Rainer Maria Rilke: Bearing Witness

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In the intense work that a thesis demands two factors will make most difference: subject matter and quality of supervision. Not all subject matter grows more interesting over several years of close attention. Mine did and does, and led me to read not Rilke only at ever-greater depth but also a range of others writers, philosophers, poets and literary critics in whose company I feel privileged to have worked. I have been as fortunate with my supervisor, Professor Jane Goodall of the Writing and Society Group at the University of Western Sydney. She had a long-standing interest in Rilke as well as in the arts of reading and writing, and brought all of that to our intensely rewarding discussions. More personally, she was able to offer a high degree of trust in the eventual realisation of this study even during the time when little had “arrived” on the page. It is a rare privilege in a writer’s life to share so much concentrated time around mutual intellectual interests. Jane’s interest was constant and transformative and I thank her wholeheartedly. At the early stages of this project I was also supported by the interest and enthusiasm of Dr David Phillips, then at the University of Western Sydney. He left to take up a position at the University of East London, but not before we had had some invaluable discussions, for which I also thank him. I would like to thank Dr Christopher Fleming of the University of Western Sydney for insights in the final stages. Over the last year of writing I was able to discuss some aspects of Rilke’s work and particularly other people’s translations, as well as my own, with Susanne Kahn-Ackermann of Munich. She and I have shared interests through much of our adult lives, not least on questions of spirituality. It was a special joy to share this. Her wise counsel and keen language skills were invaluable. Rilke has many “fans”. Among the people who took time to share their views or bring my attention to pertinent critical writings are Susan Maley, Professor Joe Bessler, Amanda Lohrey, Sally Gillespie, Subhana Barzarghi, Jocelyn Krygier, Donna Idol and Dr Caroline Josephs. I also wish to thank for their personal support or hospitality, Gabriel and Kezia Dowrick, Geraldine Killalea, Kim Cunio, Paul Wilson, Hanan al-Shaykh, Helen Palmer, Judith Ackroyd, Rev. Hilary Star, Helen Palmer, Rev. Ian Pearson, Sue Hines, Clare Emery and, most particularly, Jane Moore.
Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is original, other than supporting quoted material all of which is clearly indicated and fully acknowledged within the text.

I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

Stephanie Dowrick
2 June 2008, Sydney, Australia.
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Abstract: Rainer Maria Rilke: Bearing Witness

This study of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) explores both epistemological and ontological themes, explicitly asking what readers may “bear witness to” within themselves, as well as on the page, through their reading. The primary question of the study comes from Martin Heidegger’s essay on Rilke when (quoting Hölderlin) he asks: “What are poets for (in these destitute times)?” and whether this has genuine significance beyond entertainment or diversion.

The spiritual complexity of Rilke’s work has been of some interest to many scholars. In this study I centralise that interest at book-length for the first time since Frederico Olivero’s 1931 study of mysticism in Rilke’s work. Also for the first time I privilege the perspective of the contemporary general reader, looking at the spiritual variances and ambiguities within Rilke’s work and why they may have a particular resonance for twenty-first century readers. This allows for a more diffused discussion about reading as well as writing, with attention to the acquisition of knowledge and the forces of imagination and inspiration as well as subjectivity. The study looks closely at Rilke’s poetry, from the popular Book of Hours to the more challenging Duino Elegies and Sonnets to Orpheus, as well as the varied translations into English, using that variety to intensify insights about the inevitable subjectivity of readers as well as translators. I discuss Rilke’s psychologically and socially complex life, revealed in part through his legacy of more than 10,000 letters. How readers “read” the life of a writer self-evidently colours their reading of the work. I propose that this simultaneously allows for an enhanced “reading” of and greater understanding of their own spiritual or existential needs and individual subjectivity.

The study calls on the work of a number of critics outside the field of literary studies. These include the psychoanalytic writers Alice Miller and James Hillman and the philosophers Hans-Georg Gadamer, Iris Murdoch, Gaston Bachelard, John Armstrong, George Steiner, Gabriel Marcel, Rudolf Otto and Martin Heidegger. The study speaks both explicitly and implicitly for John Keats’s idea of “negative capability” and the specific demands of bringing to the reading of Rilke, and the writing about him, the receptiveness and concentration of a “poet’s” mind where, as Rilke himself urged, questions can matter more than answers and the need for absolutism can be postponed.
Introduction

Now it is time that gods came walking out
of lived-in Things….
Time that they came and knocked down every wall
inside my house. New page. Only the wind
from such a turning could be strong enough
to toss the air as a shovel tosses dirt:
a fresh-turned field of breath. O gods, gods!
who used to come so often and are still
asleep in the Things around us, who serenely
rise and at wells that we can only guess at
splash icy water on your necks and faces,
and lightly add your restedness to what seems
already filled to bursting: our full lives.
Once again let it be your morning, gods.
We keep repeating. You alone are source.
With you the world arises, and your dawn
gleams on each crack and crevice of our failure….

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Introduction overview

“It is my conviction that, by any measure, the two greatest writers of the twentieth century are James Joyce (1882-1941) and Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926),” writes the critic John Mood.\(^2\) Echoing that, German literature scholar Michael Hofmann writes, “Rilke, first – whatever else one thinks of him – is at least as good a poet as there has ever been, in point of skill, originality and expression.”\(^3\) Robert Musil, in 1927, declared that Rilke was “the greatest lyric poet the Germans have seen since the Middle Ages”.\(^4\) Writer and monk, Thomas Merton, put it most simply and truthfully of all: “He is a poet. Is that a small thing?”\(^5\)

Merton was asking his question rhetorically, but spending time in the company of Rainer Maria Rilke would make it easy to respond: this is no small thing. Rilke is one of very few poets on the world stage who “transcends the sphere of the literary”.\(^6\) What’s more, at a time of massive indifference to the sometimes sublime and quietly subversive art of poetry, his life and especially his work are of genuine and increasing interest not to scholars only but also to the general reading public.

Three reasons stand out. Rilke is a highly innovative and great poet. (Yet there are other great poets unread outside university literature departments.) He is genuinely “European”: “From early on, Rilke, the European, saw himself as a mediator between various cultures and nations.”\(^7\) Perhaps most crucially, he speaks directly to the spiritually minded, even yearning reader out of a shifting consciousness that is both transcendent and uncertain. That paradox could not be more timely in a century already marked by a dramatic resurgence in religious

fundamentalism, intense questioning of traditional faith and beliefs, and an explosion of forms of post-denominational spirituality.

That last, driving aspect of Rilke’s work and particularly of his appeal has, I believe, been noticeably under-discussed in contemporary scholarly writing, both its nature and the timeliness of it. Certainly the spiritual power of Rilke’s writing, as well as his spiritual beliefs and particularly their inconsistency, unconventionality, and intimate relationship with the creation of art, have been widely canvassed. Rilke’s numerous biographers have explored those themes with varying degrees of interest and insight. Contemporary scholar Mark Burrows has canvassed them with stimulating insight. Critics and biographers J. F. Hendry, Donald Prater, B. D. Barnacle and J. R. von Salis, as well as philosophers, including Martin Heidegger, Gabriel Marcel and Hans-Georg Gadamer, have particularly illuminated the philosophical and spiritual aspects of Rilke’s work. Lou Andreas-Salomé, Rilke’s greatest love and the one who, in Rilke’s view, knew him best, had much to say. Of recent translators, Robert Bly, Joanna Macy, Anita Barrows and Annemarie Kidder have been carefully attentive to the explicitly spiritual poetry. Their commentaries are, however, necessarily subservient to their translations.

What remains noticeable, then, is that given the weight of Rilke scholarship more generally, the originality and contemporary pertinence of spiritual questions in Rilke’s work has not had greater centrality in recent decades. Significantly, there has not been a full-length study of this aspect of his work since 1931 when Frederico Olivero’s dated and virtually unreadable Rainer Maria Rilke: A Study in Poetry and Mysticism, written in Italian, was published in English. Can this be because “spirituality” as a context or academic discipline itself remains contentious in the academic sphere?

There has been no substantial work, either, on the spiritual focus of Rilke’s life and work as the likely catalyst for his continuing and even increasing claim on readers’ attention. Yet this is of exceptional interest. At a time when public indifference to poetry could not be greater and the idea of someone “living for poetry” is simply laughable, new translations of Rilke’s work continue to appear, and not just of his early Stunden-Buch (Book of Hours) which does bring him closer to readers than many of his later works. His magnificent but obscure and demanding Duineser Elegien (Duino Elegies) and Die Sonette an Orpheus (Sonnets to Orpheus) also continue to inspire new translators and to find new as well as faithful readers.
Those two concerns are at the heart of this study: first, the spiritual themes, and the nature of them, driving Rilke’s writing and especially his poetry, made more and not less relevant to these times by the psychological complexity and intense uncertainties of the poet himself; and second, the experience of reading perhaps for spiritual insight and experience, and what such reading may allow, especially from the perspective of Rilke’s contemporary general readers. In other words, the “witnessing” to which the subtitle of this study draws attention is highly relational: it “witnesses” Rilke himself, and his ambiguous, compelling inner world and writing. As crucially, it “witnesses” (honours, explores) what it means for contemporary readers to read Rilke within the explicit frameworks of greater self-knowledge generally, and of spiritual yearning particularly. It honours that inchoate yearning; it also expresses it and may intensify it.

The study also testifies to or witnesses the power of human creativity, of art and of poetry specifically. (A greater appreciation of Rilke leads to a greater appreciation of poetry itself.) Beauty, joy, awe and praising are dimensions of the sacred and are frequently to be found in the poetry of Rilke. Discussions about those qualities in Rilke’s work are necessarily complex. Direct experience of them within Rilke’s work may, by contrast, be simpler.

Here is the time for the sayable, here is its homeland.
Speak and bear witness. More than ever
the Things that we might experience are vanishing, for
what crowds them out and replaces them is an imageless act…
…Between the hammers our heart
endures, just as the tongue does
between the teeth and, despite that,
still is able to praise.8

When considering readers and what they may be seeking beyond entertainment or aesthetic pleasure, it is stimulating to think about Martin Heidegger’s famous and famously provocative question (quoting Hölderlin): “What are poets for (in these destitute times)?” Readers in our own time read within a context that is arguably no less culturally and spiritually “destitute” than when Heidegger first gave his (Wozu

8 Lines from Ninth Elegy, in Rilke, Selected Poetry, (Mitchell), 1987, p 201.
The context today may in fact seem decidedly grim for reading serious, sometimes fey or obtuse and certainly “high art” poetry. Nevertheless, such poetry, Rilke’s poetry, is being read – and increasingly. A paraphrase of Heidegger’s question remains urgent, “What is poetry for?” Which quickly leads to the question that drives this study: “Why read Rilke?” And, as centrally, what do we witness within ourselves when we do so?

A version of an answer comes in contemporary American critic Harold Bloom’s large-hearted, idiosyncratic book, Omens of Millennium, when he suggests that, “Even the most spiritual of autobiographies is a song of the self.” Bloom’s self, as far as he can remember, “came to its belated birth” when he was about nine or ten, achieved by “reading visionary poetry, a reading that implicitly was an act of knowing something previously unknown in me.” The “something” that Bloom is referring to, mid-wifed in his case by the poetry of Hart Crane and William Blake, was a sense of “possible sublimity”. In the life of the searching reader, this is a version of the Grail. Bloom continues:

To fall in love with great poetry when you are young is to be awakened to the self’s potential...The self’s potential as power involves the self’s immortality, not as duration but as the awakening to a knowledge of something in the self that cannot die, because it was never born...At more than half a century away from the deep force of reading and loving poetry, I no longer remember precisely what I then felt, and yet can recall how it felt. It was an elevation, a mounting high on no intoxications except incantatory language.

Of the many “visionary poets” who might awaken a reader to the self’s potential, even to the transformative knowledge that “something in the self...cannot die, because it was never born”, Rainer Maria Rilke holds a quite exceptional place. Quoted and paraphrased in movies as varied as Sister Act 2 and Wings of Desire, read at weddings and funerals, anthologized repeatedly, he is cherished not as a poet only but also as a source of insight and wisdom that would almost certainly far exceed anything he might have anticipated or with which he might have felt remotely comfortable.

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9 Published in German in 1950 and in English as part of Poetry, Language, Thought in 1971.
In quite remarkable ways, Rilke lived “as a poet”. In a letter to a friend he said, “Everyone discovers in his own time that artistic work and life somehow form an either/or.” For Rilke there was no either/or. Despite friendships and lovers, he quite ruthlessly sacrificed other people’s needs and to some extent his own more conventional wishes to make himself “available” to his art. His was in many ways an extraordinary life, wide open to criticism or even outrage, as well as wonder.

It had begun without particular promise in a constricted and unhappy German-speaking household in Prague in 1875. It ended in 1926 in a small tower, the Château Muzot, in the Valais, a French-speaking area of Switzerland, in the period between the two world wars that devastated and transformed Europe. Rilke lived for years in France and was passionate about Italy and especially Russia, a country he regarded as his spiritual birthplace and where, as a young man with Lou Andreas-Salomé, he also spent time.

His poetry is the highest of “high art”. He believed deeply in the power of art to “change the normal world”, but certainly did not aim to make his thoughts or poetry “accessible”. He may have regarded such an idea as “American”, unjust Rilkean shorthand for a world changing for the worse, part of his prejudice against English-speakers generally and Americans particularly, and perhaps especially unjust given that the outstanding Rilke English-language scholarship and translations of the last two decades, especially, have with few exceptions come from the United States.

The rapidity of change in an increasingly mechanised world frightened and appalled him. The focus of Rilke’s work was inward: “We empty ourselves, we surrender, we unfold,” he wrote.

…what my heart will be is a tower,
and I will be right out on its rim:
nothing else will be there, only pain
and what can’t be said, only the world.
Only one thing left in the enormous space
that will go dark and then light again,
only one final face full of longing,
exiled into what is always full of thirst,

only one farthest-out face made of stone,
at peace with its own inner weight,
which the distances, who go on ruining it,
force on to deeper holiness.\(^{15}\)

Given the depth and intensity of his vision it might have been understandable had he been forgotten by all but the most serious readers. Yet almost a century after his death interest in his work is, if anything, growing. Susanne Kahn-Ackerman has been translating books of a literary and spiritual nature from English into German (her mother tongue) for more than thirty years. Only the Bible and Shakespeare, she says, are more often quoted than Rilke. And this is not in German-originated texts; it is in books written in English.\(^{16}\)

Rilke’s life and work have also stimulated a massive scholarly literature. This began before his death and in the years since virtually every word of his torrential output - which includes a huge variety of poetry, some arguably as fully realised as poetry has ever been, plays, a Modernist novel, semi-philosophical writings and more than 11,000 extant and often long, discursive letters – as well as most moments of his troubled but supremely accomplished life, have been minutely examined. This highly introverted, sensitive man has been laid bare, theorised, pilloried, sanctified, misunderstood – and interpreted with the greatest sophistication and understanding.

“Rilke’s life, Rilke’s poetry, Rilke’s alleged ideas, have exerted an amazing attraction for many minds, “ writes American critic and Rilke translator William Gass. “It’s not been just the highborn women who have sewed a skirt about him, or written him loving letters, or offered him castle space, eager ears, and ceaseless devotion; who came to him as though they were soupless and he a kitchen...studies have multiplied as if they had been


\(^{16}\) Private conversation, 2008.
introduced into a scholar-empty Australia; and dozens of translators have blunted their
skills against his obdurate, complex, and compacted poems…”17

Coming “soupless” to the “kitchen” of Rilke’s work, to extend Gass’ metaphor,
demands an unusual degree of receptivity in the reader, including setting aside notions of
what one should receive. This is a primary gift of reading Rilke closely: that it can “ripen”
mature one’s reading habits more generally, open them up even as the poetry also hones
one’s attention and concentration. What must be witnessed is the poetry itself and its
effects on one’s own thinking and soul. A surrender to what is present is the constant call.
So if it seems impossible that I should, simultaneously, be suggesting that there is
something more that is worthwhile to say, especially about the spiritual power of and
interest in Rilke’s life and writing, and also that Rilke’s poetry can, if not should, be left to
“speak for itself”, then that usefully and immediately expresses something of the paradox
of what I am both creating and unpicking in the pages that follow.

My interest began in a way that was remarkably similar to Harold Bloom’s
experience, described above. I don’t know whether I read visionary poetry as a
child. My sense is that I was in my early teens before I read and learned by heart
Gerard Manley Hopkins, T. S. Eliot and Emily Dickinson. (I can remember, as Bloom
does, how that felt. Fortunately, I have never recovered.) I did, however, have a
religious upbringing that was unusual in that it did not begin until I was nine, the
same age that Bloom was when he began reading Crane and Blake. In those days,
and those were the days of traditional Roman Catholicism, the unqualified intensity
of spiritual, even mystical experience was a given. Mystery was at the centre of
daily life: everyday human experience radiated outwards from it. The one-true-faith
ideology was fierce, many of the rules for daily living were extreme, the threats
grotesque. Nevertheless, there was (literally) no questioning the possibility of an
ordinary person achieving an authentic level of spiritual relationship with and even
realisation of the divine.

Those experiences were made far more vivid, I believe, because my mother
died a year before we entered this strange new world. My father, older sister and I
were “converts”. The contrasts between old and new were stark. Our new Catholic
lives were to be in every way different from our previous, casual-Protestant, barely-
believing “non-Catholic” lives. I noticed the reversals: God first. It was my first

deep and startling experience of seeing: like ripening, a Rilkean theme. Often far from comfortable, and given the circumstances of the changes in our lives and especially my mother’s disastrously premature death, generally far from welcome, it was nevertheless a version of what Buddhists might call “coming awake”. By this I mean, waking up to the sacred and eternal dimensions to living.

The depth of spirituality, the power of prayer, the rhythms of ritual, music, the constant references to the vulnerable fate of one’s soul, along with frantic urgings to examine one’s conscience, repelled and compelled me. This was when I discovered that language could be used to talk about and pray to God and, crucially and as powerfully as silence or music, to seek God and feel sought. The origins of this study belong in that time.

Rilke’s own intensely pious, superstitious Roman Catholic childhood in Prague, a hundred and fifty years earlier, was not the same as mine. Some of the traces it left on his personality and in his work were nevertheless familiar to me. And nothing was more familiar to me, so familiar it felt like a homecoming, than the passionate yearning for the transcendent so dazzlingly characteristic of some of Rilke’s poetry. What is more, and is perhaps more surprising, this transcendence is not an experience outside life; it is within it. However inconsistent Rilke may be in some ways, he is not inconsistent in this. It is life in its fullness that is sought. And fullness in this context specifically includes and acknowledges darkness as well as light, the unseen with the seen, uncertainty frequently triumphing over certainty: questions mattering much more than answers.

Australian scholar David Tacey proposes an appropriately unassuming definition of spirituality when he writes that it is “the careful and reflective art of developing a relationship with the sacred”. It may not be self-evident how complex this relationship between the temporal and eternal is in Rilke’s work and life, or even how much darkness there is in Rilke’s countless evocations of “beauty”, so much so that reading him can usefully jolt the reader to examine any limiting notions they may have of beauty, and, again, of what “spiritual” might mean. The idea that what is beautiful or spiritual is necessarily soothing or essentially harmonising has, when reading Rilke, quickly to be laid to rest. It can also mean, in Rilke’s hands, something – rather like his “not Christian” angels – that is plainly “terrifying”.

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A primary challenge in the writing of this study then has been to “hold” the interdependent tensions and relationships at its centre: between Rilke and his ambiguous and often contradictory ideas writing into and of the sacred; between Rilke, the writer (envisioned and experienced in a variety of ways), and his twenty-first century readers; between readers and their independent “developing relationship with the sacred”, and between the demands of traditional scholarship and the specific needs of this approach and study.

Exegetical humility, tentativeness, openness, a deliberate unwillingness to say This is how it is, or This is how it ought to be are, I believe, essential qualities when reading or discussing Rilke, and particularly when discussing the spiritual aspects of Rilke’s work as well as readers’ possible experiences of that work. I want them to be hallmarks here. And yet it must also be said that these qualities can be difficult to honour in a world of scholarship where spirituality itself is largely marginalised or ignored, theoretical certainty is expected and a self-protective distance is assumed.

In my experience it is virtually impossible to write meaningfully about spiritual matters without engaging one’s own subjectivity and vulnerability at least implicitly. (What do these questions mean to me? is as vital an enquiry as, What do these questions mean?) How one writes reflects a series of choices that will determine not just subject matter and conclusions but, more fundamentally still, questions of territory and voice. Voice “carries” those choices. To some extent at least, it also determines them. Rilke is the poet who wrote:

...we are nothing but the bark and leaf.
The great Death that we all have in ourselves
is the fruit, around which everything revolves.19

Engagement is called for. Risk is assumed.

I came to this work not as a Rilke or German literature scholar but as a conscious and experienced “reading practitioner”, someone who has spent her entire adult life as a publisher and then as a writer, and whose lifelong career and passion it has been to think deeply about reading and the needs and interests of the “serious general reader”. This quite naturally takes me into the interstices between scholarly

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“territories”, and to the sometimes un-signposted terrains of inter-disciplinary scholarship.

I also came to Rilke as a minister and spiritual seeker, not “seeking” Rilke but seeking, even yearning for where the poetry of Rilke sometimes takes me. Reading Rilke through such a prism has felt quite natural to me, although also demanding. Once again, reading Rilke is not self-evidently soothing. It is often exhilarating. It is sometimes enchanting. It can be confusing. Occasionally it is repugnant. The poet of inwardness makes huge claims on readers, on their/our own inner experience. That there is nowhere to hide is part of his attraction. Rilke’s intense subjectivity invites a self-questioning, self-evolving response. In the way I have chosen to raise, explore (and frequently refrain from answering) questions, I have felt inspired by one of the most familiar passages from Rilke’s writing, more fully explored in Section One, emphasizing the value not of questions only (“Live the questions now”) but of an open, patient receptivity to unfolding inner as well as outer knowledge (“…you will then, gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”20).

Language has also been a welcome challenge in the writing of this work both as subject matter and as means to bring my ideas to the page. I felt that to write about Rilke using language any less lucid than I could attempt to offer would be dishonouring. Indeed, while holding in my mind the particular requirements of thesis writing, and the conventions of drawing attention to one’s own original scholarship as well as the “lineage” from which it is drawn, I have nevertheless avoided language that is itself “tribal” or academically self-referential wherever possible. Rilke is, after all, the poet who disliked theories as much as he did formal philosophy, theological arguments and discussions of mysticism. Many of the concepts I propose are presented in language that is deliberately tentative and occasionally playful. This is not a comment on their seriousness; the opposite is true. But nor have I felt the need to “bolster” them in language that is more reassuringly assertive than the ideas themselves.

“Universities have so far afforded me very little; there is so much resistance in my nature to their ways,” Rilke wrote in 1904. This adds a stimulating caution when considering using theories or overtly theoretical language to discuss Rilke.

Why am I using this theory, these tools or those ideas? What do they allow – and prevent? Such questions have added rigour, not subtracted it. And they have kept me faithful to one of the most crucial considerations of all: when and how is it possible to read (and write about) Rilke with a poet’s rather than a critic’s mind?

In this context, I wish again to emphasise that I make an implicit case throughout the study for “tentative knowledge”: knowledge that is continuously unfolding, that is part of a chain of relationships of reading and writing and that does not need to “arrive” at a point of absolute conviction or persuasiveness. This does, I believe, fairly and even accurately “carry” Rilke’s own complex spiritual structure as well as the immediacy of the “poetic experience” that in its subtlety and variety cannot rely exclusively on the conventional tools of analysis and judgement, however skilfully those are used. I align this to John Keats’s idea of “negative capability”, following it as a liberating principle throughout the writing.

About “Reading”: the first part of Rainer Maria Rilke: Bearing Witness

In the first part of this study my focus is largely on creating an original and clarifying way of approaching Rilke, deepening an appreciation of his poetry within a spirit-focused or spiritually-enquiring reading. My thesis is that the spiritual power and seeking in Rilke’s work, along with the ambiguities in his beliefs, interests and life choices, have sustained an increasing scholarly and popular interest in his work, and made it exceptionally rewarding for readers at this time. I also explore significant aspects of the reading process itself: what a twenty-first century “seeking” reader might look for (and find) in Rilke’s work; the potent relationships between the writer and his many translators into English; and between the writer and his readers.

I am proposing that for many readers an interest in Rilke is driven by a spiritual hunger that exceeds an aesthetic interest. Throughout this section and in the study as a whole, I look closely at the poetry that speaks to this hunger, framing it cautiously to encourage personal freedom within each reader’s own reception of it. I argue for the benefits of surrendered reading: freeing the mind to the extent to which it is possible from presumptions and opening to the particular gifts of Rilke’s creations.

I explore the work of the major Rilke scholars and critics writing in English, in relation to the study’s central themes, and draw extensively from Rilke’s letters, as well as from philosophers whose interest in poetry extends beyond the aesthetic. It is not by chance that there are as many philosophers on my reading list as literary critics. I have needed and welcomed their spacious “high ground” statements that simultaneously pay attention to the particulars. I want also to show that a reader is “free” to receive what a writer has written only to the extent to which they can “see” (a core Rilkean idea), and understand the limitations and prejudices they inevitably bring to their reading (a core Gadamerian idea). The work of Hans-Georg Gadamer has been particularly useful as I attempt to show that some of those limitations and prejudices will also be unconscious and less available to examination, part of the conditioning that comes with particular time, place and modes of thinking.

For example, it has become “natural” for a halfway-serious reader to read through a psychological prism. This is part of my own formal training but it is also the case for the “serious thoughtful reader” whom this study considers and to some extent addresses. Freud’s ideas are of far more limited interest than they were even twenty years ago. Nevertheless, “psychologizing” has become increasingly routine at all levels of public and private discourse from the most banal Dr Phil-ish moments to subtle analyses of complex situations.

This psychological context unites literary-minded readers across geographical and language borders. It not only determines what is read but how something is read. What’s more, this frequently applies to writers as much as to what is written. “Reading Rilke” is not limited to reading his poetry, prose or letters. For many, “reading Rilke” means freely interpreting the man and Rilke, in all his raw ambiguity, appears to be exceptionally available. Biographies abound; his many thousands of letters reveal his most private thoughts.

22 Thanks to my supervisor, Professor Jane Goodall, for this vivid term, “high ground”, which could not be more appropriate as a linking descriptor for many of the comments that usefully elucidate the breadth of Rilke’s writing and readers’ interest.
This does not, however, make him easy to read accurately. As a person Rilke may be as difficult to read as some of his poetry. But this itself creates a rich opportunity for self-enquiry. Who is “Rilke” to each reader? How do we “create” him? How do our perceptions of him illuminate our own self-perceptions and understanding of how we make sense of the world? What is our reading for?

Key psychological questions conclude the first section of the study. Raising them, I draw on the work of two widely published contemporary analysts with dramatically differing views: the Swiss writer Alice Miller and the American post-Jungian, James Hillman. My interest is not in allowing one theory to triumph over the other. In fact, I hope to show how convincing each is; yet, by contrasting the ways in which Rilke could be “read” through those two legitimate theoretical frameworks, I want also to show that each is one among many possible prisms and that neither could have an exclusive claim to truth.

About “Yearning”: the second part of Rainer Maria Rilke: Bearing Witness

“Truth” is also crucial to the investigations of the second part of this study. The same themes of reading more generally, and of reading Rilke (poet and poetry), continue. Here I deepen the spiritual context further by investigating the key notion of yearning. I use this term to describe a specific human impulse reaching beyond the familiar (everyday consciousness and its limitations) towards the transcendent. It is, I suggest, to the yearning reader that Rilke particularly speaks.

This again raises challenges in the context of scholarly writing. Yearning is an emotional impulse. Its “object” is incorporeal, numinous and ineffable – and also “object-less”. Yearning reaches towards…and is itself an experience. Understanding yearning is best achieved inwardly, experientially. Reading Rilke repeatedly demonstrates that. As an experience it can be profound, perhaps transformative. (“You must change your life.”) As a topic, it is highly vulnerable to trivialisation or misunderstanding and relatively unavailable to the usual forms of analysis. A heavy hand will not do.

Once again, the implicit demands of this study become clear: how to discuss something at the heart of Rilke’s writing without colonising it, however well-
meaning that may be. To complicate the issue further, this topic of yearning leads rapidly to questioning what knowledge itself is, especially “knowledge” of the numinous, sacred and “holy”. One yearns: for what? One seeks: what? One discovers: what? One is bearing witness to what?

Rilke himself spoke of differences between elucidation and reading that is “submitted to”. This raises core issues of receptivity and in taking seriously the power of yearning in Rilke’s work, and the power this specifically has within readers’ own lives, I hope to demonstrate what such reading might mean not in literary terms only but also and again in relation to self-enquiry and self-understanding.

I continue to explore the range and ambiguity of Rilke’s own spiritual and religious beliefs (and their attraction for contemporary readers); his dependence upon and understanding of inspiration (Rodin’s “Only work” dictum was transformative but not everything); his arguably mystical attitudes to death (and life); his refusal of external authority; his interest in but sometimes bitterness about “God” in whom, frequently, he barely believed; his vision of “Things” and his sensual appreciation of this world, where, arguably, transcendence is to be found.

The poet remains as much on the page as his writing and poetry. Michael André Bernstein writes [of Heidegger, but it could as well be said of Rilke]: “Today, the disjunction between imaginative intelligence and character is a cultural commonplace, and yet we have never entirely stopped asking whether there is a point at which a basic shabbiness of soul must disfigure any works that such a person produces.”

In countless studies of Rilke, judgements are made about his behaviour, emotional strengths and weaknesses, morals and ethics, his physical and emotional health. In this study, I also make judgements; they may be inevitable. Crucial to this second part of the study, however, is my attempt further to elucidate the extent to which our ideas are shaped by possibly unexamined projections and prejudices. These limit something within us more crucial than mere appreciation. I write about the space between the reader and the page, questioning what “fills” it.

Adherence to a particular fashion, view or framework can be fierce. Without risk and originality, however, even the most skilful writing is de-vitalised. The scholarly and literary choices we make, and our everyday choices as seeking

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readers, are, I suggest, profoundly descriptive of our levels of consciousness (awareness), as well as of our most intimate Weltanschauung.

In the company of Rilke, we can learn to see the world through a poet’s eyes; even if only momentarily. Catching our breath, we can think with a poet’s mind and appreciate our world with a poet’s heart.

As part of his commentary on Heidegger’s *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Albert Hofstadter returns to the Wozu Dichter? question, alluded to above. Hofstadter writes: “So poetry… has for Heidegger an indispensable function for human life: it is the creative source of the humanness of the dwelling life of man. Without the poetic element in our own being, and without our poets and their great poetry, we would be brutes, or what is worse and what we are most like today: vicious automata of self-will.”

A genuinely receptive, even radically “innocent” reading of Rilke may be difficult to achieve. Yet still one must ask, how else should “the poetic element in our own being” be revived? How else should Rilke be read?

**Voice**

In her book-length literary study of Rilke, British scholar Judith Ryan cites Rilke’s 1905 *Book of Hours* as being a “meditation on creative powers in general.” She goes on to say, “Constructing the divine also constructs the voice and the mode that will become inimitably Rilke’s: a personal tone modulated by a virtuoso command of rhetoric, expressions of intense anxiety combined with grandiose self-assurance, and a devotion to past tradition refracted through idiosyncratic forms of turn-of-the-century free-thinking (my itals).”

It seems impossible to work on Rilke for any length of time and not become increasingly sensitised to issues of voice. This happens at several levels. First-hand accounts report that Rilke had an exceptionally memorable speaking voice. He understood the literal effect of sound and what it could carry beyond the meaning of the words themselves. What he also understood is how much “listening” occurs also in the multiple processes of reading and of writing.

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This is not something easily taught. It is largely instinctive but experience convinces me that readers will “lend their ears” – their mind, sensibility, feelings – with greater trust and confidence to the writer who “listens” as they write, who can build sentences, paragraphs and a complete work with attention to the individual “melodies” of what they are creating as well as to drumbeat, the “pulse” and “rhythm” of the work as a whole. This is central to what we often think of a “beautiful writing”, even when the subject matter is not beautiful. It is of course possible to write “beautifully” and without sustaining content. Voice is not everything. But when voice, style and content merge, as they do sublimely in Rilke’s writing, a synergy is created that carries extraordinary power. The poet is then “speaking” not to the intellect only, but also to the imagination, the sensuality, even the soul of the listener/reader. Rilke frequently achieves what great music also can, breaking through the carapace of presumptions and defences to go to what is quite accurately called “the heart of the matter”.

The gifts of Rilke’s inner listening (what he paid attention to in his inner world; what he places on the page) cannot easily be conveyed in translation yet must nevertheless be attended to in any attentive reading of his work. I believe those gifts also affect how one might most effectively write about him.

I have briefly mentioned above issues of language and my wish to avoid the conventional constraints of formal technical or self-referential academic language. Voice is as crucial in writing about Rilke, perhaps more so.

In this study I have followed the example of Rilke himself, as well as many of the poet/critics and philosophers who have written about him, in largely favouring the use of the first person plural, especially when addressing concerns, experiences or ideas likely to be common to readers. (I have not used it in the “royal” sense, blurring clarity as to whether I am speaking for myself, or myself and others.)

This usage is less a comment on current academic conventions generally, of which I am aware, than it is a response to the particular demands of this work. Even when writing about that elusive “general reader” – or “common readers” as Virginia Woolf called them - I make no claims to sociological exactness. On the contrary, and again trailing Rilke, I am favouring spacious, almost meditative writing that is nevertheless thorough and purposeful not in its contents only but also in its communicative strategies. Public speaking as well as writing has taught me a great deal about the art and skills of inclusiveness, and the challenges of finding a voice.
spacious and confident enough to include and welcome difference and originality. Rilke’s own comments are helpful here.

To be someone, as an artist, means: to be able to speak one’s self. This would not be so difficult if language started with the individual, originated in him and would then, from this point, gradually force itself into the ears and the comprehension of others. But this is not the case. Quite on the contrary, language is what all have in common, but which no single person has produced because all are continuously producing it, that vast, humming, and swinging syntax to which everyone feels free to add by speaking what is closest to his heart...

In order to shape prose rhythmically, one has to immerse oneself deeply within oneself and detect the blood’s anonymous, multi-varied rhythm. Prose is to be built like a cathedral: there one is truly without name, without ambition, without help: up in the scaffolding, alone with one’s conscience.

Is this not what life is?...that the countless paltry, timid, petty, and shameful details ultimately still amount to a wonderful whole – a whole that would not exist if it depended upon us to understand and achieve it, but to which we contribute in equal parts with our abilities and failures.26

In the presence of Rilke, a consideration of reading itself needs to be a positive and inclusive experience. The assumption of a consensuality of interest is critical and is not dependent upon assumptions on my part of consensual knowledge or experience. How could “we” (readers) approach Rilke and reflect on our spiritual questions and concerns in relation to his writing other than spaciously and inclusively?

In his letters and more formal prose, Rilke uses the first person plural as a signifier of inclusivity, although I would question whether that was his conscious intention. It is not by chance that in the writing of virtually all the poets, critics and philosophers I have chosen to quote about Rilke, this same convention is observed. In thinking freshly about Rilke, the use of this more inclusive and personally

engaged voice allows for a vital emphasis on common purpose, undermining the distancing and implicitly hierarchical voice of the “expert” (guarded) writer speaking to less expert, less guarded readers.

My choice seemed self-evident but I made it less to argue than to demonstrate that whatever the differing opinions and perspectives of readers, critics and writers, in thinking about Rainer Maria Rilke and our own reading experiences, we engage mutually in something that is both meaningful and affecting.

**Choices in language**

There are many times in this study where I am quoting a writer – including Rilke - who uses language in conventionally sexist ways. Some (not all) of these were writing long before this became unacceptable. I have not wanted to litter my text with (sic)s; I would ask readers to be reassured that I was aware of these instances and offer this blanket (sic) to cover them all.

The naming of God, “God” or god was more challenging. (Generally I managed to avoid personal pronouns and the conundrum of him/it in relation to God.) I use all three, meaning something different in each case that I hope is self-evident within the text and that adequately conveys Rilke’s own varying usage and uncertainty, as well as my own.

**Choice of poems and translators**

This study will succeed only if it awakens in readers a greater appreciation of Rilke’s poetic gifts and inner vision. Choosing the poetry was one of several intense joys in writing this work. Frequently, I wavered. How to choose this, rather than this? Hours could pass. There were times when a poem “fit” a particular moment or theme; other moments were less easy. Indecision hung around the corners of my room usefully serving my enquiry about instinct and inspiration that is everywhere in this work. Eventually I persuaded myself that choosing between one exceptional
poem or another was itself a sparkling example of choices being different, rather than right or wrong: an implicit theme of this study. I have attempted to bring forward a number of less well-known poems and, when using better-known poems, I hope to have contextualized them freshly. I also sought to offer a variety of Rilke’s periods and styles, although because of the emphasis of this study the more explicitly spiritual and “yearning” poetry dominates.

Choosing particular translations, often out of many choices, was also a complex process. In the context of a lengthy discussion within this study about translation itself, and when it may be “representation” rather than translation, I sometimes knowingly chose translations that are arguably “too free”. I discussed this at length with Susanne Kahn-Ackerman who mentored my own limited translations and commented patiently and productively on my choices. As a translator and a native German-speaker she felt, as would some English-language Rilke scholars, that some of the translations I have chosen cross the line with Rilke left too far behind. However, when a translation claimed my attention utterly and felt “true”, it found its way onto the page.

I have also chosen occasionally to use different translators even within the same series of poems (for example, the Sonnets). I am ambivalent about this decision, yet within a single series the transparency of the translations varied. For the depth of each individual experience of reading – this moment, these lines – I chose the translation of a particular poem or part poem that I believed worked best. Occasionally I extend the discussion around choice within the footnotes.

Late in the writing of this study I took out the German text for the poems where the translations were not my own. Again, I am conscious of loss. Rilke’s German will convey to a German-language reader what the most accomplished translation cannot. (They can hear through Rilke’s inimitable “voice”.) I was, nevertheless, explicitly constrained by space here and chose to omit the original texts rather than bringing fewer poems (or prose quotations) to the consideration of readers. Throughout the study I wanted Rilke’s own profound sense of awe and enquiry to dominate, even though in English we must receive those qualities through a chorus of diverse voices.

My own translations are a small part of the total. Unlike the published translations, those poems are accompanied by the original text but other than that I make no special claim for them. I use them when there is not a more obviously
satisfactory translation available, fully aware of my own and their limitations. Yet in those, too, in the unravelling of one language and the knitting in another, I felt the “hum of the Invisible”: the irresistible Rilkean call to hear and heed more than ever could be on my page, even while continuing to give each of his pages my closest and most focused attention.

Don’t believe it, that I’m wooing. Angel. And even if I were! You are not coming. For my call is always packed with farewelling. Against such strength of current, you cannot advance. My call is like an arm outstretched. And its hand, held open as if for touching, remains before you, open, like defence and warning.

Ungraspable One, far out.

Glaub nicht, daß ich werbe.
Engel, und würb ich dich auch! Du kommst nicht. Denn mein Anruf ist immer voll Hinweg; wider so starke Strömung kannst du nicht schreiten. Wie ein gestreckter Arm ist mein Rufen. Und seine zum Greifen oben offene Hand bleibt vor dir offen, wie Abwehr und Warnung, Unfaßlicher, weitauf.27

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