

Fear and Fascination in the Big City: Rilke's Use of Georg Simmel in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*

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In his monograph on Rodin (1903) Rainer Maria Rilke explains the latter's sculpture by means of a comparison with medieval cities, and in doing so, presents his own nostalgic ideal of self-contained city life as well as the aesthetic ideal for his own poetry:¹

The plastic object is comparable to those cities of ancient times whose life was passed entirely within their walls; this does not mean that the citizens held their breath, nor did it cramp their life. But nothing passed beyond the limits of the circle enclosing them, nothing lay on the far side, nothing suggested a world outside, no hopes lay open towards the beyond. However great the movement in a piece of sculpture, whether it comes from infinite distances or from the depths of the heavens, it must return to the marble, the vast circle must be closed, that circle of solitude within which a work of art exists. (9: 158; G. Craig Houston 107)²

His formal conflation of an autonomous, self-sufficient city and a work of art served to elucidate an aesthetic ideal, but Rilke had difficulty reconciling that ideal with his actual experience of life in Paris (though one might argue that later, upon leaving Paris, he in fact found his medieval ideal fairly intact on a small scale during his sojourn at Duino castle).³ In Paris Rilke faced the gulf between this fanciful conception of a city and his disturbing first impressions of Paris, between the nostalgic ideal of a city's harmonious formal order and the chaos around him.

In the third book of his *The Book of Hours*, "The Book of Poverty and of Death" (1903), he registers his sense of shock at life in Paris. In his opening apostrophe he asks "Or is it anguish that I now am in, / anguish profound of cities grown too greatly, / in which you've planted me up to the chin?" (1: 343; Leishman 88).⁴ This fearful query gives way to a decided condemnation:

The great cities are not true; they deceive*
 both day and night, both animal and child;
 their silence lies, with noises they are lying
 and with those things that are willing.*

Nothing of all that spacious, real on-going
 that around you, Great Becomer, is astir
 goes on in them. Those winds of yours, their blowing
 falls into alleys that reverse its flowing,
 their roaring, through continual to-and-froing,
 gets ever angrier and excited.*

(1: 352; Leishman 94)

Yet, despite their artistic success, his poems in that series constitute for Rilke a sort of literary defense against the city through his adherence to traditional meter, much in the way his service to Rodin preserved him from too great isolation and disorientation in the city. Only in the unconventional prose of *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910) does Rilke attempt to confront and absorb fully his experience of the modern city.

Malte is based on Rilke's first visit to Paris in 1902-03. At the same time, Georg Simmel published his essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903). In the imaginative depiction of his experience in Paris Rilke enacts Simmel's thesis on the psychological effects of city life on the individual.⁵ Rilke had attended Simmel's lectures in Berlin in 1899 and again in 1905, and thereafter remained in contact with Simmel through occasional letters and visits, and it is likely that he knew of Simmel's thesis, either as essay, lecture or through conversation.⁶ In fact Simmel's categories of psychological response to urban life provide the inner scaffolding for Malte's scattered notes and observations.⁷ Whereas Malte's reactions to the city reflect Simmel's categories, his attempts to find in his writing a new form of artistic response adequate to overcoming the existential threats posed by the city coincide with Wilhelm Worringer's contemporary thesis on abstraction in art (in his *Abstraction and Empathy* [1908]).⁸ Further, those same attempts adumbrate a poetics of prose based on principles of spatial form, as I shall demonstrate in the latter half of this essay.⁹

In this triangle of reciprocal influence and affinity among Simmel, Rilke and Worringer, we find a nexus of three contemporary discourses in the first decade of the century: Simmel's sociology of urban

pathology, Worringer's aesthetic theory concerning the psychic origins of abstract form in art, and Rilke's artistic realization of the two in his confrontation with the city in the poetic narrative of *Malte Laurids Brigge*.¹⁰ In each, the author attempts, however differently articulated, to link forms of consciousness on a personal level (institutions, art, narration) to the individual's psychic trauma caused, in turn, by social forms on a suprapersonal level. Each work registers in a different discourse a similar response to early twentieth-century modernity, as concentrated in the metropolis.

In *Malte* a young writer struggles to achieve or recover a sense of organic coherence, in narrative and in personal identity, against the hostile incursions of the modern city, which have overwhelmed him. Malte's notes register the clash of a poetic sensibility with a prosaic reality that is anonymous and aggressive and which can only be apprehended in separate moments. As a result, *Malte* appears as a work without apparent organization or proportions in terms of conventional fiction, that is, a work without a logical progression of thoughts or events, without plot. As we read, we are able to glean from the different entries facts about Malte and his situation, but, as Theodore Ziolkowski has noted, the facts "are scattered seemingly at random through the notebooks and must be reassembled into a chronological pattern" (15). Unable to rely on linear development of character or action, the reader is forced to skip back and forth in *Malte* and re-read in order to find a "chronological pattern" in his life and a principle of organization for the novel beneath the appearance of surface disunity and randomness. As occasional notebook entries (only the first is dated), the novel gathers together impressions, reflections and memories into a protracted meditation on the possibilities of prose narrative in modern society.

The novel opens in Paris "11 September, rue Touillier." Malte has returned to his room to write up his first impressions of the city:

So this is where people come to live; I would have thought it is a city to die in. I have been out. I saw: hospitals. I saw a man who staggered and fell. A crowd formed around him and I was spared the rest. (11: 709; Mitchell 3)

Malte strikes a tone of disappointment and skepticism against his own preconceptions of vital, animate city life. His dominant impression is the opposite: "a city to die in." He merely registers what he saw in

separate images: "I saw: hospitals. I saw a man who staggered and fell." He remains a passive observer, fearful of what he might have to see and thankful to be spared, "and I was spared the rest." His impression is of death and debility. His posture is defensive. In the modern city, the perceiving consciousness is no longer in control of its perceptions. Malte is disoriented. On the street he has his map, "I looked on my map," but back in his room he has his writing by means of which he can try to impose formal order onto the welter of his perceptions.

The same experience of disorientation that Malte describes, Georg Simmel attempts to explain.¹¹ For Simmel the social conditions of a place broadly determine the psychological disposition of individuals. Simmel defines a type of disposition that results from living in a metropolis:

The psychological foundation, upon which the metropolitan individuality is erected, is the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli. (227-28; 325)

The rapid and unceasing barrage of impressions in the city upsets the even temper, the "more conservative temperament*" (325-36), that results from the slow pace and relative tranquillity of town or village life. In the metropolis the "rapid telescoping of changing images, . . . and the unexpectedness of violent stimuli" (228, 325) overwhelm the perceiver's ability to keep images in perspective.

Malte captures that same effect. His second entry reads in full as follows:

That I can't give up the habit of sleeping with the window open. Electric trolleys speed clattering through my room. Cars drive over me. A door slams. Somewhere a windowpane shatters on the pavement; I can hear its large shards laugh and its small splinters* giggle. Then suddenly a dull, muffled noise from the other direction, inside the house. Someone is walking up the stairs: is approaching, ceaselessly approaching: is there, is there for a long time, then passes on. And again the street. A girl screams, "Ah tais-toi, je ne veux plus." The trolley races up excitedly, passes on over it, over everything. Someone calls out. People are running, catch up with each other. A dog barks. What a relief: a dog. Toward morning there is even a rooster crowing, and that is an

infinite pleasure. Then suddenly I fall asleep. (11: 710; 4-5)

He lies in bed and the sounds of the city disturb his nights. The passage reflects what Simmel calls "intensification of emotional life." The passage opens with a relative clause that gives the scenario the cut-away perspective of an impressionist street scene and highlights the randomness of impinging impressions. The relative clause suggests imbalance and, by dropping the main clause, the narrator eliminates syntactically the rational motivation, the causality, we seek in the actions of an integrated character. The separate sentences follow without subordination or transitions. Syntax breaks down. Each sentence captures a fleeting impression. From outside, sounds fall in upon Malte in his room in an imagistic collage that dissolves the sphere of his privacy, "Electric trolleys speed clattering through my room. Cars drive over me." His subjective consciousness is invaded by the noises and images of the city outside his window, and he is no longer able to restrain, control and shape his experience. Personified sensations taunt, threaten and aggravate his nervous fears, until a sign of nature recalls the order of country life and allows him to sleep. Malte exemplifies "the conservative temperament*" described by Simmel, though of the utmost sensitivity, that at first responds to city life only by "disturbances and inner upheavals" (Simmel 228, 325).

Simmel suggests that the city engenders a more cerebral than emotional disposition as the individual attempts to contain the flood of impressions that pass over him:

Thus the metropolitan type . . . creates a protective organ for itself against the profound disruption with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten it. Instead of reacting emotionally, the metropolitan type reacts primarily in a rational manner, thus creating a mental predominance through the intensification of consciousness, which in turn is caused by it. (228-29, 326)

Consciousness escalates in response to the increase of anxiety in order to insulate the individual from a threatening environment. This sort of hyperconsciousness serves as a buffer to the dissonances of the city. Furthermore, that same consciousness acts "as a protection against the domination ("Vergewaltigung"—violence, rape.) of the metropolis . . ." (Simmel, 229, 326), that is, that hyperconsciousness reflects not only outward but also inward and expands the individual's sense of self

in response to the onslaught of sensations that do it violence. This dilated self-consciousness strains to accommodate the impressions forced upon it from outside and yet still to preserve a sense of integral identity.

In the city Malte cannot maintain the secure identity he had in the country in his ancestral home. His sensations and impressions of the city force upon him an openness and instability that he responds to, in accord with Simmel's typology, by a heightened awareness of place and self:

I am learning to see. I don't know why it is, but everything enters me more deeply and doesn't stop where it once used to. I have an interior that I never knew of. Everything passes into it now. I don't know what happens there. (11: 710-11; 5)

The city imposes on Malte new forms of perception. His hyperconsciousness reconciles him to the discontinuity of new impressions, but has also opened resonant depths within him that undermine the verities of his former existence. Like Hofmannsthal's Chandos in his familiar image of the vortex, Malte develops what we may call an "ontological consciousness" at the loss of his former *Weltanschauung*, an awareness of existence that precedes language and individual identity: "What's the use of telling someone that I am changing? If I'm changing, I am no longer who I was . . ." (6). His transformation of consciousness in response to sense impressions implies a continual reordering of the Self, a continual estrangement from a former identity, a continually varying anonymity. His new consciousness is aware of the fragility and contingency of all apparently stable meaning. As with Chandos, Malte's insight reduces his sense of self to nothingness: "I sit here and am nothing" (22). He is cut off from the secure traditions of his upbringing, but, like Chandos, his "ontological consciousness" also allows him to reconstitute a sense of wholeness and stability of self.

For Malte that new consciousness is imaginative, even visionary, and compensates for his sense of uprootedness and loss in the city.¹² The city both threatens Malte and liberates his imagination. In Malte we witness Simmel's "intensification of emotional life" and the compensatory "intensification of consciousness." Malte says: "I am afraid. One must take some action against fear, once one has come down with it" (7). But for Malte that consciousness does not deny or suppress

feeling, what Simmel calls “temperament.” In Simmel’s thesis, the heightened consciousness of the individual in the city leads, categorically, to “domination of the intellect” (326) in the collective, a reification of rationality in urban institutions: “a pure objectivity* in the treatment of persons and things in which a formal justice is often combined with an unrelenting hardness” (326). Malte witnesses the same when he observes the hospital, his synecdoche for the city as a place of death and dying:

... already in the time of King Clovis people were dying here, in a few beds. Now there are 559 beds to die in. Like a factory, of course. With production so enormous, each individual death is not made very carefully; but that isn’t important. It’s the quantity that counts. (11:713; 8-9)

The hospital, like the city at large, dehumanizes the individual through the rigidity of its rational organization, which leaves no time for individual needs: “the desire to have a death of one’s own is becoming more and more rare. In a short time it will be as rare as a life of one’s own” (9). In the mechanistic procedure of social institutions Malte observes what Simmel calls the “pure objectivity*... formal justice” that denies the “singular* dignity” (11:714:10) of the individual, in life and at death. Institutions enforce conformity for the sake of precision. Malte resists such rational uniformity through imagination.

Malte’s imagination develops in response to the anomie and “unrelenting hardness” (Simmel) of a rationalistic mass society. Judith Ryan aptly notes of Malte: “His response to the ugliness in Paris, to the mechanistic aspect of life and of death there, is the activation of his imagination” (254, my translation). Imagination combines heightened consciousness with feeling and defies the crippling “domination of the intellect” defined by Simmel. Imagination projects resonant depths behind the fleeting and opaque surfaces of city life; compare Malte’s observation of ambulances outside the hospital:

It is to be noticed that these fiendish little carriages have extraordinarily intriguing windows of frosted glass, behind which you can picture the most glorious agonies; even the imagination of a concierge could do that. If your imagination is more lively and you let it develop in other directions, the possibilities are truly end-

less. (11: 713; 8)

The city liberates his imagination by making it a necessary faculty to absorb the anonymous rush of images and imbue his impressions with a depth of felt experience, rather than merely to succumb, without imagination, to growing numbness. Through imagination Malte transforms an impression into a complete experience, a process Ryan calls "a completion of reality" (255, my translation). As in the revelations of Chandos, each object of Malte's perception can become the occasion for a visionary completion of reality that compensates for his sense of loss and affirms for him the wholeness of subjective consciousness vis-à-vis the depredations of the modern city.¹³

Such a process, however, cannot be sustained. That same visionary faculty ("Einbildungskraft") can work against him as well, aggravate his fears and crystallize them into an image, as when he describes a woman's face come off:

The woman sat up, frightened, she pulled out of herself, too quickly, too violently, so that her face was left in her two hands. I could see it lying there: its hollow form. It cost me an indescribable effort to stay with those two hands, not to look at what had been torn out of them. I shuddered to see a face from the inside, but I was much more afraid of that bare flayed head waiting there, faceless. (11: 712; 7)

Malte's imagination intensifies his experience of the city (as in Simmel's essay), but does not release him from the pattern of vacillation that dominates his life, between his fears (62-64) and his fascination. We can see that rapid turn of his mood in a short passage:

Today I really didn't expect it; I went out so bravely, as if that were the simplest and most natural thing in the world. And yet something happened again that took me up and crumpled me like a piece of paper and threw me away: something incredible.

(11: 768; 65)

or in his lament:

But alas, what a narrow ledge this security is standing on. The slightest movement, and once again vision plunges beyond what

is known and friendly, and the outline that was so comforting just a moment ago comes into focus as the edge of terror.

(11: 776; 73-74)

Malte's visionary resistance to the city cannot be sustained, and also inevitably turns against him and makes him a more complete victim than before.

Yet his fascination with the city, which compelled him to sleep with his window open and subject himself to his fears, re-appears consistently.¹⁴ After a telling allusion to Flaubert's "Saint Julien L'Hospitâlier" Malte adds: "I am sometimes astonished by how readily I have given up everything I expected, in exchange for what is real, even when that is awful" (73). Malte forces himself, so to speak, to lie down with what repulses him. In this posture toward experience in the city Malte defines for himself a sort of willful promiscuity, an insatiate temptation toward whatever new sensations the city has to offer.

Malte defines the attraction for him of the city's most sordid aspects:

The existence of the horrible in every atom of air. You breathe it in as something transparent; but inside you it condenses, hardens, takes on pointed, geometric shapes between your organs; for all the torments and agonies suffered on scaffolds, in torture-chambers, madhouses, operating rooms, under bridges in late autumn: all this has a stubborn permanence, all this endures in itself and, jealous of everything that is, clings to its own dreadful reality.

(11: 776; 73)

Among the deranged and dying, Malte discovers a self-sufficient persistence in mere living, without illusions, without analysis but with a passionate consciousness of existence that defies adversity and unites all of life at the level of simple being. Beneath the ephemeral rush of images in the city, Malte seeks to approach some universal essence that is eternal, a permanence in Being that coincides with his own "ontological consciousness" and which would, paradoxically, unite him with the very city that has estranged him. In the words on the psychological genesis of abstract art of Rilke's contemporary Wilhelm Worringer, we might say that in Malte "the feeling for the 'thing-in-itself' re-awaken(s) as the final renunciation of knowledge" (18).¹⁵

He rejects the institutional perfection of rationality that he observes in the city and instead, he recognizes in the very horrors that repulse him his own transcendent sense of a universal essence, or, in Worringer's words, "a point of tranquillity in the flux of phenomena*" (21; 16).

Malte appears engaged in a sort of quest to come to terms with the changed conditions of his existence, both externally and psychologically, in response to the immediate reality of city life and to his expanded consciousness of existence:

I am in Paris. People who hear this are glad; most of them envy me. They're right. It is a great city, great and filled with strange temptations. For myself, I must admit that I have, in a certain sense, succumbed to them. I don't think there is any other way to express it. I have succumbed to these temptations, and this has brought about certain changes, if not in my character, at least in my point of view and, in any case, in my life. An entirely different conception of all things has developed in me under these influences; I have had certain experiences that separate me from other people, more than anything I have ever felt in the past. A different world. A new world filled with new meanings. For the moment I am finding it a bit difficult, because everything is too new. I am a beginner in my own life. (11: 774-75; 71-72)

Malte's life in Paris is an experiment in exposure and recovery, in confronting the shocks of the city and the changes they engender in him, and then in discovering a new order of integration commensurate with his entirely different "conception of all things."

Malte's attempts at integration aim to overcome the transitoriness of his impressions, which agitate and threaten him. In the preceding pages I have demonstrated the closeness of Malte's different psychological responses in Paris to the terms of Simmel's thesis: Malte passes through stages in the escalation of his anxiety and subsequent escalation of consciousness, the development of "ontological consciousness," the threat of "domination of the intellect" and his resistance through imagination, his "completion of reality" through imagination and his failure to sustain that visionary mode of perception, which then becomes its opposite in his visionary fears of an antagonistic reality and his fascination with those horrors for the transcendent sense of universal being that they elicit in him. On the one hand he vacillates between those two visionary modes of perception, but on

the other hand he seems to engage in a willful experiment, monitoring those changes in his consciousness in the city. Yet Malte cannot yet sustain his imaginative perception of reality as something less transitory than the impressions that call it forth. Part of his experiment, then, is to give permanence to his imagination by finding an equivalent for his transcendent sense of universal being that brings his developing strategy of artistic response into alignment with Worringer's thesis on abstraction.¹⁶

For Malte, writing helps overcome the transitoriness of his impressions and relieves his nervous fears. He notes: "I have taken action against fear. I sat up all night and wrote; now I am as tired as after a long walk through the fields of Ulsgaard" (16). The process of writing re-creates in Malte the sense of wholeness and continuity that he had had at his ancestral home in the country and lost in the city. Writing has become a conscious act of recovery, a form of imagination that combines knowledge and feeling (the poles of his estrangement) and sustains in him an impression beyond its momentary perception. Writing gives lasting shape to his fleeting impressions and reconciles his sensibility to artistic form with the dissonances of the city.¹⁷ Malte's experimental sense of self finds in writing its counterpart in actual experience; the notebooks mirror the process by which he reconstructs his sense of identity in order to accommodate his new experiences in the city and evade them. Malte, the passive observer, the victim of harsh reality, the experimental sensitivity in the city, becomes through writing the active maker of reality of a higher order. Accordingly, Ziolkowski observes that "individually, each of the 'notes' represents an attempt to transcend temporality by fashioning reality into a timeless pattern in which things take on a new meaning and hence are no longer free to threaten Malte" (24). In his writing Malte tries to fix the reality of his impressions against the inevitability of their temporal demise, as in the following entry:

How much a small moon can do. There are days when everything around you is luminous, scarcely intimated in the bright air, and yet quite distinct. The foreground takes on the colors of distance, is remote and merely shown from far away, not given to you. And everything related to expanse--the river, the bridges, the long streets, and the extravagant squares--has taken that expanse behind it, is painted on it as if on silk. It is impossible to say what a bright-green carriage on the Pont-Neuf can then become, or a

red so vivid that it can't be held back, or even a simple poster on the division wall of a pearl-gray group of houses. Everything is simplified, brought onto a few correct, clear planes, like the face in a Manet portrait. And nothing is trivial or superfluous. The booksellers on the quai open their stalls, and the fresh or worn yellow of their books, the violent brown of the bindings, the larger green of an album: everything is in harmony, has value, everything takes part and forms a plenitude in which there is nothing lacking.
(11: 722-23; 18)

Malte begins to evoke an ethereal landscape and a delicate mood of languid daydream, but instead of building toward what Ralph Freedman calls "lyrical immediacy" (a discussion of Freedman's thesis follows), Malte retreats to description, not of a scene as in naturalistic art, but of a mode of perception and a technique of visual composition. He analyzes a visual impression and describes a progression from mimesis to abstraction, from three-dimensional perspective to the arrangement of color fields on a one-dimensional surface. The term abstraction is perhaps premature, as the allusion to Manet would indicate, but a similar sensibility is at work here. Naturalistic depth has been foreshortened to reveal only the medium itself; mimetic fidelity has been abandoned in order to elucidate instead the elements of the composition, whether in terms of the visual image or in the prose itself. Without narrative context, or without an increase of meaningful detail to a "scene" in a story, we find here also that in the prose "Everything is simplified, brought onto a few correct, clear planes. . . ." The initial image and the allusion to Manet suggest the French Impressionists' discovery of pictorial surface and spatial distribution in imitation of Oriental models, "as if on silk"; the initial scene gains no depth, but breaks into its constituent parts, each with its own distinct, if ineffable, effect. The final sentence captures the basic principle of Worringer's conception of absolute art as a self-sufficient and necessary construction, entirely apart from its representation, if any, of the real world. The ideal of coherence here is less organic than mathematical; parts do not enter into the development of a larger whole to which they are subordinate, but each is a self-sufficient addition to a totality.

Previously, Malte had registered sensations as they impinged upon him. His separate, short sentences or sentence fragments simulated the randomness and unexpectedness of those sensations and

conveyed his agitation in the city. Now Malte imposes upon those impressions the order of pictorial composition:

In the street below there is the following group: a small wheelbarrow, pushed by a woman; lengthwise across the front of it, a barrel-organ. Behind that, a small crib in which a baby is standing on firm legs, chuckling with delight under its bonnet, not wanting to be sat down. From time to time the woman turns the organ handle. Then the baby immediately stands up again, stamping in its crib, and a little girl in a green Sunday dress dances and beats a tambourine lifted up toward the windows. (11: 723; 18-19)

Malte eliminates his own emotional turmoil, caused by the immediacy of those impressions, by fixing separate images into a rigorous geometrical design. Ziolkowski describes the pattern of the image:

First, the word 'composition' ('Zusammenstellung'), a highly unusual designation for such a random occurrence as a street scene, draws our attention to the conscious construction of the vignette. Then our eye is directed, in strict geometrical motion, from front to back, with a diagonal interruption. This horizontal motion is emphasized by the vertical thrust of the first words ('Down below') and the last words ('up toward the windows'), which frame the linear composition. (23)

Malte's "intensification of consciousness" manifests itself in an overtly "conscious construction" that controls the randomness of an instantaneous impression. As Ziolkowski adds, the fixity of the image lifts the scene out of any "temporal context," that is, its designation as "composition" removes the image from any continuous narrative, and the juxtaposition of its separate elements, whereby each sentence fixes a spatial relation within the composition, resists the normal transitional development of prose and forces the reader to look back and conceive the image as a simultaneous whole.

In Worringer's terms, both passages illustrate a manner of writing that subordinates nature to form, depiction to composition, in response to a "Weltgefühl" of anxiety and fear, as in the earlier passage. Both passages attempt to eliminate the time element of prose in order to arrest the flux of experience in the fixity of art. Both passages move toward the depiction of the work of art "an sich" as a metaphysical

correlate to the artist's "ontological consciousness," his sense of permanence in universal being behind the flux of phenomena. Ziolkowski, however, distinguishes the above passage from the preceding passage ("How much a small moon can do . . .") as "not based on principles of painting" (23). I would argue, nonetheless, that both passages *are* based on principles of painting that increasingly tend toward abstraction as defined by Worringer. The movement between the two passages, we might say, marks the shift from the principles of an impressionism that anticipates abstraction to principles of abstraction in spatial composition.

Malte's technique aims not at affects of immediacy, as Freedman claims, but at intellectual control over his impressions and the expansion of those impressions into whole experiences. The project of writing gives Malte aesthetic command on the page over the contingency of his impressions and over his equally contingent "completion of reality" through imagination. Writing mediates his movement from forms of perception to forms of art, and the act of writing invests his impressions with an integration of his faculties that was impossible for him on the street. His writing makes an integrated experience out of a fragmentary perception in preparation for the eventual task of lyric:

For poems are not, as people think, simply emotions (one has emotions early enough)—they are experiences. For the sake of a single poem, you must see many cities, many people and things, you must understand animals, must feel how birds fly, and know the gesture which small flowers make when they open in the morning. (11: 724; 19)

In effect, writing becomes a form of memory, which combines the objective familiarity of his estranged impressions ("to see," cf. his earlier comment, "I am learning to see . . .") with subjective familiarity ("kennen"), knowledge ("wissen") and feeling ("fühlen"). His now integrated impressions have the same fullness of experience as his experiences in the past before his arrival in the city.

Aesthetic control through writing gives integrated fullness to immediate impressions just as memory, a sense of one's past, gives integrated fullness to one's own experience in the present. Writing is a form of memory, and memory is a form of imagination. Memory and writing give shape and depth to experience, but both open a distance

between the writer and that experience. Therefore, Malte adds:

And it is not yet enough to have memories. You must be able to forget them when they are many, and you must have the immense impatience to wait until they return. For the memories themselves are not important. Only when they have changed into our very blood, into glance and gesture, and are nameless, no longer to be distinguished from ourselves--only then can it happen that in some very rare hour the first word of a poem arises in their midst and goes forth from them. (11:724-25; 20)

Lyric is the distillation of many experiences, as spontaneous and immediate as the sensations that assail Malte in the city. Malte's prose consciously strips his impressions in the city of their randomness and immediacy, and calls up the profundity of his past, in order to prepare and make available an abundance of experience for the spontaneity of lyric, for his future verse. Between the frightening contingency of city life and the redeeming spontaneity of Malte's lyrical impulse, his prose constitutes an act of conscious, formal and deliberate mediation.

The possibility of lyrical expression remains poised beyond the narration at all times as its eventual goal. Ralph Freedman notes that "lyrical novels (*Malte Laurids* included) exploit the expectation of narrative by turning it into its opposite: a lyrical process" (4-10). Freedman rightly cites the proximity of Malte's prose to lyric, but I disagree that Malte's notebooks are themselves "lyrical process" or anything more lyrical than formal prose preparations for lyric, which is a considerable but separate accomplishment. Freedman defines the lyrical novel by two primary characteristics. First: "The world is reduced to a *lyrical point of view*, the equivalent of the poet's 'I': the lyrical self." And second: "The writer aims for the effect of lyrical poetry: . . . the rendering of objects, sensations, even ideas with immediacy . . . *Lyrical immediacy* . . . an immediacy of portraiture. . . ." The first trait depends upon an *a priori* designation of the "poet" and does not distinguish itself from other forms of first-person narration, such as (in Freedman's own equation) "the diarist, the confessor, or first-person narrator" or for that matter, the keeper of "poetic" notebooks. The first requirement undermines the second, for the more obvious and self-conscious the point-of-view, the less immediate the effects of the writing, the more directly mediated by the

narrator's consciousness, even if he "narrates" only his own sensibility, as does Malte.

Freedman himself distinguishes Rilke's prose from the different forms of Rilke's lyric by its "absence of verbal structuring" (6). Nevertheless, he considers it lyrical for "ordering all parts retroactively in a total image." In other words, he equates lyric with spatial form, and duly cites Joseph Frank's essay. Yet spatial form belongs to prose as well as poetry and does not necessarily make prose into poetry, or vice versa; both poetry and prose can be subject to spatial organization in order to reach what Freedman calls a "specific intensity by modulations of images." Indeed, what Freedman felicitously terms a "different rhetoric of images" for "lyrical" prose implies rather a more self-conscious construction than would allow for "lyrical immediacy." Freedman simply privileges lyric over prose and interprets the emergence of spatial form in (Rilke's) prose as an approximation of lyric. But the movement away from the conventions of realistic narrative toward forms of prose based on images and moments of sensibility does not in itself constitute a movement toward lyric. Spatial form, as proposed by Worringer and pursued by Frank, is not specific to genre and is, in itself, a transgression of the inherent properties of language as an artistic medium (as originally defined by Lessing). Therefore, spatial form reveals the separate qualities of the genre, prose or lyric, as forms of language that strain against their temporal imperative in order to approximate the visual arts.

Malte's prose pieces, however, move away from the syntactical disruptions of his early description of his city nights and away from the self-consciously formal control of his *tableaux*.¹⁸ In other words, Malte abandons his experiments with the spatiality of language on the page and returns to recognizably traditional passages of narrative that, nevertheless, still explore different possibilities of narration. In continuation of his exercise of control over his impressions, he gradually expands his entries, as if taking measure of his capacity to narrate, and pursues themes he introduced in the first third of the notebooks into various narrative contexts, which to recount lies outside the scope of this discussion. His narrations reflect aspects of his own life and sentiments, either directly as memories and family legend or indirectly as analogues to his inner life. The loss of impressionistic and formal immediacy is accompanied, accordingly, by an expansion of his use of plot and a dominant tone of empathy, rather

than estrangement.¹⁹In short, his psychological condition and his narrative drift away from the *Weltgefühl* and the prose style of abstraction.

The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge does not, however, develop organically from that point into a conventional narrative. Rather, one has the impression that the local coherence of individual narrations increases alongside greater overall digressiveness. One loses perspective on the relation between entries and what they describe or reflect upon, and the work sustains its appearance of cumulative formlessness in conventional terms. Yet that appearance of digressiveness gives rise to a different form of coherence.²⁰ The distinction I made earlier in my discussion of "How much a small moon can do . . ." between an ideal of organic wholeness and one of mathematical totality applies to the complete work as well as to that single passage. In general terms Ziolkowski notes the same when he asserts that the "*Notebooks* as a whole, then, is subject to precisely the same laws of poetic composition as are the individual tableaux" (31). For the sake of brevity, I will indicate those "laws of poetic composition" by calling upon the conclusions of previous scholarship.

The overall organization of the notebooks emerges through recurrent motifs in the different entries that allude, forward and backward, to one another according to what Ulrich Fülleborn calls "the law of complementarity" (184). Fülleborn gives *Malte* a central place in the development of the modern novel for Rilke's use of

an associative language of motifs and of an artistic interlacing of themes that combine into a polyphonic whole, according to principles of musical composition, primarily those of counterpoint. (189, my translation)

In this respect *Malte* anticipates Thomas Mann's more complex and systematic application of musical principles in *Doktor Faustus* (1947).

Thus, by the end of his experiment in prose Rilke no longer has to make apparent the same aesthetic control as was previously needed in order for *Malte* to come to terms with the unsettling sensations and threatening impressions of the city. While developing his aesthetics of spatial form in individual notebook entries as discrete notations of his desire both to absorb his emotional impressions and also to control them with intellectual distance one at a time, Rilke follows the typology of psychological responses to city life of his occasional

mentor Georg Simmel, whose scholarly authority provides a sort of hidden safeguard for Rilke's emotionally hazardous experiment. However, once he has gained the degree of aesthetic control that can give permanence in prose to the singular imaginative responses that sustain him, his implicit scholarly identification, his primary affinity in intellectual history, shifts from Simmel's sociology to Worringer's aesthetics. He is finally able to extend his narrative control according to mathematical principles of spatial form while at the same time regaining the apparent continuity of traditional narrative. His seemingly casual digressiveness is now the confident measure of his success in absorbing and turning into a resource for his imagination the manifold aspects of fear and fascination that the city had imposed upon him.

Notes

1. See the articles by Reinhard Thum and Bernhard Blume (76-77, and 82). Thum notes that "Rilke holds up medieval society as an ideal to be emulated, an ideal against which the validity of later social structures can be measured" (332).
2. All references to Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke*. Insel Werkausgabe. Page references to the German edition are highlighted. Also, see note 4.
3. See Leppmann: "Duino und die grobe Welt" (303-13).
4. I use standard English translations (see Works Cited); an asterisk indicates where I have altered a word or phrase in the translation.
5. Roy Pascal makes the connection to Rilke: "Rilke's prolonged encounter with Paris, like that of his Malte Laurids Brigge, strikingly bears out Simmel's view that the city embodies the reality of the modern world and must be confronted, not evaded" (155), but he does not demonstrate *how* Rilke actually makes use of Simmel's thesis to structure his impressions in *Malte*.
6. In a letter to the Germanist Hermann Pongs (October 21, 1924) Rilke responds to his questionnaire as follows:

When first acquainted or acquainted at all with Simmel's works? And with which?

With Georg Simmel I came into contact only socially (1908-1900) [1899-1900]; at that time I was living in Schmargendorf in Berlin. (*Letters* #212)

This would seem to eliminate from the outset the possibility of an influence of Simmel and his work on the young Rilke. One should, however, keep in mind

the general unreliability of authorial statements concerning influence, especially in response to a questionnaire, and that this drastic foreshortening of any possible influence in retrospect by a much older Rilke does not at all do justice to the respect for Simmel felt by the young Rilke and the prominence with which Simmel figured in Rilke's university plans, as described by his letters of that period. See his letters to Lou Andreas-Salomé of October 19, 1904 (187-91); April 19, 1905 (201); May 19, 1905 (203); last day of May 1905 (206). In the first of these he notes that Simmel is not even in Berlin at the moment "But nevertheless he is the reason I am going" (201, my translation). In the letter dated "last day of May 1905," Rilke complains: "The more it becomes summer, the more effort it costs me to imagine Berlin. And when I now read something by Simmel, nothing draws me to him" (206, my translation). He speaks of a passing mood, a reluctance to go to Berlin and to the university, but also then of his resolve to do both. The emphasis in this sentence falls on the "now" and indicates, indirectly, his regular reading of Simmel's work. See Ernst Pfeiffer's note (534) on Simmel and Lou Andreas-Salomé's estimation of Simmel. In a letter of December 2, 1913 to Andreas-Salomé, Rilke writes in the margin: "Read Simmel's Goethe with uninterrupted pleasure and agreement" (307, my translation). Also, see Prater (50, 117, 121). Another biographer, J.-F. Angelloz goes further (158) to ask "to what degree Rilke owes this new point of view [on death -NHD] to the philosopher Simmel, with whom he stood in close confidence ['auf vertrautem Fuße'], even though he was not a disciple of his. He maintained a lively admiration for this 'homme d'un esprit rare' (letter to Rodin, October 27, 1902), who—as he said to Jean Cassou— "would slip his words into the ears of his auditors." The latter statement would include himself, I presume; that assumption is the basis of my analysis. See also Paul Fechter's wonderful and pertinent account of Simmel's charisma as a lecturer (48-52).

7. There is much that the Rilke of *Malte Laurids Brigge* might have learned from Simmel. David Frisby characterizes Simmel's written work as an "aestheticization of reality" (40), and as "sociological impressionism that is rooted in an aesthetic stance vis-à-vis social reality" (53). Particularly germane to Rilke's work on Malte would be "Simmel's unswerving interest in the vignettes of social interaction" (79).

8. Briefly, whereas naturalistic art issues, for Worringer, from rational confidence and feelings of empathy with a hospitable universe, Worringer maintains that 'primitive' and modern man alike are dominated by an instinctual dread of open space and the dangers it might contain (whether, we might add, from wild animals or rushing traffic). Both Simmel's essay and Rilke's *Malte* describe this condition of existential fear. That dread, *Platzangst* or "spiritual agoraphobia," seeks solace in the fixity of iconic, abstract art that suggests a transcendent, timeless permanence beyond the relativity of time and space by eliminating the third dimension of perspectival space; likewise, an aesthetics of spatial form in literature indicates the elimination of temporality in narrative. Interestingly, in

his introduction to the 1948 edition, Worringer attributes the inspiration for that work to a chance meeting with Georg Simmel in Paris in the Trocadero Museum. His description of the intellectual effect on him of this encounter is replete with images of birth and midwifery. After the book's publication Worringer had further contact with Simmel, who was an early, enthusiastic reader of *Abstraction and Empathy*, which he unknowingly inspired. Worringer claims that they remained friends thereafter.

9. The notion of "spatial form" in literature, as introduced by Joseph Frank in his essay "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" (1945), derives from Worringer's aesthetics in *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908). See Frank's recent collection of his essays on spatial form for a summary of the debates that have surrounded that term since its first use. For a summary of Worringer's thesis and another example of its influence and its critical use in terms of spatial form, see my article on Carl Einstein.

10. I would like to note here that the primary focus of this essay is on only two vertices of this triangle, first Simmel-Rilke, then Worringer-Rilke, for the purpose, of course, of illuminating *Malte*. However, I wish to suggest that the other vertices are also of interest, though beyond the scope of this study: for example, Simmel-Worringer, Rilke-Simmel, Worringer-Simmel. Also, the term "influence and affinity" should be understood to frame the space between documentation and reasonable speculation in linking Rilke to Simmel and Worringer.

11. Quotations from Simmel's essay are from the translation by Edward Shils. The page numbers in the German edition are highlighted.

12. Lorna Martens concentrates upon this visionary aspect of the narrative, and gives an intelligent account of the novel, which supports this interpretation. For example, she likewise departs from the observation that "Malte himself is afraid of discontinuity and . . . comes to prefer continuity in his own lived experience, memory, as a solution" (164). She focuses, however, on the "figural dialectic" (170) of self-referential mirroring as a metaphor for his kind of vision. She therefore is concerned less with stylistic analysis of Malte's early notations of Paris (as I am) than with his remembered scenes of childhood, which she links (the "theme of vision") to the later narrative ("theme of love") in the second half of the novel.

13. Cf. Ryan 255.

14. Andreas Huyssen's non-Freudian, psychoanalytic reading of *Malte* provides a trenchant account of this "repetition compulsion" (121). Like Martens, whom he does not cite, Huyssen focuses primarily on the remembered scenes of mediated vision, of "mirroring" in childhood, but, unlike Martens, he focuses first on the immediate scenes of Paris. Huyssen derives from those scenes the frequent images of the "fragmented body" that lead him to call into question whether Malte had ever developed a stable ego (117). Thus, Malte's "particular experience of the city . . . triggers the resurfacing of childhood disturbances and confronts Rilke/Malte with the necessity of working through them" (121).

Huyssen can in this way link the figure of Malte to the “historical contingency” of Paris on a psychic or deep psychological, level, as Simmel, whom Huyssen cites in the epigram to his own essay, had done. Huyssen also summarizes Simmel’s essay but criticizes Simmel for assuming a “conscious ego” (133). Instead, Huyssen’s provocative reading insists on Malte’s “inability to protect himself against the chaos” (his emphasis 134) in order to make an equation of “childhood trauma,” narrative rupture and urban experience. Yet, as I argue, Malte does protect himself through his kind of writing. Malte both foregrounds his techniques of exerting aesthetic control in his writing and his gradual development, however halting, toward greater ease and scope of narration. Huyssen acknowledges this (134) but nonetheless ignores that aesthetic dimension and dismisses the later narrations as “obsessive evasion” (137). Yet the evasion is successful precisely because of the aesthetic control Malte has gained in his writing.

15. Worringer’s influential thesis, which bears similarity to Simmel’s, asserts that:

the instinct for the ‘thing in itself’ is* most powerful in primitive man. Increasing spiritual mastery of the outside world and habituation to it mean a blunting and dimming of this instinct. Only after the human spirit has passed, in thousands of years of its evolution, along the whole course of rationalistic cognition, does the feeling for the ‘thing in itself’ re-awaken in it as the final resignation of knowledge. That which was previously instinct is now the ultimate product of cognition. Having slipped down from the pride of knowledge, man is now just as lost and helpless vis-à-vis the world-picture as primitive man. . . . (23-24, 18)

16. In a letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé of July 22, 1913, Rilke writes:

On my trip I read Worringer in absolute agreement; finally this question of “Style,” before which I was so half-informed, has been thought through and settled [zu Ruhe gedacht], beautifully and simply, —it does one good. Essentially I understand the course he takes, particular arguments I can’t follow completely, that’s due to my inability to keep pace conceptually. (my translation, *Briefwechsel* 288-89)

Rilke’s comment upon actually reading Worringer’s work confirms the affinity that I posit in terms of their shared notion of abstraction or “Style” (I retain the capitalization in the English to underscore its particular connotations of eruptive, existential expressiveness). Ernst Pfeiffer (568) identifies the book of Worringer’s that Rilke read as *Abstraction and Empathy*, given to him by Lou Andreas-Salomé. She herself had been deeply involved (“eingehend beschäftigt”) with that book and with Worringer’s *Problems of Form in Gothic Art* (1911). She responded to Rilke’s letter on July 24, indicating some

dissatisfaction about Worringer's thesis and telling him not to send her back the book, since "you can see that it was waiting for you and jumped out at you" (292, my translation), acknowledging both Rilke's satisfaction and his identification with Worringer's aesthetics.

17. Martens notes that "Rilke transforms visual reproduction into verbal domination" (160), as does Malte also, of course.

18. See Ingeborg Schnack 885. On December 23, 1923 Rilke gave to the young painter, Balthasar Klossowski (later known simply as Balthus), a copy of Worringer's *The Beginnings of Panel Paintings (Die Anfänge der Tafelmalerei)*. Piper, 1924) as a gift. The gift not only confirms Rilke's interest in medieval and Renaissance tableaux, but also his continuing interest in and attention to Worringer's work.

19. Cf. Ryan. "This expansion of his own realm of experience through empathy with others is characteristic of Malte's procedure in the *Notebooks*" (255 my translation). Ryan speaks here specifically of the incident of the "windows of frosted glass," but her comments indicate a general process throughout Malte's narration(s).

20. Cf. Ryan 261; Hoffmann 232-36.

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