HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

RILKE, RAINER MARIA

The Life of Rainer Maria Rilke. Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) was a Bohemian-Austrian poet, novelist, and voluminous correspondent, who left a deep mark on the introspective (and borderline mystic) lyric of our own century. Rilke was born in Prague. His father, a not very successful military man, and his mother, who came from a well to do Prague family, divorced in 1884, when Rilke was nine. Partly due to this shake up in the family, Rilke found himself consigned to a military academy from 1886-1891. Rilke was not at home in this environment, and could not wait to get out—which he did in l895-96, when he studied at the Universities of Prague and Munich. It can be said that with the departure from those institutions of higher learning, Rilke set out on a course of lifelong devotion to poetry, as well as love. In l897 he met and fell in love with Lou Andreas Salomé, the gutsy, attractive, and very talented intimate of Freud and Nietzsche, as well as of Rilke. Rilke remained close to Lou for the next three years, and though they then split up she remained an invaluable guide and adviser to him throughout his life. (Close to Freud, and in her own right a serious student of psychoanalysis, she aided the often self-absorbed Rilke to think more critically about himself.) It was she, after all, who had forced him to change his name from René to Rainer, which seemed 'more masculine.' A meeting with Tolstoy, in 1898, greatly expanded Rilke's sense of the power of art in the world.

The Prose Work of Rainer Maria Rilke. Rilke brought many of his lifetime themes into his only work of fiction. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910). This work presents the jottings, notations and observations of a young painter living in Paris, in pretty complete human isolation. For some time Malte is struck by the ugliness of Paris, as a vast urban sprawl, but gradually he learns how to look at his surrounding world 'aesthetically.' The model for this change in sensibility—which is the turning point into a whole new world view—can be seen in the Baudelaire poem, 'Une Charogne,' 'The Corpse.' That poem is cited admiringly in the novel and suggests the transformation by which one can come to find the sight of a rotting corpse aesthetically satisfying. Malte's self-discoveries also include, not surprisingly, a fascinating with his own death, which becomes profound and interior to him, and opens him up, strangely, to a power of transcendent love.

Rilke's poetry. In his *Stunden-buch*, *Book of Hours*, 1905, Rilke deepens the haunting bond between his prosodic flexibility and the mystical dignity of his thought. In this work he laments the loss of a past—especially the l8th century aristocratic past—which enshrined human values and a sense of beauty, and which set standards of behavior and thought, unlike the crass society of Rilke's time, with its brainless commercialism, and indifference to valid traditions. Among the bleak casualties of this commercial culture must rank the almost universal forgetting of the interior meaning, and enrichment, of death. *The Duino Elegies* (1923) and *The Sonnets to Orpheus* (1923) show us Rilke at his most mature and powerful, making new myths for our time—myths of the Angelic, myths of the Orphic—deepening his account of the leading place art plays in the making of society, and widening his sense (which is always latent in his work) of the importance of the underclasses in his society, and of their candidacy for artistic greatness. Rilke carries his work far beyond the barren isolation of Malte, into a participatory transcendent world, which all can assay.

Reading

Primary source reading

Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, trans. Robert Bly, 1981.

Secondary source reading

Freedman, Ralph, *Life of a Poet: Rainer Maria Rilke,* 1998.

Further reading

Tavis, Anna, *Rilke's Russia: A Cultural Encounter*, 1997.

Original language reading

Engel, Manfred, *Rilkes 'Duineser Elegien' und die moderne deutsche Lyrik*, 1986.

Suggested paper topics

Why was death so personally meaningful to Rilke? Was this intimacy to death a creative factor in Rilke's poems? Is the death he lives with a depressing death or an inspiring death?

What does Malte Laurids Brigge discover about the ugly aspects of death, as encountered in Paris? Does he find a way to see a rotting human corpse as beautiful?

Excerpt http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/archaic-torso-of-apollo/

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

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

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