly defined object of love, i.e. it is not contingent upon particular set of characteristics of certain individuals. Rather it recognizes the great expanse that is within them, their value within the universal design and ultimate connection to own self. It is a disposition that when achieved, permeates the perception of every single individual: “Mein Leben ist eine besondere Art Liebe, und sie ist schon getan. Gleichwie das Lieben des heiligen Georg das Drachentöten ist, eine währende Handlung, die die Zeiten ausfüllt bis ans Ende, so



sind auch die Aufwände meines Herzens schon verwendet und verwandelt in ein endgültiges Geschehn” (*Das Testament* KA 4:719).

Emphasis on individual humans as opposed to an abstract being differentiates Rilke’s love concept from the Western European ideas of objectless love as developed by Goethe, Spinoza or Simmel. It reminds of the insistence on loving individuals found in the works of Solovyov, Hippius, and Dostoevsky, albeit Rilke’s definition of an individual appears to be unique. Rilke himself draws a close parallel between his revelation of eternal unity that he experienced in Russia and his lament of not being able to find the ideal lover in his work *Das Testament*. On that Moscow Easter night, the poet saw a living example of eternal harmony and unity among people; each individual was partaking in the ritual as a rightful and valued participant, regardless of social standing or any other temporary trait. Rilke regrets that no one was able to love and see him in the same manner as the Easter pilgrims saw each other on that night:

Gab es jene Liebende, die kein Hindernis war, die ihn nicht verlangsamte und nicht ablenkte in die Aufenthalte der Liebe? Jene, die begriff, daß er weit über sie hinaus geworfen war, wenn er sie durchdrang? [. . .] Oh wenn es sie gab, dann war ihm geholfen, wie ihm damals als Jüngling, anders geholfen wurde, da er nach Russland kam (KA 4:718).

Comparison of Rilke’s work created before and after his Russian travels also reveals a striking difference in his treatment of the concept of love. For instance, his poem *Ballade* from the early poetic cycle *Larenopfer* captures the pain of losing the beloved as an illustration of the injustices of war. The idea of love’s ability to transcend time and physical space is not present in this depiction. Likewise, *Lieben*, the last part

from Rilke's poetic cycle *Traumgekrönt*, depicts a memory of a love story which begins with the joy of being together and ends due to physical separation of the lovers. It does not convey the idea of continuous connection between lovers after separation or the thought of approaching a deeper understanding of the self through love experience. The beloved is depicted via a concrete image: her name is Lisa, she is blond and wears a white dress. In contrast to Rilke's later contemplation of love as labor, the lyrical I from this work compares his experience to children's joy on Christmas night: "Wie Kinder eine Weihnacht sehen/ voll Glanz und goldnen Nüssen, – / she ich dich durch die Mainacht gehn/ und alle Blumen küssen" (*Die Gedichte* 91). Just like children who concentrate on enchanting sides of Christmas, such as gifts and decorations, the lyrical I celebrates a somewhat superficial side of love: the momentous joy of physically being close to each other.

Rilke's concept of love, as it was formed after his Russian encounter, remained close to the predominant Russian philosophical thought until the end of his life which is evidenced by the poet's reading of the short novel *Mitya's Love* (1924) by Ivan Bunin. The plot of the novel evolves around an exceptionally strong passion experienced by a young Moscow student Mitya. Torn between two images of his beloved Katya, the ideal lover and the ordinary, shallow girl, and plagued by the intense feelings of jealousy, Mitya loses faith in his ability to "save his beautiful love in that most beautiful spring world which not long ago resembled paradise" (Bunin 159). Katya's infidelity along with his own meaningless sexual encounter with a hired peasant girl lead Mitya to despair. He shoots himself in the mouth thus ending his unbearable existence. Bunin's novel received acclaim from the Russian intelligentsia as fitting well into the dominant discourses on

love. As Pachomova notes, the novel manifested “to a great degree an internal connection to the concept of love by the Russian philosophers”, such as N. Berdyaev and V. Solovyov (111-112).

Rilke’s perception of this work can be gleaned from his letter to Lev Struve which was published posthumously in 1927 in the Parisian journal *Русская мысль* (Russian Thought)<sup>103</sup>. In this letter, Rilke confirms Struve’s perception of the similarity between the poet’s *Eighth Elegy* and the experience of love by Bunin’s protagonist Mitya. In spite of calling Bunin’s novel “old-fashioned” due to its culmination in the death of the protagonist, Rilke points out that his elegy and the novel contain very similar concepts of love:

But no, you are right, this poem talks about him [Mitya] as a “loving person”, even if he commits a mistake by combining two very different states which are contrasted in the “Eighth Elegy.” The beloved, Katya, this gentle, impressionable Katya, for the first time enables him to glance into the Open which (possibly) approaches the great unconsciously-knowledgeable gaze of the animal<sup>104</sup>. (cited in Saparov 248)

Mitya’s first fleeting moments of love resemble the state experienced by the animal, i.e. by the creature that is “in the world” without accounting for itself. Animals do not fear death since they perceive life cycle as a never-ceasing, continuous existence:

Was draußen *ist*, wir wissens aus des Tiers  
Anlitz allein; denn schon das frühe Kind

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<sup>103</sup> The letter (in Russian) along with a brief discussion about the journal can be found in the following article: Saparov, K. “Райнер Мария Рильке о повести Бунина «Митина Любовь» (Rainer Maria Rilke About the Novel “Mitya’s Love”)", *Voprosi Literaturi*, 9, 1966. 247-248. Print.

<sup>104</sup> Translation is mine.

wenden wir um und zwingens, daß es rückwärts

Gestaltung sehe, nicht das Offene,

das im Tiergesicht so tief ist. Frei von Tod.

*Ihn* sehen wir allein; das freie Tier

hat seinen Untergang stets hinter sich

und vor sich Gott, und wenn es geht, so gehts

in Ewigkeit, so wie die Brunnen gehen.

...

Denn nah am Tod sieht man den Tod nicht mehr

und starrt *hinaus*, vielleicht mit großem Tierblick.

Liebende, wäre nicht der andre, der

die Sicht verstellt, sind nah daran und staunen... (KA 2:224)

Like the animal, Mitya is capable of perceiving himself as a part of the eternal unified world. He sees his own “vastness in the person [he] love[s], and in the ecstatic surrender to God” (cited in Saparov 249).

Rilke’s analysis of Bunin’s work has been described as extremely precise, grasping the essence of the author’s message (Pachomova 116-118). In contrast to Bunin’s Russian critics, such as Zinaida Hippus and F. Stepun, who relied on fashionable Freudian theory and placed a great emphasis on the power of physical attraction in their interpretations, Rilke foremost perceived *Mitya’s Love* as the story of the tragic vulnerability of an inexperienced youth. Without a single mention of Mitya’s physical desires, Rilke criticizes this character’s impatience and his complete focus on his current psychological state: “A smallest bit of curiosity [. . .] for that state that should

have followed this despair, could have saved him [Mitya], though he truly placed his whole world which he knew and saw on that small, moving away from him ship ‘Katya’...the whole world left him on that ship” (cited in Saparov 248-249). Such reading of Bunin’s work by Rilke is not thinkable without the poet’s knowledge and appropriation of Russian culture. Bunin stated in a letter to the scholar Buzilli that writing *Mitya’s Love* was not possible without previous engagement with the works of Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Turgenev (Pachomova 108). It is logical to conclude that, similarly to Bunin, Rilke drew heavily on his Russian experiences in his contemplations on love.

In addition to the presence of Russian elements in the poet’s love concept, Rilke clearly used some Russian imagery in his depictions of love. For instance, the following passage from *Die Bücher einer Liebenden* harks back to the Russian medieval lay *The Song of Igor’s Campaign*:

Und wenn dieses Herz leidet, so bricht das gleiche Leid wie eine  
Heimsuchung in ganzen Landstrichen aus, und in den plötzlich  
aussichtslosen Abenden hält sich seine Klage wie ein Vogelruf [. . .]  
schließlich wirft sie [die Klage des Herzes] sich in das unwissende Gras  
und giebt sich auf und will aufhören und aufgehen in der Natur; und  
wieder erhebt sie sich und *ist* noch und fühlt sich so ewig, daß nur sie nicht  
zittert, wenn sie irgendwo, mitten im Glücklichen, jener anderen Klage  
begegnet – : der Klage von Tod. (*Die Bücher einer Liebenden* KA 4:649)

Yaroslavna’s lament from the lay prefigures Rilke’s comparison of the lover’s plea with a bird’s cry, his image of nature’s sensitivity to human suffering, and close connection between love and death:

Lances hum on the Dunay.  
The voice of Yaroslav's daughter is  
heard;  
like a cuckoo, [unto the field?]  
unknown,  
early she calls.

"I will fly like a cuckoo," she says,  
"down the Dunay.  
I will dip my beaver sleeve  
in the river Kayala.  
I will wipe the bleeding wounds  
on the prince's hardy body."  
Yaroslav's daughter early weeps,  
in Putivl on the rampart, repeating:

"Wind, Great Wind!  
Why, lord, blow perversely?  
Why carry those Hinish dartlets  
on your light winglets  
against my husband's warriors?  
Are you not satisfied  
to blow on high, up to the clouds,

rocking the ships upon the blue sea?  
Why, lord have you dispersed  
my gladness all over the feather grass?”<sup>105</sup>

Rilke translated the lay in German in 1904. He was deeply moved by this Russian medieval work, especially by Yaroslavna's Lament. In his letter to Sophia Schill from 23<sup>rd</sup> of February, 1900 Rilke circles this passage out as “das schönste” in the whole lay (cited in Azadovskii *Rilke und Russland* 122).

Rilke's perception of love is a product of complex interactions of the poet's appropriation of different cultures. While comparison of Rilke's contemplations on love with philosophies of Andreas-Salomé, Simmel, Spinoza and Goethe reveal certain similarities, the experience of Russian culture and the familiarity with philosophies of love by Russian thinkers clearly made a significant contribution to his understanding of what love is. The significance of Russian culture for Rilke's love concept is twofold. Firstly, it is palpable in the poet's belief in the universal unity of all beings and things which had a significant presence in the works of such thinkers as Hippus and Solovyov. As he stated in his later work *Das Testament*, encounter with the Russian physical reality helped him overcome the feeling of complete isolation in a presumably hostile world. Secondly, Rilke appropriated Russians' emphasis on loving individuals as opposed to an abstract being, albeit he refused to define the beloved in concrete terms. As it was the case with his perception of the poor, Rilke viewed projecting ideas on any individual as limiting and jeopardizing harmony among people. Because of this, his beloved escapes a clear depiction and is not burdened with any expectations. The poet's insistence that true, ideal love denies any type of reciprocity has its counterpart in the works of Fyodor

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<sup>105</sup> Translation by Vladimir Nabokov

Dostoevsky whose doctrine of “active love” required individuals to move away from all expectations of appreciation. Importantly, these ideas on love are palpable in many works written after Rilke’s Russian encounter and continue to inspire the poet until the end of his life which enabled him to become a precise critic of Bunin’s short novel *Mitya’s Love*. These ideas also became interwoven into some of Rilke’s late works such as the *Eighth Elegy*.



## Chapter 4 Rilke the Artist and his Russian Experiences of the Unliterary Kind

The concepts of art and artistic calling lie at the core of Rilke's perceptions of his personal existence and his image of the universe. He saw art as a "faith in its own right, higher than religion, and the only worthwhile path for humanity to follow" (Tavis *Rilke and Tolstoy* 199). Being an artist was not a choice. It was a personal necessity given to a selected few who could not suppress or avoid their urge to create. "Erforschen Sie den Grund, der Sie schreiben heißt; prüfen Sie, ob er in der tiefsten Stelle Ihres Herzens seine Wurzeln ausstreckt, gestehen Sie sich ein, ob Sie sterben müßten, wenn es Ihnen versagt würde zu schreiben," advises Rilke to a young poet in his *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter* (KA 4:515). Given Rilke's very personal relationship with art, his claims that Russia made him into the person he was refer not only to his development as an individual but also to his growth as an artist. In Rilke's mind and imagination, Russian culture fostered fertile ground where artistic endeavors could flourish and it elucidated the necessity of the arts for a harmonious social development. Rilke's perception of a close association between art and the Russian culture can be gleaned from his essay *Russische Kunst* (1900): "[...] das russische Volk will Künstler werden, und daher kommt es, daß gerade die Besten von seinen Schaffenden sich zu seinen Erziehern berufen fühlen. Und in der Tat wird Rußland nur durch seine Künstler Kultur empfangen [. . .]" (KA 4:153). In contrast to France, Russia never became a long-term residence for Rilke<sup>106</sup> and none of his most significant works were created on the Russian soil. Russian artists, such as Leo

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<sup>106</sup> Azadovskii claims: "Gegen Ende seiner russischen Periode erwog Rilke ernsthaft den Gedanken, für immer nach Rußland überzusiedeln." Konstantin M. Azadovskii, "Briefe nach Rußland. S.W. Maljutin im Briefwechsel zwischen Rilke und Ettinger." *Rilke-Studien. Zu Werk und Wirkungsgeschichte*. Ed. Edda Bauer. Berlin/Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1976. 197-208. Print. Quotation p. 197.

Tolstoy and Marina Zwetaeva, inspired the poet yet failed to become his role models. In spite of this, towards the end of his life Rilke referred to his Russian encounter as the very basis of his perception and interpretation of his experiences: “Rußland [. . .] wurde, in gewissem Sinne, die Grundlage meines Erlebens und Empfangens, ebenso wie, vom Jahre 1902 ab, Paris [. . .] zur Basis für mein Gestaltenwollen geworden ist”. (Rilke an eine junge Freundin March 17th, 1926 Briefe II:428). Russia appears to be the first important step in the poet’s artistic development that in Rilke’s eyes is worth mentioning next to such important to him figure as Rodin. Furthermore, the term ‘Grundlage’ points to the fact that whatever Rilke acquired from his encounter with the Russian culture was not simply displaced by his later experiences but used as the foundation for later artistic growth. This chapter examines the Russian contribution to the development of Rilke the artist.

Rilke created at a time marked by an increasing spiritual uncertainty of the arts. Discourses on art’s purpose and ability took center stage at the turn of the century facilitating a vivid discussion on the significance of the artist’s relationship to the world and on the limitations of language. The sentiment of losing the ability to produce *ideal* art, i.e. what Goethe defined as artifacts “brought forth by human beings in accordance with true and natural laws” reflecting the will of God can be traced back to the eighteenth century (cited in Heller 8). During his stay in Rome in September 1787, Goethe described classical Grecian artistic productions as adhering to the criteria set forth by the *ideal* art. Simultaneously, he denounced most contemporary works of art as “lawless, forced, unnatural” (Heller 8). Erich Heller provides a representative sample of eighteenth-century

poems that contain “sublime limitations about the pathology” of spiritual experiences accessible to a poet born after the age of antiquity:

[ . . . ] Schiller’s poem “The Gods of Greece” that views anything beautiful in the poet’s own time as nothing but the dead monument to what was once a *living* truth; or Hölderlin’s elegy “Bread and Wine” that mourns the absence of the gods from the poet’s lives [ . . . ] or Keats’s “Sylvan historian” who records a time of poetic beauty that is irremediably lost; or Yeats’s forms created by “Grecian goldsmiths,” forms in whose company he desired to be once he was “out of nature” [ . . . ] (Heller 9)

Heller completes his list with opening lines from Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*: “Wer, wenn ich schrie, hörte mich denn aus der Engel/ Ordnungen? und gesetzt selbst, es nähme/ einer mich plötzlich ans Herz: ich verginge von seinem/ stärkeren Dasein.” This scholar places Rilke in a group of poets who responded “radically” to the problem of inaccessibility of the genuine external experiences, i.e. to the poets who “turn [ . . . ] radically away from a world that offends their souls, practicing a kind of conscientious objection with regard to reality , a creative negation [ . . . ] Only in pure inwardness will true existence be possible” (29). Rilke’s question from the *Duino Elegies* elucidates his engagement with the issue of establishing a genuine connection between the poet and the rest of the universe. Rilke recognized that modern people lacked an understanding of and a harmonious connection with the rest of creation. Yet, his oeuvre presents strong evidence against Heller’s claim that Rilke radically turned away from the external world. Indeed, Rilke saw art as the greatest means of achieving harmony between individuals and the world that surrounds them.

Roland Ruffini persuasively argues that Rilke's art concept is inseparably linked with his perception of the self. Reminiscent of Nietzsche's philosophy, Rilke pondered the duality of human essence. Both Rilke and Nietzsche described one aspect of human existence as the individual, conscious self which is being continuously constructed by a person but which is also temporary, i.e. is inevitably terminated by death. This self creates the illusion of being separate from other beings and is also responsible for our perception of the world as an objective, well-organized image:

[ . . . ]'das Subjekt' oder eine Person, die sich in der Partikularexistenz und der Anwesenheit, in die sie sich aus der Einheit des Ursprungs entlassen sieht, behaupten will] erfährt sich als ein ausschließlich anwesendes Selbst, indem es sich nicht nur von dem Nicht-Anwesenden, dem Nicht-Da-Sein, als seinem Gegenteil absetzt, sondern indem es sich anderes schafft, das es sich als ebenso Anwesendes, aber seinen Gegenstand gegenüberstellt: Es schafft sich eine objektive Welt, die eigentlich ein begrifflich geordnetes Bild einer solchen ist. (Ruffini 432)

Such artificially constructed image of the universe contributes to the suppression of an individual's awareness of the other facet of human existence, the so-called Nicht-Da-Sein. It is best described as being a part of the never-ending existence which encompasses all creatures, the Divine Being, as well as all phenomena found in this universe, including the cycle of birth and death. Ruffini points to Rilke's image of "das freie Tier" in the *Eight Duino Elegy* as an example of a creature who has not lost its connection with the universal oneness, "Daseinsganzheit" (432). Such animal stands in a stark contrast to humans:

hat seinen Untergang stets hinter sich  
und vor sich Gott, und wenn es geht, so gehts  
in Ewigkeit, so wie die Brunnen gehen. (KA 2:224)

Humans never cease to be a part of the universal existence, the Nicht-Da-Sein, yet they constantly try to shape it according to their will, i.e. they aim “dem Werden [. . .] den Charakter des Seins aufzuprägen”, “um eine Welt des Seienden zu erhalten, des Verharrenden, Gleichwertigen” (cited in Ruffini 433). Nietzsche describes it in his works as “Wille zur Macht.” He elucidates that continuous attempts to replace the true existence with an artificially constructed, limited image produce the feeling of dissatisfaction in humans: “Von den Werten aus, die dem Seienden beigelegt werden, stammt die Verurteilung und Unzufriedenheit im werdenden” (cited in Ruffini 432).

A very similar reflection can be gleaned from Rilke’s oeuvre, for instance from the opening lines of his *Fifth Duino Elegy*:

Wer aber *sind* sie, sag mir, die Fahrenden, diese ein wenig  
Flüchtiger noch als wir selbst, die dringend von früh an  
wringt ein *wem*, *wem* zu Liebe  
niemals zufriedener Wille? Sondern er wringt sie,  
biegt sie, schlingt sie und schwingt sie,  
wirft sie und fängt sie zurück [. . .]

Und kaum dort,  
aufrecht, da und gezeigt: des Dastehens  
großer Anfangsbuchstab . . ., schon auch, die stärksten  
Männer, rollt sie wieder, zum Schmerz, der immer

kommende Griff, wie August der Starke bei Tisch  
einen zinnernen Teller. (KA 2:214)

The essence of these “Fahrenden” is ridden by the paradox of the constant oscillation between the Da-Sein and the Nicht-Da-Sein. They are caught in the tension between becoming and perishing<sup>107</sup>. In addition, they appear “vordergründig als agierende Figuren”, “als Objekte, auch grammatisch, des “niemals zufrieden[en] Wille[ns]” (Ruffini 433). Both aspects point to their state of being out of touch with the universal becoming, i.e. ‘Werden’. It is the ‘Werden’, worin sich der Wille zur Macht manifestiert. Das ‘Subjekt’ kann sich als “Unzufriedenheit im Werdenden” dem ‘Wille[n] zur Macht’ nicht entziehen” (Ruffini 433).

Rilke perceived uniting the Da-Sein and Nicht-Da-Sein as the ultimate task required of each individual who pursues harmony with the self and the rest of the universe. According to the poet, this task is twofold. Ruffini concisely summarizes<sup>108</sup>: “Das Ich hat also nicht nur die einseitige Verfestigung an die Anwesenheit [. . .] aufzubrechen, ‚Stückwerk und Teile‘ zu ‚ertragen‘, ‚als sei es das Ganze‘, indem es die ‚Einheit von Leben und Tod voraus[.]setz[t]“”. Außerdem ist nämlich diese Einheit und Ganzheit als ein ‘Werden’ offenzuhalten, die eine nicht durch eine andere ‘Erstarrung’ zu ersetzen [. . .]” (436).

Works of both Nietzsche and Rilke reflect the idea that fulfillment of this task is enabled by and through art. Nietzsche’s *Also sprach Zarathustra* conveys the image of an enlightened character, Zarathustra, who succeeds in transcending the existence composed of creation and destruction. He achieves “ein übergeordnetes ‘Werden’” where both

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<sup>107</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Ruffini 429-435.

<sup>108</sup> For concrete examples from Rilke’s work that support this claim, see Ruffini 435-440

facets of existence are united as one whole (Ruffini 452). It is art, or more specifically, poetry that enables the achievement of this state: “Bei [...] [Nietzsche] geht es [...] um Kunst bzw. Dichtung, die diese Art der ‘Seins’-Gewinnung ermöglicht. Die auftretenden Figuren sind dementsprechend Künstler oder Dichter. Bei Nietzsche gilt es, mit seinen ‘neuen Liedern’ eindeutig als ‘Sänger’ ausgewiesen, für Zarathustra wie für den ‘Übermenschen’, insofern beide identisch sind” (Ruffini 452).

In Rilke’s work, “the promise of existential salvation through poetry” is clearly palpable in his *Sonnets to Orpheus* (Bernstock 28). Rilke’s Orpheus is both a personification of poetry and a “model of virtual connection” that “dwells freely in a double realm, where opposites are reconciled in an eternal wholeness” (Bernstock 28-29). The following passage from the *Sonnets* (1 XIX) illustrates Rilke’s perception of Orpheus’ song as capable of transcending the world of opposites:

Wandelt sich rasch auch die Welt  
wie Wolkengestalten,  
alles Vollendete fällt  
heim zum Uralten.

Über dem Wandel und Gang,  
weiter und freier,  
währt noch dein Vor-Gesang,  
Gott mit der Leier.

Nicht sind die Leiden erkannt,

nicht ist die Liebe gelernt,  
und was im Tod uns entfernt,  
ist nicht entschleiert.  
Einzig das Lied überm Land  
heiligt und feiert. (*Die Gedichte* 687)

The third and fourth stanzas describe human misperceptions of three major aspects of life. “Nicht sind die Leiden erkannt” manifests the idea that “man sich des Schmerzes nicht als des notwendigen Gegenstücks zum Hochgefühl des Daseins bewußt ist” (Ruffini 447). “nicht ist die Liebe gelernt” points to the fact that a beloved is routinely perceived only as an object and goal of a subject’s desire which prevents humans from gaining awareness of love’s “Bezogenheit auf das Daseinsganze”. Finally, the lines about the misunderstanding of death elucidate the tendency of placing death outside of human existence: “[. . .] mit der gängigen Vorstellung der ‘Entfernung’ im Tode [wird] das Nicht-da-Sein als außerhalb des Daseins angesetzt [. . .], im Versuch, dieses als ausschließliche Anwesenheit zu begreifen, indem man den Tod aus ihm eliminiert, anstatt ihn als dessen positiven Teil zu erkennen, der es in seiner Fülle des ‚Werdens‘ erst ermöglicht” (Ruffini 447). These sonnet lines hark back to Rilke’s letter to Witold von Hulewicz from November 13th, 1925 where he underscores the importance of viewing death and life as parts of the same entity: “Der Tod ist die uns abgekehrte, von uns unbeschiedene Seite des Lebens: wir müssen versuchen, das größte Bewußtsein unseres Daseins zu leisten, das in beiden unabgegrenzten Bereichen zu Hause ist [. . .] Die wahre Lebensgestalt reicht durch beide Gebiete [. . .]” (*Briefe aus Muzot* 371-372).



In contrast to misconceptions that plague society, art and/or poetry celebrate and reestablish the wholeness of the universe, i.e. the song hovers above false attitudes, it “heiligt und feiert”. Rilke’s already mentioned letter to Hulewicz elucidates the poet’s perception of “eine heile [. . .] Welt” as the world that possesses “weder ein Diesseits noch Jenseits, sondern die große Einheit” (*Briefe aus Muzot* 372). In a similar manner, Rilke described an artist<sup>109</sup> as someone who strives to achieve “kein Erwerben eines stillen, langsam wachsenden Besitzes, sondern ein fortwährendes Vergeuden aller wandelbaren Werte” (KA 4:116). To sum up: Rilke contemplated awareness of the universal wholeness as the highest purpose of art. Art encouraged an individual to transcend the boundaries of the socially accepted, temporary concepts and enabled to grasp eternal interconnectedness of natural phenomena, all beings and things.

Rilke’s association of art with such a complex purpose encouraged him to contemplate a significant barrier on the way towards its achievement: limitations of language. The idea was not unique to Rilke. Rather, discourses on the necessity of going beyond the boundaries of the traditional ways of expression have been commonplace in Europe starting in the late nineteenth century. Discussion on the inadequacy of language to capture and express the true essence of the world and even of human experience was firstly facilitated by Friedrich Nietzsche with his essay *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn* that he wrote in conjunction with his lecture on the Roman and Greek rhetoric in 1872-73 (Kiesel 183). Defining human experience as limited by subjective human perceptions and hence as removed from the objective truth, Nietzsche postulates the following question: “decken sich die Bezeichnungen und die Dinge? Ist die

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<sup>109</sup> In his essay *Über Kunst* (1898)

Sprache der adäquate Ausdruck aller Realitäten?“ (cited in Kiesel 183). Nietzsche clearly states that human linguistic expressions are indeed a far cry from the objective reality:

Das “Ding an sich” (das würde eben die reine folgenlose Wahrheit sein) ist auch dem Sprachbildner ganz unfasslich und ganz und gar nicht erstrebenswerth. Er bezeichnet nur die Relationen der Dinge zu den Menschen und nimmt zu deren Ausdrücke die kühnsten Metaphern zu Hülfe. Ein Nervenreiz zuerst übertragen in ein Bild! erste Metapher. Das Bild wieder nachgeformt in einem Laut! Zweite Metapher. Und jedesmal vollständiges Überspringen der Sphäre, mitten hinein in eine ganz andere und neue. [. . .] Wir glauben etwas von den Dingen selbst zu wissen, wenn wir von Bäumen, Farben, Schnee und Blumen reden und besitzen doch nichts als Metaphern der Dinge, die den ursprünglichen Wesenheiten ganz und gar nicht entsprechen. (qtd. in Kiesel 184)

The awareness of language limitations was precisely captured a few years later by Hugo Hofmannstahl in his *Brief des Lord Chandos an Francis Bacon* (1902). The fictional writer of the letter juxtaposes “abstrakte Worte[n]” that dissipate “wie modrige Pilze” with the vivid experience of the senses. The complexity of human experience does not lend itself to being expressed with the limited number of words and concepts found in modern language. Grasping the essence of things requires a new way of perception and expression:

Es ist mir dann, als bestünde mein Körper aus lauter Chiffren, die mir alles aufschließen. Oder als könnten wir in ein neues, ahnungsvolles Verhältnis zum ganzen Dasein treten, wenn wir anfangen, mit dem Herzen zu denken.

Fällt aber diese sonderbare Bezauberung von mir ab, so weiß ich nichts darüber auszusagen; ich könnte dann ebensowenig in vernünftigen Worten darstellen, worin diese mich und die ganze Welt durchwebende Harmonie bestanden und wie sie sich mir fühlbar gemacht habe, als ich ein Genaueres über die inneren Bewegungen meiner Eingeweide oder die Stauungen meines Blutes anzugeben vermöchte.

Similar insights can be gleaned from Hofmannstahl's later essay *Über die Pantomime* (1911) as well as from works of Fritz Mauthner, Karl Kraus, and Ludwig Wittgenstein (Eilert 37).

Rilke occupied himself with the issues of language's insufficiency and its distortion of the truth early on, as is manifested by his poem *Ich fürchte mich so* (1897):

Ich fürchte mich so vor der Menschen Wort.

Sie sprechen alles so deutlich aus: [. . .]

Ich will immer warnen und wehren: Bleibt fern.

Die Dinge singen hör ich so gern.

Ihr rührt sie an: sie sind starr und stumm. (*Die Gedichte* 188)

The lyrical I stresses the danger of language's limitations: it masks the essence of things making it inaccessible and incomprehensible. Such misconception elicits fear in the lyrical I; it disturbs the harmony between an individual and the surrounding world.

The problem of language's inadequacy to convey the truth remained of paramount importance to the poet as is manifested by a solution he offers in his later novel *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*. In the 37<sup>th</sup> note, Malte refuses to describe Abelone, *eine große Liebende*, with words since "mit dem Sagen nur unrecht geschieht"

(KA 3:544). A narrative about Abelone is supplanted by a combination of two artistic mediums, language and visual arts. Addressing this ideal lover, Malte invites her to explore six Renaissance tapestries from the Musée de Cluny in Paris. Then he proceeds to create an elaborate verbal image of the tapestries which serves as a means to convey his perception of Abelone and the development of their relationship: “Abelone, ich bilde mir ein, du bist da. Begreifst du Abelone?” (KA 3:546). It is known that the tapestries contain allegoric representations of the five senses (Eilert 40). Yet in Malte’s mind and imagination, this artwork captures more than that. The tapestries contain and project onto an onlooker “das unabänderliche Leben [...] strahlend [...] in seiner unendlichen Unsäglichkeit”, i.e. they depict the multi-faceted truth of human existence which cannot be expressed with words. Rilke uses this image as a model for depicting what lies beyond human vocabulary, such as the essence of love. Heide Eilert notes:

So ist es gerade das hier vorgeführte „leise Leben langsamer, nie ganz aufgeklärter Gebärden“, das zum Gegenentwurf verbaler Aussage werden kann [. . .] Da gerade diese um eine weibliche Mittelpunktfigur zentrierten Teppichbilder im Geheimnisvollen, Vieldeutigen der visuellen Zeichen verblieben sind, stehen sie in markantem Gegensatz zum Unrecht verfälschender „Preisgabe“ in der konventionellen Rhetorik. Wenn Malte von den „gewebten“ Bildern spricht, die alles preisen und „nichts preisgaben“, fügt er deshalb sogleich die Klage hinzu: „Ach, daß die Dichter je anders von Frauen geschrieben haben, wörtlicher, wie sie meinten. Es ist sicher, wir durften nichts wissen als das. (39-40).

Scholars predominantly point to the contributions of Western European thought towards Rilke's reflections on inadequacy of language. For instance, Heide Eilert elucidates resemblance between Herman Bahr's *Ästhetik der ‚Nerven‘* captured in his 1891 essay about Maurice Maeterlinck and Rilke's early critical writings, such as his review of production of Maeterlinck's works on the Berliner Sezessionsbühne (1900). Both Bahr and Rilke stress the importance of finding a means for expressing not only "[...] das Verstandesmäßige und das klare Gefühl, die in sichere und helle Worte faßlich [sind]" but for conveying "das *jenseits* des Verstandes und *vor* dem Gefühle" (Bahr cited in Eilert 38). As a better alternative to the verbal expression, both authors propose to explore the "Gebärdenkunst", i.e. the art of gesture. Body language possesses the ability to escape narrow linguistic connotations and create space for concepts and ideas that are not easily expressible with language. Echoing Bahr, Rilke writes: "Das einache Heben der Hände bedeutete wieder etwas, wie in der Kindheit, und bedeutete viel [...]" "Auch die Worte wirkten in diesem Sinne, stark und neu [...]. Ganz einfache alltägliche Worte klangen wie niegebraucht" (cited in Eilert 38).

The most important contribution to the development of Rilke's perceptions of the endless possibilities offered by non-verbal expression is usually attributed to the poet's encounter with Auguste Rodin. Rilke attributed to Rodin's pieces of art the ability to capture and convey forces and concepts which escape clear definitions. According to the poet, Rodin's sculptures offered significantly more than mere reproductions of real life objects. Rodin produced things, "Dinge", and Rilke reflects: "Ein Ding, darin man das wiedererkannte was man liebte und das was man fürchtete und das Unbegreifliche in alledem" (KA 4:456). These pieces of art are not static, unchanging artifacts. Rather they

serve as a vehicle which allows humans to become aware of the phenomena that lay beyond verbal expression. In his monograph about Rodin (written in 1902 and expanded into a lecture in 1907), Rilke elucidates this idea on the example of beauty:

Was für ein Ding? Ein schönes? Nein. [. . .] Schönheit ist immer etwas Hinzugekommenes, und wir wissen nicht was. [. . .] Niemand hat je Schönheit gemacht. Man kann nur freundliche oder erhabene Umstände schaffen für das, was manchmal bei uns verweilen mag [...] Das Andere steht nicht in unserer Macht. Und das Ding selbst [. . .] ist ein Daimon, ist zwischen Gott und Mensch, selber nicht schön, aber lauter Liebe zur Schönheit und lauter Sehnsucht nach ihr. (KA 4:456-457)

Michaela Kopp persuasively argued in her thorough analysis that Rilke's Rodin-monograph can be read as a "poetischer Entwurf des eigenen Schreibens" (219). A similar opinion can be found in an article by Bernhardt Dieterle who interprets Rilke's statement that Rodin's art "an den Anfang einer anderen stieß und [. . .] sich nach dieser anderen geseht hatte" as the poet's desire to master Rodin's art of expression: "Da Rilke Rodins Empfindungen unter Rekurs auf eigene Einstellungen [. . .] imaginiert, spiegelt diese Äußerung auch und vielleicht vor allem Rilkes eigene Sehnsucht nach Rodins Ausdrucksform, ja nach Rodins Formungsgabe und nach seinem konkreten Handwerk" (33). Rilke's continuous reflection on the possibility of using language in a similar manner to how sculpture was used, i.e. of making words into the vehicle for conveying the unspeakable can also be gleaned from his personal correspondence. In a letter to Andreas-Salomé from 1904, Rilke writes: "[. . .] jene Gotik, die bildend, so unvergessliches und weites zu geben hatte, sollte sie nicht auch eine plastische Sprache

gehabt und geschaffen haben, Worte wie Statuen und Zeilen wie Säulenreihen?“ (cited in Dieterle 31).

Clearly, Rodin was the true artist in Rilke's eyes whom he strived to learn from. Rodin was, however, not the first person whom Rilke perceived as such. In a letter to Hermann Pongs from October 24<sup>th</sup>, 1924, Rilke elucidates that his understanding of what an artist is prefigured his acquaintance with the great French sculptor: “Nur die Begegnung mit Rodin, die mir zwei Jahre später beschieden war, und der jahrelange nahe Umgang mit ihm, konnten den so groß gefaßten Begriff noch weiter bestärken, ihm noch gründlicher recht geben” (*Briefe aus Muzot* 325). Rodin's presence encouraged development of Rilke's already existing artist concept. It helped him shape his thoughts and ideas sparked by an earlier experience. This experience was the much-debated encounter of Rilke with Lew Tolstoy<sup>110</sup>. In the same letter to Pongs, the poet clearly stated that for him Tolstoy epitomized the authentic artist who possessed an inborn necessity to create. Tolstoy's figure stood in stark contrast to those who lacked the true calling and ability to pursue a serious artistic endeavor:

[Tolstoj] der in sich an der ständigen Unterdrückung dessen arbeitete, was ihm im göttlichsten Sinne auferlegt worden war; der sich mit unendlicher Mühe bis ins eigene Blut hinein wiederrief und mit den ungeheueren Kräften nicht fertig wurde, die sich in seinem unterdrückten und verleugneten Künstlertum unerschöpflich erneuten. Wie hoch (und rein!) stand er über jenen, den Meisten in Europa, die, im Gegenteil, zeitlebens,

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<sup>110</sup> E.g. see Butler, E. M. „Rilke and Tolstoy.” *Modern Language Review*, 100 ([Supplement]) (2005): 210-21. Print. ; Painter *Quarterly*. 65.2 (1992): 192-200. Print  
, Rebecca M. „From Death to Self-Knowledge: An Essay on Works by Tolstoy and Rilke.” *CLA Journal (CLAJ)*, 26.2 (1982): 172-190. Print; Tavis, Anna. “Rilke and Tolstoy: The Predicament of Influence.” *The German*

um diese Kräfte besorgt waren und entschlossen, durch Übung und Fälschung (durch „Literatur“) das gelegentliche Nachlassen oder Ausbleiben ihrer Fruchtbarkeit zu verdecken. Die Begegnung mit Tolstoj [...] bestärkte so in mir genau den Gegenteil von dem, worauf er es bei seinen Besuchern mochte abgelegt haben; unendlich entfernt seiner willkürlichen Absage recht zu geben, hatte ich, bis in sein unwillkürlichstes Benehmen hinein, den Künstler die heimliche Oberhand behalten sehen, und gerade angesichts seines von Weigerungen erfüllten Lebens, steigerte sich in meinem Innern die Vorstellung von dem Rechthaben der künstlerischen Eingebung und Leistung; von ihrer Macht und Gesetzlichkeit; von der schweren Herrlichkeit, zu dergleichen berufen zu sein. (*Briefe aus Muzot* 324-325)

As Sophia Brutzer mentions, Rilke saw in Tolstoy “den großen Künstlermenschen in seiner Totalität, in seiner Unbedingtheit und Ganzheit [. . .]” (51). This experience encouraged the development of certain sensitivity in Rilke which enabled him to appreciate Rodin to the extent he did a few years later. Tolstoy may have “failed [Rilke] as a model” due to his “refusal to take art as seriously as religious faith” (Tavis *Rilke and Tolstoy* 198), but Rilke’s experience of Tolstoy’s genius exposed the young poet to another individual who could not avoid his artistic calling, i.e. to a person whom he could identify with, “[. . .] in diesem Sinn wurde Tolstoi für Rilke das, was später nur Rodin ihm werden konnte” (Brutzer 51). The two Tolstoy-versions of the ending for Rilke’s *Die Aufzeichnungen* reveal that the poet attributed to Tolstoy, as he did to Rodin, the ability to prompt spiritual growth in others, the ability to encourage an active pursuit of a



harmonious connection between the self and the rest of the creation: “Einst, da er [Tolstoy] sich, ringend mit allem, seine verwandelnde Arbeit entdeckte, wie half er da. Begann er nicht in ihr, unter seliger Mühsal, seinen einzig möglichen Gott, und die es in seinen Büchern erlebten, wurden sie nicht von Ungeduld erfüllt, jeder in sich auch zu beginnen?” (KA 3:652).

Rilke’s perception of Tolstoy remained plagued by contradictions until the last few years of the poet’s life. Tolstoy’s decision to sacrifice art for the sake of social betterment of his community discouraged Rilke to place this great Russian novelist next to his other teachers, such as Rodin or Cézanne. Rilke denied Tolstoy’s significance for his artistic growth for many years, until he encountered a German translation of Maxim Gorky’s *Erinnerungen an Tolstoi* published in 1920 (Tavis *Rilke and Tolstoy* 195)<sup>111</sup>. Tolstoy’s decision to cease his artistic endeavors became the main focus of Rilke’s reflections on Tolstoy the artist. For instance, Rilke uses Tolstoy’s image as a contrasting figure to Malte in the first ending for his *Die Aufzeichnungen*. Juxtaposing “Tolstoy’s internal turmoil” with “Malte’s inward composure”, Rilke elucidates the importance of faith in one’s artistic calling in the face of adversity (Tavis 197-198)<sup>112</sup>. The reflection contained in this ending reveals another consequence of Rilke’s encounter with Tolstoy: it encouraged Rilke to question his own artistic endeavor. Yet, in contrast to Tolstoy, the

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<sup>111</sup> Gorky’s representation of Tolstoy was centered around three central issues: “God, art, and the artist in their mutual responsibilities and interactions” (Tavis 196). Tolstoy was depicted as a “Godseeker” who has lost his way and an “irrelevant pilgrim” who was “terribly homeless, alien to everyone and everything.” This portrait allowed Rilke to find points of identification with the Russian novelist; akin Tolstoy, Rilke became a pilgrim in the search of his God (whom he found in Russia). His life was also marked by never ceasing wandering from country to country.

<sup>112</sup> Interestingly, Rilke’s perception of the Scandinavians elucidates that this juxtaposition is not meant to indicate any disappointment with the figure of the Russian artist. Rilke’s true artist, Malte, was a Dane and consequently had certain connection to the Russian set of mind: “[Rilke] thought that of all west Europeans the Scandinavians were closest to the Russians, and that is why he loved them. In Denmark he had noticed how even the most inexplicable phenomena are allowed their freedom and that the supernatural, therefore the poetic also, enjoys an unusual hospitality” (de Salis 242).

poet always came to the conclusion that his artistic calling was worth placing above all other obligations:

Schon, da ich vor fast zwanzig Jahren neben Lew Tolstoj über die Vergißmeinnicht-Wiesen von Jasnaja Poljana ging, hatte ich mich gründlich zu entscheiden.

Und seither, ich weiß nicht, wie oft, an jeder Wendung meines Weges, hab ich mir mein eigenes Tun fraglich gemacht, fraglich und schwer, und hab mich geprüft und begrängt, ob ich denn in ihm zu Recht bestehe und ausharre [. . .].

aber bis heute ist mir die verantwortende innere Stimme immer noch zustimmend gewesen<sup>113</sup>. (KA 4:708)

Tolstoy remained in Rilke's eyes an artist who misused his gift. Yet, as the poet acknowledged towards the end of his life, it was precisely an anti-model that encouraged him to continuously reflect on the nature of being an artist and to develop a better understanding of his own self. In a letter to Rudolf Bodländer from March 13<sup>th</sup>, 1922, he wrote:

Was ich künstlerisch schreibe, wird wohl bis zuletzt irgendwo die Spuren des Widerspruchs aufweisen, mittels dessen ich mich angetreten habe...vor ihm nicht nach auswärts, sondern ins Tiefere ausweichen, dem Druck der Verhältnisse nicht so sehr widerstreben, als vielmehr ihn ausnutzen, um durch ihn in eine dichtere, tiefere, eigentümlichere Schicht der eigenen Natur eingesetzt zu werden. (*Briefe aus Muzot* 129)

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<sup>113</sup> From Rilke's *Vorrede zu einer Vorlesung aus eigenen Werken*, 1919.

Only after he had acquired enough experience and reached a certain maturity level, Rilke was able to gain “access to the language in which he could convincingly explain the complex phenomenon of Tolstoy’s personality and its impact” (Tavis *Rilke and Tolstoy* 192). Rilke’s encounter with Tolstoy left an indelible mark on the young poet the significance of which was not immediately palpable. Clearly, this significance lies in the poet’s first exposure to a living individual who embodied Rilke’s theoretical contemplations and intuitions of what an artist’s nature is. Rilke could never agree with Tolstoy’s interpretation and treatment of his genius. But he found a living proof that artistic calling is not a choice. It is an inborn necessity to create. Any attempt at suppressing it is doomed to failure.

In contrast to the conflicted relationship with Tolstoy, Rilke encountered other Russian artists whose opinions on art elicited immediate response from him and encouraged him to address Russian art discourses in his critical essays. For instance, Anna Tavis indicated that Rilke’s essays *Russische Kunst* (1900) and *Moderne russische Kunstbestrebungen* (1902) were inspired by works of a Russian writer Nikolai Leskov who raised the “question of how to reconcile the artist’s uniqueness with his communal responsibilities” (*Rilke’s Russia* 75). Tavis points to Leskov’s “much debated icon essays” where Leskov conveyed his belief in the necessity of “asserting the individual artist’s roots in his community and his obligation to keep his tradition alive” (*Rilke’s Russia* 75). Leskov’s reflections on icon painting are foremost captured by his three essays: *On Hell Icons* (July 24<sup>th</sup>, 1873), *About the Russian Art of Icon Painting* (September 26<sup>th</sup>, 1873) and *About the Artistic Man Nikita and Those Raised Like Him* (1886).

Clearly, Rilke agreed with Leskov's call to dedicate more attention to the study of the Russian religious art and his insistence on adhering to the traditional, canonical icon form. Creating an image of an ideal icon painter in his essay *Russische Kunst*, Rilke states: "Unzählige Madonnen schaut das Volk in die hohlen Ikone hinein, und seine schöpferische Sehnsucht belebt beständig mit milden Gesichtern die leeren Ovale. Hier muß der Künstler einsetzen, indem er, ohne an der gewohnten Form zu rühren, innerhalb der goldenen Krusten die Visionen des Volkes erfüllt" (KA 4:154). Later in the essay, Rilke further stresses the importance of preserving the original form:

Es kann sein, daß einmal jahrhundertlang beide Formen, die der Gebärde und die des Bildes, wiederholt werden, leer, sinnlos oder mit falschem Inhalte beschwert – aber sie werden mit peinlicher Genauigkeit weitergegeben, und kommt wieder ein Andächtiger oder ein Künstler, wahrer Werte voll, so findet er für seine Reichtum die schöne, schlichte Schale bereit, die immer groß genug ist, alles zu halten [. . .] (KA 4:155).

In spite of agreeing on the necessity to adhere to the traditional icon conception, Rilke and Leskov had very different opinions when they defined the utmost danger to an artist's connection with his or her tradition. Rilke perceived it as a twofold problem consisting of "der bestechende, glänzende Einfluß fremder Schönheit" and "der dringende Wunsch [seinem Volke] mit seiner Kunst zu helfen" (KA 4:153-154). Leskov, in contrast, sought the reason for the pitiful condition of the religious art within the Russian society and the tradition of icon painting itself. Foreign influences and attempts

to use art as a means of social betterment are not among the reasons mentioned in his essay *About the Russian Art of Icon Painting*<sup>114</sup>.

The main emphasis of Leskov's essay is on the unavailability of high quality icons to a common person and even to the clergy. In spite of a few excellent icon collections displayed in museums or owned by private collectors, hardly anyone comes to see them. As a result, "no one from the public has ever seen and knows of any specimen<sup>115</sup>" of an immaculately painted icon (Leskov 183). Leskov regrets that very few people treasure iconography and the vast majority does not have any knowledge about this important tradition. Furthermore, poorly painted icons are readily available for purchase. At the root of this problem lies the lack of original icons in the churches. According to the tradition, every newly purchased icon must be brought to a church for consecration. In the old days, when original icons were still housed in churches, clergy used originals as a point of reference for determining the quality of a new icon. Since such comparison is no longer possible, clergy is unable to identify flaws of the newly painted icons and readily consecrates them (see Leskov 184). Another reason that prevented Russian religious art from blossoming was according to Leskov the secrecy around the technical aspects of the icon painting. Important aspects of icon painting such as special egg paint preparation have been traditionally kept secret by master artists and instructions concerning appropriate materials and dimensions have not been published<sup>116</sup>.

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<sup>114</sup> Leskov also focuses on the problems within the Russian society in his essay *On Hell Icons*. The so-called 'hell icons' contained an image of the devil that was concealed by a layer of paint or by the re-vestment. They were used for a dishonest trade where a merchant would sell a number of hell icons to unsuspecting peasants. After the hell icons were sold, the merchant's partner shortly followed to the same village revealing to the peasants that their newly purchased icons were blasphemous. The peasants were shocked by this discovery and most often gave the icons back to the second merchant and bought new icons from him.

<sup>115</sup> Translation is mine.

<sup>116</sup> For detailed discussion, see Leskov 179-187.

In addition to the emphasis in Leskov's essays on the problems within the Russian society, a negative evaluation of his work by Lou Andreas-Salomé most likely prevented Rilke from viewing his essays as conveying a strong message against accepting Western artistic influences. In her essay *Das russische Heiligenbild und sein Dichter* (1898), Andreas-Salomé harshly criticizes Leskov for his insistence on adhering to the original Byzantine icon conception. Arguing that "byzantine formalism had, with a suffocating pressure, burdened art and development", Andreas-Salomé thought it was necessary that "the art of the people creates out of itself a Mother of God in whom it unconsciously glorifies the ideal of a Russian peasant woman, or a Jesus who resembles, perhaps, a farmer of the Tostoyan sort [. . .]" (cited in Brodsky 64). Given that Rilke held Andreas-Salomé's opinions in high regard, it is highly unlikely that he saw a warning against Western influences in Leskov's essays.

Rilke's essays on Russian art appear to have had an additional source of inspiration. As Sophia Brutzer mentions, during his initial intense preparations for the trip to Russia, Rilke came across an important Russian document focused on defining the relationship between Russian and European art (Brutzer 24-25). This source was V. V. Stasov's article about Il'ja Repin published in the Russian journal *Ptschela* in 1875. Vladimir Stasov, one of the most respected Russian critics at the time, was known for his ability to distance himself from blind admiration for European canonical masters, both past and present. Following Nikolai Chernyshevsky's<sup>117</sup> statement that "beauty is life", Stasov sought to appropriate only those elements that could assist in conveying the truth

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<sup>117</sup> A prominent Russian revolutionary democrat, materialist philosopher and critic. His views are foremost captured by his popular novel "What is to be Done?" (1863)

of contemporary life.<sup>118</sup> As a part of his campaign against “pure”, separated from life art, Stasov put effort into familiarizing the public with the views of prominent contemporary realist artists. This served as a motivation for his article titled Il’ja Efimovich Repin which included excerpts from Repin’s letters where the prominent young painter shared his unflattering evaluation of European art and regretted popular inclination of viewing European works as a model for Russian artists. Repin’s letters were originally meant strictly as private correspondence and were published without his knowledge. Due to this circumstance, Repin’s statements still contain all elements of the artist’s sincere disappointment with the European masters that he would have likely eliminated from any material meant or publication.

In disagreement with a popular opinion that the study of antique and contemporary European works was a necessity for a young artist, Repin wrote to Stasov from Rome in the summer of 1873:

What can I tell you about the notorious Rome? I do not like it at all!  
Obsolete, lifeless city, and even the traces of life that remain are trite [. . .]  
Only Michelangelo leaves a striking impression. The rest, together with  
Rafael at the top, is so old, childish that one does not want to even look at  
it [. . .] It is simply an *eastern* city, hardly capable of movement. No, I  
have now significantly more respect for Russia! [. . .] One needs to work  
on the native soil. I feel inside of me a reaction against the likings of my  
ancestors: just as they despised Russia and loved Italy, so Italy is now  
repulsive to me, with its nauseating conventional beauty [. . .]

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<sup>118</sup> For a detailed discussion see Sh’ipunov.

This statement harks back to Rilke's perception that Russian artists must foremost seek their models in the works of art created on their native soil and in other manifestations of their own culture. In contrast to such Russian painters as Victor Wasnetzov, Alexandr Ivanov or Ivan Kramskoi, all of whom Rilke praised in his essays on Russian art, many Russian painters "[haben] frühzeitig sich nicht nur die Techniken, sondern auch die Empfindungen des Auslandes mit ziemlich viel Geschick angeeignet, und sie sind durch ihre Vorurteilslosigkeit dazu gekommen, russisches Wesen zu verachten und durch römische und antike Motive ihre bessere Bildung zu beweisen" (KA 4:155). According to Rilke, an artist must place emphasis on establishing a connection between artistic representations and an individual's life; this is impossible without looking inside one's own soul and turning towards one's own culture. Victor Wasnetzow, a Russian painter whom Rilke acknowledged for achieving this goal, "[bezieht] sich ebenso sehr auf die Dinge in der Natur, wie auf die Gegenstände seiner Phantasie [ . . . ], wodurch er sich vorzüglich dafür eignet, [ . . . ] die Vorgänge der heiligen Historie mit dem eigenen Lande so zu verknüpfen, als ob sie in seinen Dörfern und seinem Herzen zuerst sich ereignet hätten" (KA 4:156). Works of true art cannot be detached from life. Rather they must reveal to individuals the essence of various events in history and of different phenomena while simultaneously confirming that each human being is an inseparable part of the greater existence which unites all natural phenomena, all beings and things.

Likewise, Repin saw depicting the essence of things as the primary objective of art. He defined the reason for his inability to identify with French masters, such as Eugène Delacroix or Henri Regnault, as the lack of genuine connection with life in their



works and as their strong preference of form over the essence. In his letter from Paris dated January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1874, Repin wrote:

I am not familiar with any other art areas, but contemporary French painting is so inexpressibly empty, so silly. Painting itself is very talented, but it only concerns painting technique, it does not have any content [ . . . ] For these painters life does not exist, it does not touch them. Their ideas do not rise beyond the art shop. I have not met any single human type, any living soul [in their works].

Repin recognized that moving away from decorative forms towards imagery that could communicate the true essence of things placed a great strain on Russian artists. Yet, he strongly believed that the Russian people expected it which explained why so few artists enjoyed positive reception by Russian art critics and layman observers. Rilke's reflections on Russian art capture a similar belief about an intimate engagement of the Russian people with art and about their expectations of being exposed to more than just a simple story or a beautiful form. He concludes his essay *Moderne russische Kunstbestrebungen* with the following passage:

Sie [die russische Seele] versucht es immer wieder [zur Kunst zu gehen].  
Denn im Grunde sehnt sich die Seele dieser Menschen, die in schwerem Nachdenken leben, nach einem Bilde. Nach einem Bilde, das nicht Schicksale oder Geschichten erzählt wie ein menschliches Gesicht, sondern das einfach da ist, damit man es anschaut: also nach einer großen Kunst (KA 4:292).

Stressing the importance of essence over form clearly informs Rilke's reception of art after his intense engagement with the Russian culture subsided. This can be gleaned from his overwhelmingly positive reactions to the paintings of Paul Cézanne whose works ethics and principle of "réalisation" ("Bewältigung", "Dingwerdung") Rilke admired and honored in his *Briefe über Cézanne*, a collection of letters containing his personal response to the painter's work (KA 4:608, 1003). Rilke first encountered Cézanne's paintings in October 1907 during the annual Salon d'Automne exhibition in Paris which opened with two rooms dedicated to 56 works of this painter. (Heller *Rethinking Rilke*) Regarded today as "one of the founding fathers of modern art", Cézanne rejected the idea that nature can be mimicked by a piece of art (Jamme 139). He believed that artists can only represent nature since attaining the "intensity that develops before [their] senses" and "marvelous abundance of colors that animates nature" is not feasible for any artist (cited in Jamme 139). Yet, Cézanne argued that in spite of lacking the perfect form, such artistic representations must possess "Treue zum Gegenstand", i.e. they must be able to convey the essence of the depicted object (Kurz 19). Cézanne sought to achieve two essential goals with his paintings: "die Entzifferung des Modells" and "seine Realisation" (Kurz 19).

[...] das Sujet [muss] sukzessive in seinem Wesen erfaßt werden – wir sprechen im Deutschen von "etwas realisieren" im Sinne von Gewährwerden, „(in einem Prozeß der Bewusstmachung) erkennen, einsehen und begreifen. Mit diesem Erkenntnisvorgang unlöslich verknüpft ist der Gestaltungsvorgang, der das intensiv Geschaute auf der

Leinwand konkretisieren möchte, im Sinne von „realisieren“ als “eine Idee  
[. . .] in die Tat umsetzen.” (Kurz 19)

Cézanne attempted to approach this twofold goal via transposing the world into color:  
“[...] light and shadow are here [in Cézanne’s paintings] turned into color [...] contours  
of bodies are transformed into borders of color [...] In this way, Cézanne introduced a  
“transformation in seeing,” which consists of “seeing reality exclusively as a visual event,  
excluding from it all putative knowledge” (Jamme 140). Cézanne’s art seeks to avoid all  
connotations associated with his objects, including ideas called into life by the scientific  
view of the world. Rather, this painter depicts the universe in a manner in which an object  
“offers itself directly as the center from which the sense data radiate outward” (Merleau-  
Ponty cited in Jamme 140).

For Rilke, Cézanne’s goal was: “Das Überzeugende, die Dingwerdung, die durch  
sein eigenes Erlebnis an dem Gegenstand bis ins Unzerstörbare hinein gesteigerte  
Wirklichkeit, das war es, was ihm die Absicht seiner innersten Arbeit schien;” (KA  
4:608). Had Rilke’s experience in Florence, as recorded in his *Florenzer Tagebuch*  
(1898), focused his attention solely on art for the artist’s sake very much in following  
Nietzsche’s exhortation of the artist’s role<sup>119</sup>, his fascination with the Cézanne’s concepts  
stressed a new element that helped the poet to evolve further in his aesthetic theorizing.<sup>120</sup>  
While the Florence experience and refocusing on the artist’s exclusive subjectivity had

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<sup>119</sup> In his *Florenzer Tagebuch*, Rilke conceived of art as a private creative act foremost carried out by an artist who must “mit ringenden Händen formen und aus sich hinausheben” (33). Subjective perception is viewed as essential to any type of artistic creation. Art in itself serves an individual, not the society as a whole, as the solitary subject applies “Mittel Einzelner, Einsamer, sich selbst zu erfüllen” as a “Weg zur Freiheit” (33).

<sup>120</sup> Nelson, Erika M. *Reading Rilke's Orphic Identity*. Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2005: 27-28. Print.; Martina Kurz. *Bild-Verdichtungen: Cézannes Realisation als poetisches Prinzip bei Rilke und Handke*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003. Print.; Meyer, Hans. “Rilkes Cézanne-Erlebnis”. *Jahrbuch für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 2 (1952-54): 69-102. Print. Reprinted in H.M. Zarte Empirie. Studien zur Literaturgeschichte. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1963. 244-286. Print.

prepared Rilke for Moscow,<sup>121</sup> the poet drew an inspiring spirituality and a sense of art for the sake of the community from his transformative Russian encounter. Peter Riedl's work indicates that Rilke's experience of the Russian Orthodox icon contributed greatly to this metamorphosis. Riedl concisely summarizes how Rilke's concepts of art for art's sake and edification of the solitary artist were transformed to an embeddedness in the community:

Die menschlich schöne Madonna verweist nur auf sich selbst, ohne Geheimnis, ohne spirituelle Aura und damit als rationales Konstrukt ohne rituelle Transzendenz. Dagegen bilden die Einsamen, denen die göttliche Offenbarung zuteil wird, auf der Grundlage einer organischen Lebenstotalität eine utopische Gemeinschaft, die von einem Geist, einer pantheistischen Grundstimmung beseelt wird [ . . . ] Während die Einsamkeit des Kunstanbeters in Florenz allein auf sich selbst bezogen bleibt, weiß sich der einsame russische Künstler im Ritual der Gemeinschaft aufgehoben. (474)

Following the experience of the Russian icon, the encounter with Cézanne's colorful and transparent art and its "Dingwerdung" fostered in Rilke another refocusing as he absorbed the painter's concept of "réalisation", i.e. the representation of the tangible aspects of reality while reality remained fleeting and impossible to be captured in its entirety. As Rilke's aesthetic beliefs and concepts constantly evolved, certain elements

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<sup>121</sup> Rilke himself refers to his stay in Florence as a kind of preparation for his Russian encounter: "Florenz scheint mir als eine Art Vorbildung und Vorbereitung für Moskau, und ich bin dankbar dafür, dass ich Fra Angelico habe sehn dürfen vor den Bettlern und und Betern der iberischen Madonna, die alle mit der gleichen knieenden Kraft ihren Gott erschaffen [ . . . ]" (Letter to Frieda von Bülow, June 7th, 1899).

and parameters remained constant and transformative factors in the development of the poet's reflection on art including his own.

Cézanne's importance for Rilke's work has been elucidated among others by such scholars as Christoph Jamme, Martina Kurz, Hans Meyer, and Karl E. Webb.<sup>122</sup> In addition, Annette Gerok-Ritter conducted a thorough analysis of Rilke's use of multiperspectivism in his *Sonnete an Orpheus* concluding that it has its equivalent "auf grammatikalischer und linguistischer Ebene mit der mehrdeutigen Bildkonstruktion bei Cézanne" (cited in E. Weber 17).

In spite of this indisputable significance of Cézanne for Rilke, the poet's personal statements reveal that his artistic perceptions largely prefigured his encounter with the painter's oeuvre. For instance, Rilke writes in his *Briefe über Cézanne*: "Es ist die Wendung in dieser Malerei, die ich erkannte, weil ich sie selbst in meiner Arbeit erreicht hatte oder doch irgendwie nahe an sie herangekommen war, seit langem wahrscheinlich auf diese Weise vorbereitet, von dem so vieles abhängt" (KA 4:622). Of interest is Rilke's use of multiple perspectives which supposedly unites the poet's text and Cézanne paintings. Elena-Raluca Weber persuasively argued that multi-perspectivism is already palpable in Rilke's *Stundenbuch* which was published two years before the poet's discovery of Cézanne. Rilke's poetic cycle contradicts traditional perception of the world which views God as the center of creation. Rather, Rilke's lyrical I contributes to the „Zerstückelung“ of God referring to Him not as a universal entity but as "mein Gott." Furthermore, the relationship between the creator and the created is two directional:

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<sup>122</sup> Webb, Karl E. "Rainer Maria Rilke and Paul Cézanne: A Stylistic Comparison." *Probleme der Komparatistik und Interpretation: Festschrift für André von Gronicka*. Eds. Walter H. Sokel, Albert A. Kipa, and Hans Ternes. Bonn: Bouvier, 1978. 182-92. Print.

Es geht um eine Umkehrung der „schöpferischen“ Perspektive, im Sinne dass sich der Mensch selbst (den eigenen) Gott schafft. Das wird jedoch nicht der Willkür überlassen, sondern findet in einem künstlerischen Akt statt: „Was irren meine Hände in den Pinseln?/ Wenn ich dich male, Gott, du merkst es. [. . .] Dein ganzer Himmel horcht in mir hinaus,/weil ich mir sinnend dir verschwiege.“ (E. Weber 18).

Such multidirectional perception of creation is closely associated with the unorthodox process of objectification, or *Verdinglichung* in Rilke's poetic cycle. Defying traditional perception of the human being as “ein schöpferisches Produkt Gottes” or “[ein] verdinglichtes ‚Kunstwerk““, Rilke transforms the image of God in a twofold manner (E. Weber 18). God from the *Stundenbuch* “[wird] [e]inmal vermenschlicht durch den Verlust seiner schöpfenden Kraft und zweitens verdinglicht durch das Binden ‚An Bild und Gebärde””: “Ich bin auf der Welt zu gering und doch nicht klein genug,/um vor dir zu sein wie ein Ding” (E. Weber 18).

Rilke's *Stundenbuch* does not only borrow imagery from his Russian experience (a Russian Orthodox monk painting an icon) but it clearly conveys the poet's reflections on this culture, specifically on his experience of the Russian religious art. As is manifested by Rilke's essays on the Russian art and other early texts, “[er] hatte [. . .] tatsächlich das Wesentliche der Ikonensemiotik erfaßt”, i.e. he grasped the essence of the Russian icon painting which left an indelible mark on his mind and imagination. A thorough analysis by Erika Greber elucidates that Rilke's simultaneous use of multiple perspectives can be traced back to his exposure to this religious imagery. In contrast to Western images that are usually designed and expected to be observed from one single

point of view, an icon must be perceived as simultaneously conveying multiple viewing perspectives: “Die umgekehrte Ikonenperspektive ist theozentrisch, nicht anthropozentrisch verfaßt; eine Ikone ist nicht die Komposition dessen, was das menschliche Auge (von einem materiellen Standpunkt aus) sehen kann, sondern gilt als Selbstmitteilung des Göttlichen (und was immateriell und ubiquitär ist, kann viele Standpunkte simultan einnehmen” (Greber 165).

The second important contribution of Rilke’s Russian encounter to his appreciation of Cézanne evolves around the type of perception that Rilke sought to elicit from true works of art. Cézanne’s choice of simple objects for his paintings reveals his intent “sich eine neue Realitätsebene zu verschaffen [. . .]” (E. Weber 13) which enables “[. . .] ,sich Einlassen‘ in die Mitte der Dinge, [. . .] sich Einlassen genau an die Stelle der Dinge, wie Gott sich gewissermaßen einen Moment hingesezt hätte [. . .]” (Nubert 291-292, cited in E. Weber 13). Such engagement with a work of art releases the ability to see “die Dinge genauso wie an ihrem Schöpfungstag im Stande der Unschuld [. . .]” (Nubert 292, cited in E. Weber 13). Rilke was able to grasp and appreciate the mode of perception that was encouraged by Cézanne’s paintings. The poet captures his experience of Cézanne as the feeling that one “[ought to] be able lay one’s hand on the earth at any moment in time like the first man” (cited in Jamme 142). The ability to view the world “like the first man” harks back to the reasons why Rilke defined Russia as the land that “will Künstler werden” (KA 153). It was the alleged undisturbed connection of Russians with their past and God that Rilke saw as the core feature of this culture’s harmonious relationship with art: “[. . .] in dem Reiche Ruriks, noch der erste Tag dauert, der Tag Gottes, der Schöpfungstag [. . .] In seinen alten Liedern, den sogenannten Bylinen, sind

mit schlichter Gerechtigkeit alle Helden genannt, als ob sie Zeitgenossen gewesen wären” (KA 4:153). The old lays depict their stories and heroes as if they were contemporary to the reader. This approach to storytelling along with the atmosphere and attitudes that Rilke experienced in Russia enabled even modern readers to see the world through the eyes of those who lived long before them. In addition to lifting temporal boundaries, Rilke attributed to Russian culture the ability to discard the value attributed to an object at the time. When he described Russia as a child who dreamt of becoming an artist, he had the following definition of childhood in mind:

[. . .] diese Art zu sein [d.h. Künstler zu sein] hat etwas Naives und Unwillkürliches und ähnelt jener Zeit des Unbewußten an, deren bestes Merkmal ein freudiges Vertrauen ist: der Kindheit. Die Kindheit ist das Reich der großen Gerechtigkeit und der tiefen Liebe. Kein Ding ist wichtiger als ein anderes in den Händen des Kindes [. . .] (KA 4:116)

For Rilke, grasping Russian experiences was only possible via appropriating such child-like perception, i.e. letting go of all previously acquired connotations, including those that plague language itself, was a must. In a letter to Gerhart Hauptmann, the poet expressed a great difficulty of putting his Russian impressions into words since they were “still, intimate, and unliterary” (cited in Tavis 75). Images seemed a better means of expression for this experience since they could “transcend words already overinhabited by other Western commentators” (Tavis 75).

Rilke’s Russian encounter did not lend itself to much verbal recollection. In addition, it exposed the poet to better alternatives of how to capture and convey linguistically inexpressible concepts. Rilke saw in Russian culture the expression of



primary elements found in Nietzsche's theories on art, particularly the invisible force of the background, the "dionysische Gewalt, d.h. [das] rhythmisch-flutende [. . .], gestaltfeindliche[. . .] Element [. . .]" (KA 4:169). This element of destruction was, for instance, the moving force behind the Russian ring dancing, *chorovod*, which Rilke saw as the stage for vehement interplay between the creative and destructive forces of nature: "Während die Sänge der Sitzenden – Gestalten aus den Bylinen schwer und körperlich hinstellen, brechen alle Grenzen ein vor dem Ansturm jener flutenden Lieder, die die Ringe der Reigenden treiben und verschlingen." (KA 4:170) The poet stressed that this experience was uniquely tied to the Russian culture due to its harmonious connection with the past and myth: "Und steht nicht allein der russische Mythos der Menge noch nah genug, um einmal als Gleichnis gebraucht zu werden für das freie Leben des Klängen?" (KA 4:170). While in the Western societies "man bei uns verlegen wäre, die Gestalten zu finden, welche Chorleuten sein dürften", Russian peasants could easily free their minds from perceptions burdened by modern, scientific connotations. It enabled them to engage in activities which brought them in touch with the side of existence that cannot be logically explained or expressed via language. Participants and observers of the ring dancing were exposed to "'Musik' [...] [die] *nicht* Musik ist, sondern [...] nur durch Musik am reinsten ausgedrückt wird" (KA 4:171).

Perception of dance as possessing the capacity of uncovering and conveying forces that lie beyond human language can also be gleaned from Russian literature. For instance, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* uses dance as a means to communicate the idea of national consciousness that permeates the minds of all members of the Russian society regardless of their social class and upbringing. The novel depicts a visit of Natasha

Rostova, a young aristocratic woman from St. Petersburg, to her uncle who lives a modest life in a wooden cabin in a forest. During the visit, Natasha is exposed to Russian folk music which prompts her to dance in a way that she never learned before:

Where, how, and when had this young countess, educated by an *émigré* French governess, imbibed from the Russian air she breathed that spirit, and obtained that manner which the *pas de chale* would, one would have supposed, long ago effaced? But the spirit and the movements were those inimitable and unteachable Russian ones that ‘Uncle’ had expected of her. As soon as she had struck her pose and smiled triumphantly, proudly, and with sly merriment, the fear that had at first seized Nikolai and the others that she might not do the right thing was at an end, and they were all already admiring her.

She did the right thing with such precision, such complete precision, that Anisya Fyodorovna, who had at once handed her the handkerchief she needed for the dance, had tears in her eyes, though she laughed as she watched this slim, graceful countess, reared in silks and velvet and so different from herself, who yet was able to understand all that was in Anisya and in Anisya’s father and mother and aunt, and in every Russian man and woman. (546)

Rilke was certainly familiar with this passage since Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* had a special place in his heart. In an interview, Rilke spoke of Tolstoy’s characters “as if they were people he had known; and as Pierre Basuchow was his favourite character in *War and Peace*, Rilke was convinced that he had met that unique imaginary person’s double

when he was in Moscow” (de Salis 242). Rilke held Tolstoy’s talent as a writer in very high regard. It is likely that the poet’s praise was partially due to the Russian novelist’s ability to capture in his works concepts that elude language. *War and Peace* manifested the use of imagery and non-verbal communication, such as dance, as a way of telling the unspeakable.

The significance of Rilke’s Russian encounter inevitably encompasses its contribution to his poetic perception and to his ideal of an artist. The poet’s post-Russian experiences exposed him to such figures as Rodin or Cézanne whom he saw as additional role models due to their ability to live in harmony with their artistic calling. Yet, his first encounter with a live person who possessed the inborn urge to create took place on the Russian soil. Rilke could never accept Tolstoy’s treatment of his artistic gift, but the Russian novelist encouraged him to delve into a deeper reflection on the essence of being an artist. In Rilke’s eyes, Tolstoy’s greatness as an artist clearly encompassed the ability to express concepts not easily captured by language. Tolstoy’s images together with the unique ability of the Russian people to remain in a harmonious relationship with their past and national myths gave the poet an answer to the Western European question of how to break free from linguistic limitations. The poet gathered experiences that did not lend themselves to linguistic expression and discovered alternative means of conveying multifaceted messages, such as Russian folk dancing or religious art. These means of expression were not burdened by linguistic connotations and allowed to discern the essence of the observed objects and phenomena. The emphasis on the essence of things and denunciation of form without meaning was further reinforced by Russian artistic discourses, above all by the letters of the painter Il’ja Repin. Later, Rilke’s praise of

Cézanne's art further develops his reflections on his Russian experiences and to Russian discourses on art which, along with Rilke's own statements, manifest that the Russian encounter truly served the poet as the foundation of his philosophy on art.

## Conclusion

The present exploration reveals that Rilke's emphatic statement of Russia's great significance for shaping his persona indeed reflects a profound and lasting transformation of his poetic perception from a self-enclosed artist as defined by his "Florenzer Tagebuch" to an empathizer of the Russian folk and their transporting art. The biographical information bears testimony to the fact that Rilke approached Russia with an open mind, eager to explore this culture's unfamiliar facets as he was highly cognizant of the importance of a productive cultural exchange with the other for the creative process. Rilke's intense study of Russian culture under the guidance of Lou Andreas-Salomé, his extensive travels within this country, his acquaintance and friendship with Russians from very different walks of life, and his mastery of the Russian language indicate that the poet's interest in this culture avoided the desire to confirm fashionable Western perceptions of this land. Transcending attempts to assess Rilke's depictions of Russia as not accurately conveying contemporary social conditions and the political climate, the present analysis examines Rilke's Russian encounter from the perspective of transformative transculturation as merely biographical and positivistic approaches are avoided in favor of probing a 'representational space' in terms of Henri Lefebvre's theory. The tenets of this conceptual framework treat this geographical space as consisting of both physical attributes and imaginary symbols which are conjoined and result in a meaningful experience in Rilke's mind and imagination. Rilke's experience of Russia as a representational space constituted the poet's immediate exposure to a continuous reality that encompassed a multitude of diverse elements. According to Wilhelm Dilthey, humans cannot consciously reflect on every single aspect of their

highly complex experiences. Rather, while they are aware of the entirety of their experiences to some extent, they are affected by them on the subconscious level.

As the findings of the present analysis indicate, Rilke's Russian cultural encounter left an indelible mark on the poet which was consummated by, but not limited to his conscious reflections on this culture or his choice of imagery and motifs in his works. Indeed, the poet's cultural encounter impacted and transformed his development in a powerful metamorphosis of Rilke's perceptions that also channeled later cultural encounters that he experienced. The poet's relationship to Russia is a sign of the significant 'transculturation' whereby Rilke appropriated important elements of the Russian culture fusing them with existing beliefs and previously acquired experiences of cultural encounters, notably his profound appreciation of Italian art in Florence. Comparison of Rilke's works created before and after his travels to Russia reveal a palpable shift in his poetic output and worldview following his Russian encounter.

Clearly, the most significant changes in Rilke's perceptions encompass the development of a compassionate imagination that is built on the premise of universal interconnectedness. As the poet himself stated in his work *Das Testament*, it was his Russian experience that enabled him to see the universal unity of all beings, things, and phenomena. In the process, he became aware of the fact that the world which needed to be embraced, not repudiated was not hostile towards the individual. In addition to the influence of Lou Andreas-Salomé, Rilke's reflections on universal unity are informed by discourses on love that permeated Russian culture and thought at the time of the poet's most intense involvement with it. Dostoevsky, Solovyov, and Hippus all embraced the idea of eternal and universal interconnectedness. Rilke's ideas, however, manifest the

poet's critical assessment and selective appropriation of these philosophies. Having accepted the idea of underlying unity of things, Rilke developed a unique perception of the individual as a being possessing intrinsic value as an integral part of human society and the universe. The poet realized the importance of acknowledging limitations of human perceptions and discarding all societal connotations associated with social class, gender, and other attributes. Rilke's exposure to both Russian philosophical thought and physical reality contributed to his development of such an understanding of the individual. It was indeed during Rilke's experience of the Russian Orthodox Easter when he first saw simple folk, Russian peasants, transcend their limiting social roles and participate in the ritual as valuable individual members of the community.

Rilke's post-Russian views on the essence of the individual as a human being offer a new reading of his love and poverty concepts. The poet's perception of poverty pays tribute to Fyodor Dostoevsky's belief that the tragedy of the poor lies in a constant influx of identities constructed by others. In contrast to many interpretations of Rilke's views on poverty as refusal to create concrete images of social misery, the present analysis questions the critical attempts at alleging Rilke's aestheticization of the destitute. Rather, the examination reveals that his depictions abstracted from concrete reality allow him to avoid rigid images of the poor, thus freeing them from societal projections and expectations. Rilke was skeptical of social and political institutions' ability to ameliorate social misery since they conveyed perceptions of the poor as helpless and incapable of making decisions of their own. These misconceptions stripped the poor not only of their individual agency, but also did not conceive of producing positive long-lasting results. Rilke's approach to poverty was encouraged by what he saw as confident, self-reliant

individuals whom he encountered on the Russian soil such as the peasant poet Spiridon Drozzin, Russian Orthodox believers on the Easter night, and Dostoevsky's fictional character Sonya Marmeladova.

Rilke's concept of "besitzlose Liebe", i.e. objectless love manifests certain similarities to the Western philosophical thought as is conveyed by works of Spinoza, Goethe, or Simmel. This type of love does not seek reciprocity. However, in contrast to loving a purely abstract being, Rilke often described ideal love as aimed at concrete individuals, such as Abelone or the outcasts in his *Die Aufzeichnungen*. Rilke's love concept, referring both to romantic relationships and attitudes towards any human being, appears to be a combination of abstract and concrete elements. Emphasis on loving an individual is an integral part of Russian philosophies of love at the turn of the century. Given Rilke's familiarity with the Russian discourses on love and his close association of the ideal loving person with Russian culture in his late work *Das Testament* (1921), the poet reflected upon and appropriated certain elements of these ideas. Rilke fused Russian emphasis on loving a concrete individual with his belief in the inability to create a justified concrete image of any person. This led to his definition of love as a direction. Love can be projected on a person, but this person is not defined by constraining him/her to the limits of human perceptions, expectations, and desires.

Rilke's changed perceptions about the essence of the universe and individuals informed his definition of art. In Rilke's mind and imagination art had an ultimate purpose: to enable the awareness of the wholeness of the universe and to convey that every individual was a part of this never-ending existence. Without a doubt, Nietzsche's philosophy served as an impetus for such a definition of art in the poet's mind. In Russia,



Rilke saw this theory applied to life. Referring to Russia as the land that figuratively resembled an artist, Rilke attributed to this country's people the ability to recognize the essence of being and things. They were capable of freeing their perceptions from traditional burdens of logical thinking and conventional connotations. In Rilke's eyes, Russians preserved a harmonious relationship to their past and myths which allowed them to perceive life as a continuum that cannot be broken down by temporal and spatial limitations. Transcending space and time constraints was foremost accomplished in this culture via artistic expressions, such as folk ring dancing, folk art, religious icons, painting, and storytelling. Emphasis on essence over form found in Russian art discourses, including reflections of Il'ja Repin, clearly contributed to Rilke's far-reaching view of the artist's role. As Rilke's later perceptions of Cézanne's work indicate, the poet incorporated the concept of essence into his theorizing of art. Recognizing in the painter a strong belief in the necessity of capturing the essence of things, he adopted the idea of capturing the invisible aspects of the universe, which transcend temporal and spatial limitations, even though they are not readily expressible in language.

Additionally, it was Russia where Rilke first encountered a true artist who had the inborn necessity to create even though Leo Tolstoy failed in his attempts to achieve his artistic destiny. This reinforced Rilke's perception that being an artist is not a choice but a necessity. This informed his attitudes towards great artists he encountered later in life, such as Rodin. In concord with Russian philosophical thought, Rilke's artist could not be detached from the rest of humanity; he had a moral duty. Appropriating this idea, Rilke fused it with his own definition of responsibility: a person gifted with artistic abilities

must uncover and convey those aspects of the universe that lie beyond practical applications and escape temporal and spatial constraints.

In conclusion, Rilke's extensive Russian travels and his intense study of Russian culture served as a catalyst for the long-lasting transformation of the poet's perceptions and creativity. The poet's encounter with Russia engendered a process of remarkable 'transculturation' as Rilke approached Russian Culture with an open mind creatively appropriating congenial elements while declining others. Russia's lasting contribution to the poet's worldview primarily manifested itself in Rilke's changed understanding of the individual. All beings and things, including humans, were inherently connected with each other and, hence, appeared as inherently valuable and intriguingly complex. Rilke valued the individual's agency and rejected the portrayal of any person by using the qualifications and limitations of gender, social role or status. This view of the integrity of the individual is fostered by Rilke's Russian encounter and is clearly reflected in the poet's post-Russian oeuvre where any portraits of individuals, including the poor and the loved one, undergo a striking metamorphosis. Previously concrete and socially critical images colored by societal expectations become more abstract, detached from life, and mysterious depictions. Exposure to the country-artist Russia also fostered Rilke's perception that artists have the moral responsibility to enable individuals to recognize their eternal interconnectedness and to embrace life's seemingly opposite aspects, – life and death, poverty and wealth, – as parts of the never-ending universal existence.

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