

Outstanding Questions about Rilke

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CURDIN EBNETER and ERICH UNGLAUB (Editors)

Erinnerungen an Rainer Maria Rilke: Texte von Augenzeugen.

(Remembrances about Rainer Maria Rilke: Texts from Eye Witnesses)

Villa zum Abendstern, Switzerland: Nimbus Verlag, October 2022

A press in Switzerland, Nimbus, housed in a charming villa named after the evening star, has recently published a new work of 1,449 pages, with about 800 first-hand reminiscences about the poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926). There are of course many entries by famous authors such as Stefan Zweig, Thomas Mann, Jean Cocteau, André Gide, Paul Valéry, and Boris Pasternak. Some of the more obscure observers are the most interesting, including an erudite princess and more than one exotic dancer. The verbal descriptions are enhanced by over a thousand vintage photos, many quite rare. However, a keyword search for “Rainer Maria Rilke” in WorldCat, a database that aggregates library catalogs, produces 36,545 entries. Even accounting for “false hits,” that is a lot of titles. Does the world need another book about Rilke? When I finished reading all three volumes, I decided the answer was an emphatic “yes.”

There are lots of open questions about Rilke. He was already an anachronism when he began self-publishing his mystical poems-- almost medieval in tone, often delicately teetering on the brink of Kitsch,-- at the turn of the 20th century, within a cultural scene that in general was fostering a new, innovative, modern aesthetic. How did this loner--a scrawny, homely, homeless, unemployed, college dropout, from the fringes of the doomed Austro-Hungarian empire--manage to attract a huge following in Europe before World War I, and then enjoy a widely held reputation as the best poet in the German language as he fled Germany after the war to live in a remote, medieval, Swiss, stone castle-like house with no electricity.

An even more mysterious question is why Rilke maintains a huge following in the 21st century, even as attention spans shorten and taste coarsens. Rilke regularly gets quoted in popular movies with no pretensions whatsoever to high culture. On the goodreads.com website, where readers can rate books from one to five stars, Rilke gets 4.26 stars on average while Shakespeare only gets 3.86. Goodreads.com has special pages for following particular authors: Rilke has 5,533 followers, mostly reading in English translations of varying quality. W. B. Yeats only has 2,295, and William Wordsworth a measly 1, 217. I'm no Rilke expert, but I am one of those hopeless followers. When I see blue hydrangeas, the words from his sonnet “Blaue Hortensie” flood over me. (It is a short poem that now has its very own Wikipedia entry.) After reading the epitaph he wrote for himself, I can't look at rose petals without seeing them as sleepy eyelids.

While most readers won't have the time or desire to read all of this new compendium of reminiscences in its entirety, the beautiful indexing and source notes makes it possible to pursue specific questions, such as what did those two literary titans, Thomas Mann and Rainer Maria Rilke, both born in 1875 and also both living in Munich during World War I, think of each other? (It's complicated.) There is a great deal of gossip, with all the usual errors of memory, most gently corrected in the footnotes. The editors, CURDIN EBNETER and ERICH UNGLAUB, have achieved a monumental contribution to our cultural history. It

complements that other mountain-top source for Rilke research, the 1,251-page *Chronik seines Lebens*, edited by Ingeborg Schnack in 1975, and revised and expanded by Renate Scharfenberg, in 2009.

This Swiss reference work caught my attention when the *Times Literary Supplement* published a review with the beguiling title "Ave Maria Rilke." (And in fact, Rilke's feminine middle name caused him endless grief when he was a young cadet in a military school, and even later as a conscript in the Austrian army, both places where he was bullied mercilessly until he managed to escape.) The TLS review praised the editors so highly that it sent me to check out the only copy in a California library at that point: Stanford University had a set bound in plain white paper with no text on the covers at all, possibly a review copy.

From the Nimbus website I knew that the standard published cover of the first volume sports a botanical picture of a scraggly roadside weed with a sweet blue flower, --which sent me on a wild Google chase. Yes, it is an herb, called *Wegwarte* in German and chicory in English, praised as Rilke explains by the medical mystic Paracelsus in the 16th century. The twenty-year old Rilke entitled his self-published poetry chapbooks, to be distributed free of charge to the common public in places like hospitals, *Die Wegwarten*, after these blue flowers. (Another question: Why was a lonely 20 year old guy in Prague reading and quoting Paracelsus?) While his views on life, religion, and poetry evolved and changed throughout his life, there is something of that poetic blue flower, the emblem of German romanticism, that consistently permeates all of his works throughout his life. These early publications did not resonate as intended with the common public in his hometown of Prague, where the majority of the people favored Czech, not German. Still, the Slavic sounds and moods of his hometown stayed with him even as he had to leave Prague to find his audience, and to find himself, becoming essentially homeless for most of his life.

The memorable encounters recorded in this masterful compendium trace Rilke's travels from one rented room or borrowed guest suite to another, through the accounts of the dazzling number of friends--writers, painters, salonnières, and lovers-- he accumulated along the way, with his extended stays in Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Russia, France, Italy, Egypt, and finally an obscure corner of Switzerland. His world, where ever he went, was filled with bowls of roses and illuminated by flickering candlelight. I lost count of the moonlit strolls, chamber concerts, art openings, and most of all the endless poetry readings even in the tragic years of World War I. He had a gift for friendships based on reading poetry together, sessions typically preceded and followed up by hand calligraphed letters on fine blue stationery and sealed with his crest. He apparently wrote something on the order of 17,000 letters. His letters seem to have been long treasured and have been emerging from countless sources over the years. Quite a number have been surfacing long after his death in 1926, many since 2000. This new documentary includes 30 pages of fine type listing sources, many previously unpublished, many found only in obscure publications. I don't want to think about the work that went into compiling them, much less securing copyright permission to publish from them. His most valuable friendships seem to be with French writers, Andre Gide, Paul Valery, and he took to writing in French towards the end of his life. The central, missing piece has been the archive of his wife, Clara Westhoff-Rilke, still not available. More on that later.

These reminiscences repeatedly describe him as fragile or tender, the word “*zart*” is repeated endlessly in all the different contexts. Somehow the German descriptors seem to start with a “*z*”: *zart*, *zärtlich*, *zerbrechlich*, *zierlich*. The entries consistently emphasize the quality of his voice when he recited his poetry, generally in very small groups. He had an ability to connect with his listeners. Even as people described him as reserved, even shy, he worked diligently at bringing his words to life. It may not have been easy for him, but it becomes clear in these descriptions how he consciously generated a kind of charisma or aura. His many contradictions become vividly apparent in these pages. While he was often in precarious financial straits, he frequently stayed in grand hotels, fine resorts, and a couple notable castles. While he had pretensions to an unproven aristocratic lineage, and cultivated friendships with nobility, he sympathized with the communist revolution in Russia (much to the dismay of Nicolas Nabokov) and with the short-lived socialist uprising in Munich after World War I. While nearly everyone remarks on his homely and effeminate looks, one eye witness, the glamorous writer Claire Goll, reported, based apparently on her own experience, that “no woman succeeded in resisting him.” While he preferred living in medieval castles with no electricity, he is considered one of the creators of our modern sensibility. The epitaph he wrote alludes to himself as a contradiction, in German “*Widerspruch*.” It was apparently the tensions generated by these very contradictions that fueled his extensive networking with cultural figures all over Europe. Take together these eye witness reports explain how Rilke was able to build his readership and his following during the first quarter of the 20th century. All of this evidence makes this compendium more of a cultural monument than a reference book.

There is still an open question: How to explain Rilke’s continuing fame in the fractured 21st century? What is it about him and his work that creates such staying power. The answers may be at hand. Two months following the publication of the Reminiscences, The German Literature Archives in Marbach announced the acquisition of a large collection of Rilke papers that had been in the private possession of his descendants for a century and stored in the small town of Gernsbach. The collection contains some 10,000 handwritten pages of drafts and notes. It also includes approximately 2,500 letters written by him and another 6,300 letters written to him. Correspondents include Lou Andreas-Salome, Max Brod, Hans Carossa, Eugene Carriere, Eleonora Duse, Stefan George, André Gide, Oskar Maria Graf, Gerhart Hauptmann, Hermann Hesse, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Harry Graf Kessler, Ellen Key, Paul Klee, Oskar Kokoschka, Annette Kolb, Karl Kraus, Else Lasker-Schüler, Gustav Meyrink, Robert Musil, Boris Pasternak, Alfred Polgar, Walter Rathenau, Auguste Rodin, Romain Rolland, Arthur Schnitzler, Georg Simmel, Paul Valéry, Heinrich Vogeler, Stefan Zweig, and most crucially his wife Clara Westhoff-Rilke. It is already clear that his wide-ranging correspondence is a foundational component of his literary heritage. They may also hold the secret key to his continuing influence as a writer. Processing this mountain of documentation will take time, and integrating it into what is already known will take even longer. And, of course, no literary question ever has a definitive answer as each succeeding generation interprets things differently. But the general outlines of Rilke’s life and work, and the sources of his influence should become clearer. So the answer is still yes, there is a need for more books on Rilke ...

His last words, carved on his headstone by a small chapel in Raron, Switzerland, read: *Rose, oh reiner Widerspruch, Lust, niemandes Schlaf zu sein unter soviel Lidern.*

Biographer Ralph Freedman renders this as: “Rose, oh pure contradiction, desire to be nobody’s sleep under so many eyelids.”

https://www.academia.edu/105588823/Outstanding_Questions_about_Rilke