Rainer Maria Rilke

The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge

A new translation by Robert Vilain

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THE NOTEBOOKS OF MALTE LAURIDS BRIGGE

RAINER MARIA RILKE was perhaps the greatest poet writing in German in the twentieth century. Born in Prague on 4 December 1875, he passed much of his unhappy youth in military academies before he matriculated at university, first in Prague and later in Munich and Berlin. His first volume of poetry, *Lives and Songs*, was published in 1894 and by 1900 he had completed another seven. Two visits to Russia with Lou Andreas-Salomé in 1899 and 1900 (inspiring *The Book of Hours*, 1905) were the first of many extended journeys he was to make, to France, Italy, Scandinavia, Spain, North Africa, and Egypt, before he settled in Switzerland in 1919. He married the artist Clara Westhoff in 1901, and they had a daughter, Ruth, before separating a year later.

Rilke's lyrical prose tale about the *Love and Death of the Cornet Christoph Rilke* (1906) achieved cult status, but his poetic breakthrough came with the publication in 1907 and 1908 of two volumes of *New Poems*, written after he moved to Paris in 1902, where he worked for, and wrote on, the sculptor Auguste Rodin. His only novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, appeared in 1910. At the outbreak of war in 1914 Rilke was in Munich, and he discharged his military service in an archive in Vienna. By then he had begun the *Duino Elegies*, although these were not completed until February 1922, in the Château de Muzot in the Valais. The same month saw the composition of the whole of *The Sonnets to Orpheus*. Rilke died of leukaemia on 29 December 1926, aged 51.

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The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge

Translated with an Introduction and Notes by
ROBERT VILAIN

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For
Patience, Nathaniel, Imogen, and Genevieve

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At Oxford University Press, Judith Luna's especially patient and knowledgeable guidance has been invaluable at all stages of this project, and Jeff New's copy-editing for the Press was a model of its kind. The anonymous readers asked to comment on my sample translations both made detailed comments on my approach that fundamentally affected the way I tackled the whole text—for the better, I hope—and I am very grateful to them for their carefully articulated critical approval. Translating a major work of European fiction is an intimidating task; doing so accompanied often by memories of the late David Luke, my undergraduate tutor and a translator of great distinction, might have been very much more so. In the event, however, an internalized critical instance of this kind has been more reassuring than threatening; I hope sincerely that he would have approved of the result.

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Above all I am grateful to Patience Robinson for her tolerance of yet another half-decade of her husband's preoccupation with Rilke, and to our children, who I hope will read this when they're a little older. To all four this book is dedicated, with love.

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ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used in the Introduction and Notes to this translation. Full details of these works are included in the Select Bibliography.

AE	*Allgemeine Enzyklopädie*, ed. Ersch and Gruber (1819–89)
BT	*Berner Taschenbuch*, ed. Richter and Kolp (2012)
IJ	Rilke–Inga Junghanns, *Briefwechsel* (1959)
KA	*Werke: Kommentierte Ausgabe*, ed. Engel (1996)
MLB	*The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*
MLB/KA	*Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge: Kommentierte Ausgabe*, ed. Engel (1997)
SP	*Selected Poems*, trans. Ranson and Sutherland, ed. Vilain (2011)
SW	*Rilke: Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Zinn (1955–6)
WH	Correspondence with Witold Hulewicz, in Rilke, *Gesammelte Briefe*, v. 359–68

INTRODUCTION

'Most gracious Princess,' wrote Rainer Maria Rilke to his friend and benefactor Marie von Thurn und Taxis on 27 January 1910, 'not half an hour ago I dictated the final word from my manuscript; if I am not very much mistaken, a new book has arrived—finished, released from me, and established in its own reality'. He reports the completion of *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* as if it were the delivery of a baby from the womb; there is a certain pride evident here in this literary parenthood, but also some relief that the birth is successfully over. Metaphors of parenthood and birth are by no means inappropriate to describe this book, which deals of childhood and its anxieties, of growing up, of the isolation a young man feels in the absence of close kin after a sheltered upbringing, and of the ways in which family (for better or for worse) contribute to an individual's identity. Moreover, it is to a significant extent an autobiographical work, imaginatively interweaving relationships, incidents, and anxieties from Rilke's own past with wholly original creative material.

Rilke insisted many times, however, that Malte is 'a completely invented figure',[1] a character who has developed into someone 'wholly detached from me', achieving his own 'existence and individuality'.[2] These repeated asseverations of his character's uniqueness are best read less as an author's anxiety lest his privacy and personal secrets be invaded by the readers of his work than as akin to a parent's insistence that a child's life and identity are its own, however much of the parental self has been invested in its creation and formation. Rilke repeatedly commented on the problems he had writing the book and the enormity of the task he had set himself. He wrote to Sidonie Nádherný von Borutin shortly before completing it, that this was his 'hardest and dearest work [. . .] a true alchemy of suffering [. . .]: but ultimately the gold is nothing but gold, the purest gold, gold through and through'.[3] Other comments were not

[1] Letter to Rudolf Zimmermann, 3 Feb. 1921. References to Rilke's letters in the Introduction and Explanatory Notes will include only date and addressee; the original texts can easily be located in one of the volumes of letters listed in the Select Bibliography.

[2] Letter to Manon zu Solms-Laubach, 11 Apr. 1910.

[3] Letter of Nov. 1909.

always tempered by such an affirmative conclusion, and he called *Malte* 'this difficult, difficult book', 'a cruel and terminal task', and a source of 'infinite pain'.[4] These may have been expressions of the discomfort perhaps almost inherent in a process that he said was one of 're-performing' or 're-achieving' his own childhood.[5] In 1908 he wrote to his wife of how Malte Laurids 'stands in my way', and of how he could only proceed with his own life 'through him'.[6] He saw himself as a 'survivor' of the process of composition, wishing that he had written the book as one might detonate a mine, at arm's length, leaping free before it explodes.[7] Rilke's French translator Maurice Betz reports Rilke's eloquent paradoxical summary: 'He was my Self and was another.'[8]

The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge is the only novel-length work by a writer chiefly known as one of the leading poets of European Modernism. As a poet he remains one of the most read, studied, and translated of all German-language writers, comparable in influence and esteem to T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Paul Valéry. Four major collections—the two parts of the *New Poems* (published in 1907 and 1908), the *Duino Elegies*, and the *Sonnets to Orpheus* (both completed in February 1922 and published the following year)—are the lasting achievements of a lyric poet of genius. There is something magisterial in the monumental dignity of the *Elegies*, in the crafted perfection of the *New Poems*, and in the celebratory sweep of the fifty-five *Sonnets*, but that belies a dynamism in all four collections and a developing way of seeing that have more in common with the ostensibly less polished form of *Malte* than at first meets the eye.

Rilke was not only a poet, however. He wrote a handful of dramas, although he could hardly be said to be a true dramatist: *The White Princess* (arguably his most successful play, and his last, completed in two versions in 1898 and 1904, in Sweden) is a reflective verse drama influenced by Maurice Maeterlinck's Symbolist 'interior dramas'. Rilke was also the author of some thirty short stories, collected in

[4] Letter to Lili Schalk, 14 May 1911; letter to A. Baumgarten, 27 June 1911.

[5] This is Rilke's own description, according to Lou Andreas-Salomé in *Rainer Maria Rilke* (Leipzig, 1928), 42. Malte uses a similar phrase in entry 46 (p. 92).

[6] Letter to Clara Rilke, 8 Sept. 1908.

[7] Letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé, 28 Dec. 1911.

[8] Maurice Betz, *Rilke in Frankreich: Erinnerungen, Briefe, Dokumente* (Vienna, Leipzig, and Zurich, 1938), 114.

four volumes during his lifetime. All of these were published by 1900, although a few individual stories continued to appear in journals until 1903; the last volume, *Tales of the Lord God*, was reissued in 1904. Many of these are, like *Malte Laurids Brigge*, autobiographical in inspiration, including one of the longest, *Ewald Tragy* (written in 1898 but not published until 1929, after Rilke's death). The conception and writing of the novel, however, virtually put an end to Rilke's shorter fiction—only two prose works post-date *Malte*, and one is a fragment.

Genesis, Genre, and Structure

Malte's gestation was longer than Rilke had been used to; it took almost exactly six years. There were five principal phases of work on the novel. Rilke announced its inception to Lou Andreas-Salomé from Rome on 8 February 1904, predicting correctly that it would take 'a long and countless time' before it was ready. Brigge emerged originally as Malte Laurids Larsen, to judge by a manuscript list of names from the same period, although the name Larsen is altered to Brigge on the same sheet. An early version of the opening, preserved in a fair copy made by Rilke in Sweden late in 1904, names Malte and in modified form found its way into entry 15 of the final version. By October he had ceased to make progress with the book, and letters written during 1905 and 1906 suggest that this remained the case for quite some time.[9] However, staying with Alice Faehndrich on Capri between 4 December 1906 and 20 May 1907, Rilke seems to have regained a momentum that lasted beyond his return to Paris, and the novel shows clear signs of inspiration from his visits to the Cézanne retrospective at the Salon d'automne in October of that year. A third phase of work began after the completion of the *New Poems*, probably in September 1908, again in Paris, and Manfred Engel suggests that this is when he wrote the following plan of the novel, in French:

M. L. comes to Paris in the month of March; spring begins shortly afterwards, and carries him along. Spring in Paris. Although already alarmed by some of these impressions, he begins increasingly to open up. He notes down what he sees. But while observing, still feebly, inside he is concentrating himself and rediscovers distant memories, many of which he thought were lost for ever [there is a marginal note here: '1, childhood memories;

[9] Letters to Karl von der Heydt, 18 Apr. 1906, and Clara Rilke, 25 May 1906.

2, memories of journeys']. He is inundated by memories; he writes, he is very attentive, he perceives a great deal without fully realizing at first. Summer is spent in this way at the Luxembourg, by the Seine, in the museums. Autumn arrives. The visit to Rodin; the journey to the Mont Saint Michel (he surpasses Baudelaire; he comprehends the deceptive impulse towards freedom in the piety of Verlaine and Wilde) and the Salon where he admires the Cézanne exhibition—all these develop him immensely. His sensibility is enhanced to a very high degree; he is primed to concentrate it in a definitive work. This is the moment of his most advanced understanding: (Ibsen, Duse, La Dame à la Licorne. . . .) and it is here that the tragic crisis begins which seizes hold of all his accumulated strength and hauls him towards the abyss. And that nonetheless offers him a path upwards. The end is like a dark ascension towards an unfinished sky.—That will be for me my 'Gates of Hell' [referring to a monumental work by Rodin]. It will be necessary to create all the possible groupings so as to place them afterwards in a vast ensemble; I will need an abundance of things done to suppress the subject thus conceived by the reality of artless documents that prove [it] without intending to.[10]

At the beginning of that stage, therefore, Rilke's intention was apparently still to write a fairly linear novel, and Malte's death is implied here almost overtly, which is not the case in the published version. It is likely, then, that this period—which lasted until mid-February 1909—saw the work's most radical recasting. Rilke took up *Malte* again in the autumn, probably shortly after returning to Paris from Avignon in October 1909, and completed the entries in the so-called Bern Notebook (see Note on the Text and Translation) before leaving again on 8 January 1910. In a fifth and final phase, he personally dictated the whole text to his publisher's secretary between the 12th and 27th of that month.

Between September 1908 and January 1910, therefore, adjustments in the conception of *Malte Laurids Brigge* took place that were to contribute to the formation of one of the most radical works of prose fiction that Europe had seen. Rilke never called *Malte* a novel, preferring 'book' or 'work', but the term novel is nowadays probably capacious enough for modern readers to use it without the need for inverted commas. One of its very first reviewers, however, Julius Bab, denied its right to be seen as a novel, calling it instead a Christian

[10] The original text is published in Anthony Stephens, *Rilkes Malte Laurids Brigge: Strukturanalyse des erzählerischen Bewußtseins* (Bern, 1974), 21–2, and *MLB/KA* 326–7.

proclamation, 'the gospel of Brigge'.[11] Critical anxiety over the use of the term derives principally from the book's structure and form, which is hybrid and deliberately challenging to any expectations of coherence or chronological simplicity inherited from the nineteenth century. *Malte* begins as if it is going to be a diary, with the indication of a date and a place, although that convention does not last beyond the first entry. Before it ends, with the recasting of a biblical parable, its entries include letters, anecdotes, reminiscences, self-contemplative musings, historical narratives, poems, and extended quotations from Baudelaire and the Bible. It has elements of the memoir, and perhaps (given the intervention in nine footnotes of what appears to be an editor of some kind) more specifically of the 'found document' form.

The text consists of seventy-one 'entries' (or 'chapters', or 'notes', or 'episodes', depending on which of the incomplete generic templates is uppermost in the mind while reading), all of different lengths. They vary between a few lines and several pages, some suggesting urgency while others are more indulgent and give a sense that there is space for a narrative to unfold. The German word *Aufzeichnungen* in the title conveys more of the structural tentativeness of the work than *Notebooks* or any other English translation can: it means 'notes', 'jottings', 'records', even 'sketches'; in the foreground is a sense of recording, but there is also disjunction, discreteness, and incompletion in this term. The work itself is by no means unstructured, however, and the description 'montage' often applied to *Malte* does not really do it justice; George Schoolfield is also right to suggest that to call the novel 'aleatory' is to miss something very important.[12] Despite Rilke's announcement to Marie von Thurn und Taxis that it was 'finished' (although the word 'fertig' in the original of the quotation above can also just mean 'ready'), he acknowledged to Manon zu Solms-Laubach on 11 April 1910 that the work was 'by no means complete' and that additional entries might have been added: 'It's merely as if someone had found a pile of papers in a drawer and there were no more for the time being so he had to be content with what

[11] Writing in the journal *Die Schaubühne* in 1910; quoted from *Materialien zu Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge'*, ed. Hartmut Engelhardt (Frankfurt am Main, 1974), 144.

[12] George C. Schoolfield, '*Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*', in Erika A. and Michael M. Metzger (eds.), *Companion to the Works of Rainer Maria Rilke* (New York, 2001), 183.

there was. Considered artistically it lacks unity, but in human terms it works.' In response to a query from one of his translators in 1925, Rilke sketched the relationship of part and whole that he had in mind: 'Fragmentary, all these episodes have as their task that of completing each other, mosaic-like, within *Malte*' (WH 364).

Rilke also described *Malte* intriguingly as 'a hollow form' (where 'form' also means 'mould'), 'like a negative, where all the hollows and depressions are pain, desolation, agonizing insight, but where the cast, if it were possible to make one (as with a bronze, the positive figure that we would obtain) might be happiness, agreement'.[13] There was therefore an inner psychological necessity to how *Malte* was shaped, something beyond the structural or architectural aspects of traditional fictional form. Conceived in this sculptural way, as hugging the contours of complex and changing states of mind, it could hardly have had a third-person narrator in the manner of the traditional nineteenth-century novel—although the drafts show that in its earliest stages it did have a frame narrative (see Appendix A). The relationship between the author and his narrative, it seems, needed to be close, but not so close that Rilke melded with Malte, and the most authentic way of preventing such a conflation was paradoxically the mode that most obviously risked causing it, the first-person narrative. The task was to handle it in such a way as to let Malte's 'I' take on its own life without merely parroting the thoughts and experiences of his creator, but not to cast him so far adrift as to lose any authentic connection. Rilke wrote to his wife Clara on 8 September 1908, in the middle of his work on the novel: 'So far I have been as much at one with him [Malte] as I have to be in order to maintain the necessity of a bond with him and the assent to his perdition [*Untergang*]. I must not transcend his sufferings too far or I will cease to understand him, or he will be lost to me and fall away and I will no longer be able to give him the true fullness of his death. I'm not attempting to circumscribe *my* insights but *his*, in whose ambit and expression I must still be able to believe.'

Narratively *Malte* operates on three planes that are fairly clearly distinguishable although intimately interconnected. The first features Malte's experiences in Paris in the present time of the novel; the second consists of memories of his childhood in Denmark; and

[13] Letter to Lotte Hepner, 8 Nov. 1915.

the third is made up of a series of historical narratives and reflective evocations of places and important artistic figures. However, these deliberately do not form sections or map neatly onto unified groupings of entries. The entry on Ibsen (26) marks the end of evocations of the horrors of Paris, and subsequent entries that are chronologically located in the present (such as those centred on the tapestries of *La Dame à la licorne*, 38 and 39) are often also tied to the past (in this case via the figure of Abelone). A transition to the stories and historical narratives that dominate the last third of the novel can be seen in entry 49, which treats of Nikolai Kusmitsch. However, Anthony Stephens has made a good case for seeing entry 44 as a more logical turning-point, both because narration itself becomes a major theme there and because from this point on the subjects of narrative are figures neither from Malte's Danish past nor from his present in Paris. Either way, the complexities of the manner in which Malte structures his story represent a distinct challenge to traditional sequential or teleological narrative and disrupt any expectations of chronological stability the reader might bring to the work.

The time covered by the first plane, Malte's Paris experiences and the 'now' in which he writes—so little actually happens that it would be an exaggeration to call it the 'action' of the novel—appears to be something over half a year, beginning in September, as the heading of the first entry indicates. There are mentions of autumn (entry 11) and Mardi Gras—seven weeks before Easter, so February or early March (entry 16)—and the last temporal indication is in entry 61, 'it is winter'. Before then Malte has twice noted hints of spring (entries 22 and 59). Topographically this layer of present time occupies central Paris, between the Jardin du Luxembourg and the Boulevard Saint-Michel, the Louvre, the Tuileries and Avenue des Champs Élysées, and the Bibliothèque nationale in the rue de Richelieu. The locales of Malte's childhood are in Denmark—in Copenhagen (not named but clearly identifiable), and the two fictional estates of Ulsgaard and Urnekloster, the family seats of the Brigges and the Brahes respectively. Paris and Copenhagen may both be cities but they are quite different from each other, as Rilke explained in painterly terms in a letter to Lou on 17 October 1904: 'I see [Copenhagen] through the eyes of J. P. Jacobsen and for his sake. It is . . . quiet,—old-fashioned and in its mood so utterly *Intérieur*'—he means the type of painting known by that term, depicting the inside of a room and characterized

in Denmark by the work of Vilhelm Hammerskøj—'And since Paris, where I was suspended in space, there are moments when a certain "interior narrowness" can do me good.' The contrast of the urban and the rural is an important element in Malte's disorientation. A Danish aristocrat, whose family history constitutes a strong background of stability, prominence, and achievement rooted in land, property, and honours and exemplified in extensive private portrait galleries, suddenly finds himself displaced into a modern capital city, with very limited means. His own furniture—and the furniture of his past life in a metaphorical as well as a literal sense—is in someone's barn, rotting away, and he is adrift and alone.

Malte's narrative is enriched by the many motivic interconnections between the events affecting Malte himself and the legends and historical narratives—which, far from being unconnected interpolations, as some readers have supposed, Rilke described to his Polish translator as 'the vocabulary of [Malte's] own extremity' (WH 359). Some of these links are quite provocative. In entry 2, for example, a girl screams '*je ne veux plus*' ('I've had enough'); the French phrase is the exact equivalent of Ingeborg's '*Ich mag nicht mehr*' (also 'I've had enough') in entry 28, although one woman is resisting and the other is giving in. The Prodigal Son in entry 71 is disparaging about 'badly chosen birthday presents' in a manner that echoes Malte's resigned reflection on how parents fail to understand that birthdays isolate rather than integrate children in entry 32. There are allusions to the so-called Bal des Ardents in the story of Charles VI of France—in which four dancers died horribly when their costumes caught fire—and it may not be coincidental, therefore, that Maman's sister, Countess Öllegard Skeel, died in a similar way as she was preparing for a ball. When the body of Charles the Bold is recovered, part of his face peels off, frozen in the snow 'such that it wasn't possible to speak of a face at all' (entry 55); Malte is himself shocked when the face of the woman he sees on the rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs remains in her hands, leaving a 'naked, raw head with no face' (entry 5). The Duke's portrait in Dijon singles out his hands as having a semi-independent existence giving an impression quite distinct from the rest of the portrait—and Malte, too, experiences hands with a life of their own, his own and an alien hand, in entry 29, and when he is trapped in the costume in entry 32 he observes 'the fretful movements of my hands' in the mirror as if they are not his own. The Duke's blood is

called 'unfamiliar to the Duke himself', 'half-Portuguese blood that he scarcely knew', echoing elements of Malte's evocation of 'the Big Thing' in entry 19, an alien appendage to his own being in which 'my blood flowed through me and through it, as if through one and the same body'. Whilst the historical episodes might enjoy a semblance of distinction from those more obviously about Malte, then, they are all Malte's oblique imaginative explorations of the problems that he himself faces.

Brokenness

The frequent shifts in temporal and physical frameworks as the novel moves between experience and memory—accompanied by shifts in mood and tone—contribute to a pervasive sense of restlessness. There is, moreover, often a sense of urgency in *Malte*, and it is striking how often Rilke uses words for 'suddenly' or 'all of a sudden': '*auf einmal*' occurs thirty-five times, '*plötzlich*' fifty-three, '*unerwartet*' a dozen, and '*so*', the word that opens the novel, communicates this, too. Malte lives in a state of constant tension, always surprised by events, moods, or emotions, always alert like the birds he describes in entry 25. One critic has described this state of mind graphically as a 'seismic openness to kaleidoscopic information-overload',[14] and it represents a constant source of pressure.

This situation has its roots in the nature of Malte's subjectivity. Malte is not a 'whole' subject, has no reliable or routine sense of self. 'I, Brigge, having reached the age of twenty-eight and of whom no-one has heard. I sit here and am nothing,' he writes in entry 14. He says of himself he is 'a beginner in the circumstances of [his] own life' (entry 22), learning about himself afresh, rather than starting with a sense of self as a vantage-point or stable centre from which to order and control his perceptions of the world. With some surprise he identifies an 'inner self', an 'interior', and confesses, 'I don't know what happens there' (entry 4). He repeatedly experiences himself as broken, saying of himself in entry 18, 'I have fallen and cannot pick myself up again because I am shattered to pieces'. In Paris, feverish, Malte fears that breadcrumbs from his coverlet might become glass

[14] Ralph Yarrow, 'Anxiety, Play and Performance: Malte and the [post]modern', *Orbis Litterarum*, 49.4 (1994), 226.

and break, meaning that 'everything will be broken, forever' (entry 20). This is virtually a hereditary condition, for when Chamberlain Brigge is dying, the room in which he takes refuge, the room in which his mother died, is full of objects that fall, smash, or are dented (entry 8). Malte's own condition takes the sense of being broken to the extreme of self-annihilation: in entry 21, after seeing the man with St Vitus' Dance, he reflects, 'I was empty. Like a blank sheet of paper I floated past the houses and back up the Boulevard.' Repeatedly there are evocations of non-containment and vulnerability: 'Your heart is forcing you out of yourself, your heart is giving chase and you are standing almost beside yourself and cannot return. Like a beetle that has been trodden on, you are spilling out of yourself' (and the whole of entry 23 is an extended reflection on Malte's struggle with self-definition). Malte's head is invaded by the noise and stress of Paris, and he complains that 'electric trams hurtle through my room with their bells ringing. Automobiles drive over me' (entry 2). During his childhood he recollects being existentially gutted by the dining-room at Urnekloster, which 'sucked every last image out of you without leaving anything specific in exchange. [. . .] You were like blank space' (entry 15). In his memory, the house itself 'is not a whole building; it has been completely broken up within me—a space here, a space there, over here a piece of corridor, not one that links those two spaces, but retained as a piece on its own, a fragment'. More subtly perhaps, but no less urgently, Malte registers how he sees the world only in terms of its components, unable to construct collective identities or valid contexts, and is amazed that people still use the words 'women', 'children', 'boys', not suspecting 'that these words have for a long time no longer had a plural, just countless singulars instead' (entry 14).

Malte was not alone in experiencing this crisis of subjectivity. In 1902 an almost exact contemporary of Rilke's, born in Vienna rather than Prague, but still of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, wrote another first-person document of crisis-displacement, originally entitled simply 'A Letter', but more often referred to nowadays as 'The Letter of Lord Chandos'. Hugo von Hofmannsthal's fictional letter, set in England in 1603, is a near-canonical expression of the modernist crisis, an apology from the young courtier and writer Philipp, Lord Chandos, to the originator of empiricism, Francis Bacon, for his sudden inability to write in the easy, polished style of recent years. The

protagonists are nearly the same age (Chandos is twenty-six, where Malte is twenty-eight), and both reflect on the caesura between their earlier lives and the present. Chandos lists his creative achievements to date and laments how alien to him they now seem, and although Malte's equivalent list in entry 14 (a 'bad' study of Carpaccio, a play entitled 'Marriage', and some inauthentic poetry) is one of disappointments rather than triumphs, it performs a similar function. Chandos's letter articulates (in paradoxically eloquent language) his inability to make sense of the world or express himself, values, or judgements. Like Malte, he finds that words will not behave in the way they have always behaved, and he feels 'an inexplicable discontent even about uttering the words "spirit", "soul", or "body" '. After a youthful period in which every element of the world was captured in a mutually reinforcing network of sense and beauty—an experience that Malte has only fleetingly enjoyed, of course, although he seeks it—Chandos is suddenly confronted with a vision of collapse and disintegration. The world has become incomprehensible; all that remains in the face of the crumbling edifices of language and identity is to bypass the bad taste that words now leave in the mouth as they 'crumble like mouldy fungus', and to rejoice in rare epiphanic moments of insight into the ultimate wholeness of the world provided by tiny creatures and commonplace objects that suddenly yield a radiance that is comforting and inspiring but which cannot be created at will.

There are a few such moments in *Malte*—such as Malte's evocation of existence as a 'mosaic of life' composed of a 'million little insuppressible movements', in which 'everything is everywhere and in order not to miss anything one would have to be part of everything' (entry 56). The short entries 11–13 cheerfully celebrate Paris in the spring: they are couched in overtly painterly terms, foregrounding colour-palettes, composition, planes, to create what Rilke called '*eine Oberfläche*', a surface. This is an important term, and it is significant that the most positive of the entries in the *Notebooks* deliberately limit themselves to the composition of surface reality and avoid or ignore the 'inner self' that he has only recently discovered and from whose activities he feels excluded (entry 4). Rilke's lecture on Rodin from 1905 expands on the idea (or ideal) of surface, reflecting on how 'one can do nothing more than create a surface, a surface that, like those of natural things, is surrounded by atmosphere, shaded, illuminated—: only the surface (nothing else)' (*KA*

iv. 500). He goes on to ask: 'isn't *everything* we know surface? Can we know interior things in any other way than when they become surface? Our pleasure in a fruit, an animal, a landscape—: is this not the interpretation, the exegesis, the appropriation of a certain surface? And what we call "spirit" and "soul" and "love" . . .' Rilke's vision here engages almost explicitly with that of Chandos: 'surface' is his version of Hofmannsthal's epiphanic moments (and how characteristic it is of Rilke to use just the same terms, 'spirit' and 'soul', as examples of the very opposite of what Chandos uses them for, as indicative—provisionally—of triumph rather than of failure). But 'surface' gains in importance for Rilke; his experience of Cézanne's work in 1908 offered him the insight that art can be 'a matter to be determined by colours amongst themselves',[15] on the surface of the work of art itself, bracketing out any possibility of a hidden subjective dimension. Malte has discovered this dimension, and it troubles him; entries 11–13 offer a glimpse, mediated by Cézanne (as Rilke's letters to Clara from October 1907 make evident), of a world-view that need not take it into account, which is why they can be so cheerful. This is in all likelihood also what Rilke means when he talks of 'circumscribing' not his own insights but Malte's, in his letter of 8 September 1908 (see above, p. xviii): this apparent solution to the problem of subjectivity is denied to Malte.

The celebrations that do appear are overwhelmed not only by a sense of mental or psychic fragmentation that clings to the novel's protagonist but by experiences of physical and corporeal fragmentation or dissolution. Malte has something in common here with Chandos, who explains his sense of self-alienation by likening it to his finger seen under a magnifying glass, unfamiliar and disproportionate, the whorls of the fingerprint become huge furrows. But this is a momentary impression, whereas Malte's sense of bodily disunity is all-pervasive. His encounter with a disembodied hand in entry 29, while he is searching for a red crayon under a desk, is well known; that hand attempts to take control of his own, and Malte has to summon 'all the rights of ownership that [he] had over it' to pull it back to him. Less familiar is Malte's evocation of his childhood fear, '*das Grosse*' or 'the Big Thing', as a swelling, 'like a second head, part of me', and then like a 'dead animal' that had once been part of him and

[15] Letter to Clara Rilke, 22 Oct. 1907.

through which his blood had flowed (p. 36). Hofmannsthal's ideal was Addison's dictum, 'the whole man must move at once' (which he may have taken from the aphorist Lichtenberg or the Romantic novelist Jean Paul), but *Malte Laurids Brigge* is its antithesis, populated by a mass of disconnected body parts. When Malte visits hospital in entry 19 he observes a man swathed in bandages, 'so that there was only an eye visible, which was no longer part of anyone', and he sits next to 'a huge, immobile mass, with a [. . .] large, heavy, motionless hand' and a face 'empty, totally without features and without memories'. The physicality of the human body is everywhere prominent in *Malte*, from the very first page—the pregnant woman moving heavily, the fat, greenish child with a rash on its forehead. Individual limbs and organs detach or swell and burst, and many of the physical features that fascinate Malte are damaged, medically abnormal, or quite simply fantastic—Charles the Bold's scars and an abscess, his peeled-off face (entry 55), the ripped face of the woman on the rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs (entry 5). There are what one might call 'hypostatized' body parts, too, such as the eyes of the men in the Louvre in entry 18, who 'keep their eye on me, their eye is always upon me, always this one restless eye made up of all their eyes'—but overwhelmingly the focus is on *parts* of the body rather than the person as a whole.

Rilke's friend and sometime lover, Lou Andreas-Salomé, alluded to this in a study of Rilke published shortly after his death,[16] doubtless recalling the letter that he had sent on 18 July 1903, in which he laments Paris as a city to which wholeness is alien: 'What kind of a world is this! Pieces, pieces of people, pieces of animals, the remnants of things that used to be, and everything still in motion as if being blown back and forth in a strange wind.' This mode of perception extends to the infrastructure of Paris, too, and one of the most striking images of the early sections of the novel is Malte's evocation of a partly torn-down building. Conventionally one sees houses as contained or completed by walls; the wall that Malte sees shows a house 'inside out', partly eviscerated, its remaining innards exposed, the pipework and drainage visible instead of discreetly hidden, tatters of wallpaper still surviving, layers of old paintwork peeled back.

[16] Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Rainer Maria Rilke*, 31–2.

Story-telling

The task of holding all this together, of resisting and yet encompassing the fervid fragmentedness of self and world, is that of the writer in general, but it is Malte's in particular.[17] He associates successful writing, successful narration, with the past, a time of greater wholeness, reflecting in the opening lines of entry 44 on how 'the days when they told stories, properly told stories, must have been before my time. I never heard anyone tell a story. When Abelone used to talk to me about when Maman was young, it was very clear that she didn't have the art of story-telling. Old Count Brahe is said to have had it.' And with his customary obliqueness, via Abelone's recollections, he reconstructs what Brahe's skill consisted of, and we witness the reported narrative of the old man dictating his memoirs—as Rilke dictated the final version of *Malte* itself—directing Abelone to cross out, rewrite, and correct so that his reader, or listener, can 'see' the story: 'will they even *see* what I'm saying here?' he demands as he becomes impatient with his amanuensis. He wants figures such as the Marquis de Belmare to be *seen* even as they themselves tell their stories—'this fellow Belmare, he had marvellous stories in his blood, and incredible illustrations', he bellows, associating narrative with the very flow of life, something fully present and organic rather than locked in the past as it is in a printed book. Belmare once told his father stories about Persia, and rather than remembering what was said, Brahe reflects instead upon the continuing physical presence in him of that narrative, musing, 'sometimes I think my hands still smell of it'. Brahe is impatient with the slowness of the process of dictation because he himself 'sees' his memoirs, and indeed himself, in an entirely timeless manner, conflating distant time with vivid present, so that 'when he turned his gaze inwards [the past] should lie before him as in a bright Nordic summer night, intensified and wakeful'. Earlier we have been told that 'the passage of time had absolutely no significance for him, death was a minor incident that he disregarded entirely', and he could talk both of those dead for generations as if they were still alive and of children yet to be born (entry 15). The

[17] The role of narrative within *MLB* is the subject of a ground-breaking essay by Judith Ryan to which I am indebted here: 'Hypothetisches Erzählen: Zur Funktion von Phantasie und Einbildung in Rilkes *Malte Laurids Brigge*', *Jahrbuch der Deutschen Schillergesellschaft*, 15 (1971), 341–74.

presence of the ghosts in Urnekloster is in one sense merely an extension of the eternal present in which Brahe lives and which enables him to narrate meaningfully. Malte's mother had the art, too: Malte 'could only actually *see* [Ingeborg] when Maman told me the story that I asked for over and over again' (entry 27), and the benefits are mutual, for the very act of telling the story completely reinvigorates his fragile mother for a while.

Malte's own processes of recovery in (or from) Paris begin with learning to see—he insists on this twice, in entries 4 and 5—to see not only surfaces but the inner life of things and people, and thereby to learn about his own inner life. For Rilke the word '*sehen*' ('to see') has much in common with '*erkennen*' ('to recognize', 'to understand', 'to gain insight into'), but also with '*sich einbilden*' ('to imagine') and '*sich erinnern*' ('to remember'). Malte glosses his determination to learn to see with a remark about 'everything enters into me more deeply [. . .] I have an inner self that I knew nothing about'—and in fact his seeing is always to a large extent an account of what is happening in that inner self. Seeing and imagining have fluid boundaries, such as in the episode of the neighbour in the Petersburg hotel (entry 50), when Malte does not actually see what is going on in that room (despite his emphasis on the need to establish 'facts' in the very first line of that entry) and yet has a full picture. This pattern continually repeats itself in different forms: he and his mother 'see' the Schulins' house, even though it has been gone for years, burned down, conflating absence with presence once more in seeing that is equivalent to vision, and when Charles the Bold of Burgundy is lost, lying dead in the ice, he has never before been 'so genuinely present in the imagination of all' (entry 55).

Malte is convinced that someone must do something to correct the litany of false apprehensions of the world, and his conclusion is that to do so he, Brigge, must sit down and write (entry 14)—but the processes of narrative are not so easy. He finds it 'hard to explain' his case to his doctor in entry 19 (and impossible to repeat the narrative to the assembled medical team a little while later); he has 'no voice' to tell his family what happened in the attic while he was dressing up (entry 32), and once the right moment has passed (in the wake of his mother's story about Ingeborg and the dog, Cavalier), he cannot find a way to report to anyone else the story of 'the hand', his agitation reflected in the repeated use of the word for to tell, '*erzählen*' in