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How to Be an Artist: An Investigation in Dialogue with Rainer Maria Rilke and Virginia Woolf

Amber Nicole Junker
Bard College, aj8961@bard.edu

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How to Be an Artist: An Investigation in Dialogue with Rainer Maria Rilke and Virginia Woolf

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
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by
Amber Junker

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CHAPTER ONE

Letters to Young Poets

In her novel *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf explores the idea of what it means to be an artist under the modern condition through the character of Lily Briscoe. Woolf's painter begins the novel struggling to distinguish the shapes and colors of the world and ends it by having her artistic "vision," finally finding the ability to make something permanent from the ephemerality of life. Lily's transformation is largely a triumph of perception. She seeks after what Martin Corner calls a "perfect transparency of perception." She wants to capture the "ordinary," yet beautiful, facets of the everyday, an aspiration that mirrors Woolf's own concern of artistic perception and representation. Lily strives to, in her own words, "be on a level with ordinary experience... to feel simply that's a chair, that's a table, and yet at the same time, It's a miracle, it's an ecstasy" (218). This statement calls several things into question: What does it mean to be "on a level with ordinary experience?" What are the boundaries between the perceiver and the perceived? What is the relationship between the artist and the world?

Woolf's fictive artist may find a real-life counterpart in Paula Modersohn-Becker, a German expressionist painter who reached prominence at the start of the 20th century. *To the Lighthouse*, a novel "in part about the struggle and cost of a woman's creativity," bears many resemblances to Modersohn-Becker's own experience as a female modern painter in a male-dominated sphere, as author Diane Radycki writes in her book *Paula Modersohn-Becker: The First Modern Woman Artist*. Like Lily Briscoe, Modersohn-Becker faced the criticism that "women can't paint," in the words of Woolf's Charles Tansley. Modersohn-Becker shared the same artistic goal as Lily Briscoe, to capture what Lily calls "that very jar on the nerves, the

thing itself before it has been made anything.” Radycki explains that Modersohn-Becker strived “to capture the inner resonance of an object, to transcend its material reality,” which she described as “‘the gentle vibration of things’ – almost a quarter century before Virginia Woolf imagined the task of her artist, Lily Briscoe” (69). These similarities raise the question of whether and how Woolf’s painter may have been informed by the life of Modersohn-Becker.

Did Woolf know of Modersohn-Becker? Radycki cites a concurrence between the publication of *To the Lighthouse* and the opening of Modersohn-Becker’s museum, the Paula-Modersohn-Becker Haus, both of which occurred in 1927 (Radycki 233). Woolf was interested in the world of art, namely through her sister, Vanessa Bell, who was a post-impressionist painter, and her relationship with art critic Roger Fry. Perhaps these were reasons enough to inform Woolf of Modersohn-Becker’s story. However, the most compelling connection between Woolf and Modersohn-Becker actually arises from another writer: Rainer Maria Rilke, a close friend of Modersohn-Becker who wrote his 1908 elegiac poem “Requiem for a Friend” in her memory. Rilke’s elegy brings Woolf even further into the picture, as there are many similarities between Rilke’s poem and Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse*. In a conversation with Caroline Hayes, Radycki explained:

I discovered that there were biographical parts in that poem that show up in the Woolf piece, particularly in the painter-character, Lily Briscoe. There are lines, descriptions, metaphors in the Rilke that are in the Woolf, and when I did more research on *To the Lighthouse*, I was so startled when I read that Virginia Woolf said, ‘I am really not writing a novel, I am writing a requiem.’ (Hayes, “The First Modern Woman Artist: Paula Modersohn-Becker”)

These similarities suggest that the figure of Lily Briscoe may have been informed by Rilke’s depiction of Modersohn-Becker in his elegy. However, it is unclear whether or not Woolf would have actually read Rilke’s “Requiem.” In her review of Radycki’s book, Hayes claims that Vita Sackville-West, a close friend and lover of Woolf’s, was translating Rilke’s “Requiem for a

Friend” during the height of their relationship. Yet there appears to be no record of Sackville-West’s translation of Rilke’s “Requiem,” if such a translation exists.¹

Woolf certainly had *heard* of Rilke, however, as Sackville-West was translating Rilke’s *Duineser Elegien* around the same time as Woolf was writing *To the Lighthouse*. There are three letters addressed to Virginia Woolf held by the New York Public Library’s Berg Collection in which Sackville-West discusses the process of translating Rilke. In a letter from February 1928, Sackville-West “propose[s] to translate the poems of Rainer Maria-Rilke” and asks Woolf if she “think[s] [that] would be a good thing to do.”² Rilke next appears in a letter to Woolf from March 1928, in which Sackville-West describes Rilke as a “damned fine poet.”³ Then, in a letter from August 1928, Sackville-West includes 13 lines of her English translation of Rilke’s first elegy from the *Duineser Elegien*, a translation later published by the Hogarth Press with only a few minor changes.⁴ Yet there is no mention in any of these letters of Rilke’s “Requiem for a Friend,” and Woolf’s reply to Sackville-West’s question “if Rilke is worth translating” appears to indicate that she was not familiar with Rilke’s works. In her reply from March 6th, 1928, Woolf responds:

For God’s sake, translate Rilke: only be sure of your rights ... I read some (prose) in French; and thought it good *up to a point*; subtle, melodious; but not quite getting over the obstacle. His poetry may be better, probably, from what they say, it is. Yes, certainly do it. (DeSalvo and Leaska 259)

As Woolf does not cite her own opinion on Rilke’s poetry, but rather refers to “what they say” about it, it is implied that she has not read his poetry herself. There is additionally a level of

¹ Vita Sackville-West’s translation of Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, published by the Hogarth Press in 1931, is the only recorded translation of his work by Sackville-West. Research into a potential translation of Rilke’s “Requiem to a Friend” by Sackville-West only leads back to Hayes’s review. My assumption is that Hayes may have confused Rilke’s “Requiem” with his *Duino Elegies*, as both are elegiac in nature.

² Letter from Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf, 29 February 1928. The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library.

³ Letter from Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf, 9 March 1928. Ibid.

⁴ Letter from Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf, 21 August 1928. Ibid.

uncertainty in how she describes what it is that “they” say: His poetry is “probably” better; it “may” be better—but Woolf is not *sure* if it is better. Furthermore, if Woolf had read Rilke, or any German poet for that matter, then why would she discuss her views on French prose, a seemingly unrelated topic? Though Woolf clearly knew of Rilke from Sackville-West’s letters, the archival materials suggest no direct connection between Woolf and Rilke’s “Requiem.” However, the question of how much Woolf drew from the life of Modersohn-Becker as inspiration for Lily Briscoe remains open.

One letter from Sackville-West to Woolf refers to the process of getting Woolf’s novels translated into German, which leads to the publication history of Woolf’s novels in Germany. Further research into this publication history reveals an interesting correspondence between Rilke and Woolf. In a letter to Woolf from March 1928, Sackville-West writes about a literary agent, Margaret Voigt-Goldsmith, who asked Sackville-West if she could get Woolf’s books translated into German. Sackville-West states that she then referred Voigt-Goldsmith to “Curtis Braun,” a figure whose role remains unexplained in this letter. There is no record of a “Curtis Braun” who had a relationship with Woolf, but it turns out that *Curtis Brown* was Woolf’s literary agent. Brown worked with the Insel Verlag, the German publishing house responsible for translating and publishing Woolf’s major novels into German. This process began later that year in 1928, when Woolf sent a copy of *To the Lighthouse* to Brown to be translated and published by the Insel Verlag (Göske, 59). According to Daniel Göske’s “Virginia Woolf in German: The Hogarth Press, The Insel Verlag, and Early Translations,” Woolf was attentive to the translation and distribution of her works abroad, as she was in correspondence with her German translators and publishers (58). It is likely, especially given her own interest in publication, that Woolf paid attention to the Insel Verlag’s publications. One publication that she may have noticed was

Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* (*Briefe an einen jungen Dichter*), published by the Insel Verlag in 1929. In 1932, just a few years later, the Hogarth Press published a text by Woolf with a curiously similar title: "A Letter to a Young Poet." The close proximity of these two works, indicated by both their titles and publication history, allows for a reading that explores resonances of Rilke's letters in Woolf's letter.

Beyond the time of publication and the titles of these letters, their most meaningful resemblance is their nearness of content. Writing from the shared context of modernity, both Woolf and Rilke are concerned with what it means to be an artist at a time in which the idea of "subjectivity" was being called into question. Each text closely focuses upon the relationship between the writer and the world. As Woolf explains, it is the problem of the poet to "find the right relationship ... between the self that [they] know and the world outside." For Rilke, the poet's solitary inner life is chiefly important because it allows them to examine the outside world with more accuracy and clarity.

* * *

In 1902, nineteen-year-old Franz Xaver Kappus, a cadet at the Military Academy of Wien-Neustadt and aspiring poet, sent his "efforts in poetry" to Rainer Maria Rilke, who had studied at the same academy 15 years prior. Kappus merely hoped to hear Rilke's "verdict" on his poetry (Cohn 196). What he received was much more: over the next 6 years, Rilke sent Kappus ten letters, which detail not only how to be a poet, but how to cope with sadness, how to love—put most simply, how to live. These letters remained solely in Kappus's possession, though Rilke, a year before his death in 1926, posited that his correspondences should be published with his other works: "Since for now several years I have had the custom to channel part of the productivity of my nature into writing letters, there exists no obstacles to publishing my

correspondence ... should my publisher Insel Verlag make such a suggestion” (Baer 27).

However, it was not the Insel Verlag who initiated the publication of these letters, but Kappus himself: In 1929, after Rilke’s death, Kappus sent the letters to the Insel Verlag to be published, as he believed they were “important for the knowledge of the world, in which Rainer Maria Rilke lived and created, and to many human beings of today and tomorrow, who are growing and coming into being” (Cohn 197). Ulrich Baer agrees with Kappus’s sentiment that these works are “important for the knowledge of the world,” as “given the profundity of thought expressed in his letters and Rilke’s own high estimation of these missives, it is virtually impossible to gain a full understanding of the poet without taking the correspondence into account” (27). The “profundity of thought” expressed in Rilke’s letters to Kappus is seen in his ideas on the cultivation of the poet’s inner life, as well as the relationship between the perceiving mind of the artist and the world.

In the beginning of his first letter, Rilke objects to Kappus’s request for a “verdict” on his poetry, as the poet cannot be advised by anyone but himself. Rilke writes, “Sie sehen nach außen, und das vor allem dürften Sie jetzt nicht tun. Niemand kann Ihnen raten und helfen, niemand. Es gibt nur ein einziges Mittel. Gehen Sie in sich” (8).⁵ Noteworthy in this statement is Rilke’s repetition of the word “nobody,” which is already an absolute. There is no reason to repeat this word other than to emphasize the importance of the poet’s self-reliance and rejection of criticism. The phrase “above all,” as well as the fact that to “go inside himself” is the “only means” by which the poet can improve his craft, adds further gravity to Rilke’s suggestion. The repetition additionally imbues Rilke’s advice with a sense of urgency, an urgency which is heightened by its early placement in the letters. The short, seemingly simple and easily

⁵ “You are looking outside, and that is what you should most avoid right now. No one can advise or help you — no one. There is only one thing you should do. Go into yourself” (Mitchell 5-6).

memorable suggestion to “go inside yourself” will frame how Kappus approaches the rest of Rilke’s advice.

However, “going inside yourself” is no uncomplicated concept. This idea is contrasted with “looking outside,” which, according to Rilke, the poet should above all not do. When Rilke first advises Kappus to avoid “looking outside,” it seems that “outside” refers specifically to the world of criticism. This is supported by later letters, such as the third letter, in which Rilke explains that:

Kunst-Werke sind von einer unendlichen Einsamkeit und mit nichts so wenig erreichbar als mit Kritik . . . Geben Sie jedesmal sich und Ihrem Gefühl recht, jeder solchen Auseinandersetzung, Besprechung oder Einführung gegenüber; sollten Sie doch unrecht haben, so wird das natürliche Wachstum Ihres inneren Lebens Sie langsam und mit der Zeit zu anderen Erkenntnissen führen. Lassen Sie ihren Urteilen die eigene stille, ungestörte Entwicklung, die, wie jeder Fortschritt, tief aus innen kommen muß und durch nichts gedrängt oder beschleunigt werden kann. (16-17)⁶

The extent of Rilke’s resistance to criticism is clear as he states that not only criticism, but “any type” of argument, discussion, or introduction should be avoided. In fact, Rilke again uses an absolute to highlight the importance of this advice, as not only should criticism and related concepts be avoided, but there is *nothing* as useless as them. This outside world of criticism is then contrasted with the “inner life” of the poet, which guides him to the insights he needs in order to grow. And even though relying on one’s self for improvement requires patience, as this process cannot be “forced or hastened,” it is still preferable to using the opinions of others to improve one’s work.

Yet the emphasis on the “still” and “undisturbed” inner life of the poet seems to indicate that the poet must distance himself not only from the world of critics, but the outside world in its

⁶ “Works of art are of an infinite solitude, and no means of approach is so useless as criticism . . . Always trust yourself and your own feeling, as opposed to argumentations, discussions, or introductions of that sort; if it turns out that you are wrong, then the natural growth of your inner life will eventually guide you to other insights. Allow your judgments their own silent, undisturbed development, which, like all progress, must come from deep within and cannot be forced or hastened” (Mitchell 11).

entirety. Rilke explains: “Was not tut, ist doch nur dieses: Einsamkeit, große innere Einsamkeit. In-sich-Gehen und stundenlang niemanden begegnen,—das muß man erreichen können” (29).⁷ Though the word “nobody” could be referring specifically to the critics that he should ignore, the absoluteness of “nobody” logically includes everyone who exists in the outer world. Rilke describes this inner life in spatial terms: the movement within oneself allows the poet to enter a solitary world in which he can walk for hours without meeting anyone. Entering this space of quiet contemplation is contingent upon rejecting the outer world of other people. Furthermore, in saying that this solitary inner life is the “only” necessity, the outside world seemingly becomes peripheral to the poet’s self.

Rilke further insists on the importance of feeling above all other senses, an idea that is expressed by prioritizing “going within yourself” over “looking outside.” For when the poet “goes inside himself,” he enters a world deep within, in which sight loses its importance. In the first letter, after he tells the young poet to “go within himself,” Rilke writes that the poet must explore the reason that “commands” him to write and to test if the roots of this reason stretch to “the deepest position of his heart:”

Erforschen Sie den Grund, der Sie schreiben heißt; prüfen Sie, ob er in der tiefsten Stelle Ihres Herzens seine Wurzeln ausstreckt, gestehen Sie sich ein, ob Sie sterben müßten, wenn es Ihnen versagt würde zu schreiben. Dieses vor allem: fragen Sie sich in der stillsten Stunde Ihrer Nacht: muß ich schreiben? (8)⁸

The reason for writing must be found not only within, but in the deepest part of his heart, the innermost space of the poet’s inner world. Here, the heart represents both the poet’s life source as well as the source of his ability to write. The roots act as a kind of transmission that provide

⁷ “What is necessary, after all, is only this: solitude, vast inner solitude. To walk inside yourself and meet no one for hours — that is what you must be able to attain” (Mitchell 19).

⁸ “Find out the reason that commands you to write; see whether it has spread its roots into the very depths of your heart; confess to yourself whether you would have to die if you were forbidden to write. This most of all: ask yourself in the most silent hour of your night: must I write?” (Mitchell 6).

the poet with what he needs to develop his craft, similar to the roots of a plant absorbing water to aid in its growth. However, though the only sense that is available to the poet in this innermost position is feeling, he is still able to write. In fact, it is from this inner space that the ability to write comes from. Only in the stillest, quietest night can the poet truly answer the question if he *must* write, and only within his inner world can he find the source of his ability to write.

It appears that Rilke explicitly prioritizes the inner world above the outer world when he writes:

Denken Sie, lieber Herr an die Welt, die Sie in sich tragen ... seien Sie [nur] aufmerksam gegen das, was in ihnen aufsteht, und stellen Sie es über alles, was Sie um sich bemerken. Ihr innerstes Geschehen ist Ihrer ganzen Liebe wert ... (30)⁹

Here, Rilke elaborates on the idea of the poet's inner world, describing it as something that he carries within him. The poet must focus on this inner world above "everything" else that he notices around him. It is what happens in his inner life, not the external world, that deserves all of his attention and love. The use of absolutes indicates that there is no alternative for the young poet: he must value his inner life above all else. Additionally, the prepositions in this passage reflect how this inner world is elevated above what the poet notices around him: Rilke writes that the poet must place his inner life *above* all (über alles) that exists *around* (um) him. The elevation of the inner world is further expressed in its description as that which "stands *up* within him" ("was in Ihnen aufsteht"). This inner world seems to literally stand above the outside world, which simply exists around the poet, on ground level.

Yet to claim that the outer world is entirely peripheral to the self would oversimplify Rilke's conception of the relationship between writer and world. In fact, even in his first letter, Rilke advises Kappus to "draw close to nature:" "Dann nähern Sie sich der Natur. Dann

⁹ "Think, dear Sir, of the world that you carry inside you ... be attentive to what is arising within you, and place that above everything you perceive around you. What is happening in your innermost self is worthy of your entire love" (Mitchell 20).

versuchen Sie, wie ein erster Mensch, zu sagen, was Sie sehen und erleben und lieben und verlieren” (9).¹⁰ After drawing closer to nature, the poet can then attempt to describe what he sees and experiences. By instructing the poet to describe what he sees “like a first man,” Rilke is apparently referring to the biblical Adam, thereby invoking the idea of adamic language, defined by Richard Sheppard as a language in which “pristine words, untarnished by corrupt misuse, have a necessary connection with the things they name” (118). On one hand, to describe the world “like a first man” may simply mean that the poet should strive to make his writing unique and singular. However, this reference reveals Rilke’s commitment to describing what he calls “Dinge” (things) objectively and impersonally, not “tarnished” or “corrupted” by our understanding of them, which is necessarily subjective. Rilke’s *Neue Gedichte*, often referred to as the “Dinggedichte” (thing-poems), feature this use of objective description. Lawrence Ryan writes that the Dinggedichte display “the exact depiction of a real ‘object,’ involving a reduction of the ‘subjective’ element” (133). The speaker of the poem, “das lyrische Ich,” is not present in the Dinggedichte. Rather, due to being written in the third person, the thing seemingly describes itself.

From this definition, it may seem that Rilke’s Dinggedichte prioritize the things of the outside world over the self, contradicting the emphasis on the inner life of the poet as expressed in his letters to Kappus. However, the subject of the Dinggedicht is never completely absent. A better understanding of what Rilke means by “things” is helpful in understanding this concept.

As Ryan explains:

By “things” [Rilke] does not understand objects of perception or objects that are instrumentalized – reified – by their subjection to human volition, but rather those that embody the concretion of the inner life. Further, as the life of the subject is not defined in its own (autonomous) terms, but as being largely determined, indeed constituted by

¹⁰ “Then come close to Nature. Then, as if no one had ever tried before, try to say what you see and feel and love and lose” (Mitchell 6).

external forces, the “barriers fall” between subject and object, and the poet who is sensitive to the needs of the age establishes a bond of understanding with those things that “merge within him with his own deepest feelings.” ... He speaks not *of* things, but *with* things as they impinge on the self, and precisely in so doing he speaks of himself, is subjective. The turning to “things” is to be seen in the context not of just a new objectivity, but of one that encompasses a new subjectivity. (128-129)

The objective description of a “thing” simultaneously symbolically elevates it, as the thing gains interiority, or subjectivity, ultimately blurring the boundaries between subject and object.

Therefore, the thing, the object of the outer world, is never completely objective, but embodies the inner life. The importance of describing the thing in the first place is that it helps to attain a new understanding of the poet’s subjectivity. Even when speaking of things, or something from the outside world, the poet inevitably speaks of himself. Rilke refers to this concept in his first letter when he advises the poet to “use the things around him in order to express himself” (“gebrauchen Sie, um sich auszudrücken, die Dinge Ihrer Umgebung”) (9). The “things” are useful because they allow the poet to express himself.

Rilke’s 1902 poem “Der Panther” (The Panther), the first poem to be included in the *Neue Gedichte* (Lawrence 141), demonstrates the complexity of the subject-object relationship in the Dinggedichte.

Sein Blick ist vom Vorübergehn der Stäbe
so müd geworden, daß er nichts mehr hält.
Ihm ist, als ob es tausend Stäbe gäbe
und hinter tausend Stäben keine Welt.

Der weiche Gang geschmeidig starker Schritte,
der sich im allerkleinsten Kreise dreht,
ist wie ein Tanz von Kraft um eine Mitte,
in der betäubt ein großer Wille steht.

Nur manchmal schiebt der Vorhang der Pupille
sich lautlos auf—. Dann geht ein Bild hinein,
geht durch der Glieder angespannte Stille—
und hört im Herzen auf zu sein.

His vision, from the constantly passing bars,
 has grown so weary that it cannot hold
 anything else. It seems to him there are
 a thousand bars; and behind the bars, no world.

As he paces in cramped circles, over and over,
 the movement of his powerful soft strides
 is like a ritual dance around a center
 in which a mighty will stands paralyzed.

Only at times, the curtain of the pupils
 lifts, quietly—. An image enters in,
 rushes down through the tensed, arrested muscles,
 plunges into the heart and is gone. (Mitchell 25)

The focus of this poem lies not on the panther in general, but specifically on its gaze. All the panther can see are the bars of its cage, of which there are seemingly a thousand and beyond which no world exists. In the first stanza, the repetition of the word “Stäbe,” as well as the internal rhyme of “Stäbe” and “gäbe,” performs the “Vorübergehn der Stäbe” on the level of sound. The unwavering focus on the bars results in the panther’s activity—its “entire conscious life” (Lawrence 141)—being reduced to a constant circling inside the cage. Rilke compares the circular movement of the panther to a “powerful will.” Lawrence writes that “it is as if a powerful will, deprived of any focus or objective outside itself, were rotating around its own center” (141). This rotation is not only a “symptom of imprisonment,” but can also be understood as a “manifestation of a self-centered and self-structured being,” which is supported by the rotation being compared to a dance, “an ordered movement grounded in freedom: the rotation creates its own unmoved center” (Lawrence 141). The panther’s self-centeredness is further expounded in the last stanza, in which the panther only occasionally looks towards the outside world. Even when it admits an image from the outside world, after the image enters the panther’s heart, it is expunged, it “ceases to be.” In this stanza, the focus of the poem shifts from the panther’s vision to its inner life; in fact, the panther seems indifferent to the world outside

itself. By describing the panther's external vision, Rilke allows for an understanding of the panther's subjectivity.

In order to objectively and accurately describe the things of the world, the poet needs to be solitary:

Nur der einzelne, der einsam ist, ist wie ein Ding unter die tiefen Gesetze gestellt, und wenn einer hinausgeht in den Morgen, der anhebt, oder hinaus in den Abend schaut, der voll Ereignis ist, und wenn er fühlt, was da geschieht, so fällt aller Stand von ihm ab, wie von einem Toten, obwohl er mitten in lauter Leben steht. (31)¹¹

Before the poet can approach nature and the world of things, his solitary inner life must be completely developed. Rilke again uses an absolute to heighten the importance of the poet's inner world, as "only" the poet who is solitary is capable of standing in the midst of "pure life." By "pure life," it seems that Rilke speaks of life that has not been altered by human perception. This is further suggested in Rilke's description of the poet, who stands as if he were dead after "aller Stand fällt von ihm ab." Though, in his translation, Mitchell understands this to mean that "all situations drop from him," it can also be interpreted as though the poet's "condition" or "state" leaves him. It is as if everything that is occupying his mind suddenly melts away and the poet simply exists in the midst of life, as though he were unconscious. In being solitary, the poet attains what Lily Briscoe strives for, the capacity "to be on a level with ordinary experience." Once again, Rilke elevates the poet's inner life over the external world, because without the cultivation of his inner life, the poet would be unable to perceive his surroundings with clarity and accuracy. This idea is also expressed in Rilke's first letter, in which he gives the poet the following advice:

¹¹ "Only the individual who is solitary is placed under the deepest laws like a Thing, and when he walks out into the rising dawn or looks out into the event-filled evening and when he feels what is happening there, all situations drop from him as if from a dead man, though he stands in the midst of pure life" (Mitchell 20).

Wenn Ihr Alltag Ihnen arm scheint, klagen Sie ihn nicht an; klagen Sie sich an, sagen Sie sich, daß Sie nicht Dichter genug sind, seine Reichtümer zu rufen; denn für den Schaffenden gibt es keine Armut und keinen armen, gleichgültigen Ort. (9)¹²

If the poet cannot “call forth the riches of his everyday life,” it is not because there is no richness in the outer world, but because he is “not enough of a poet” to see it; it evades his perception.

For Rilke, the cultivation of the poet’s solitary inner world is necessary, as without it, the poet has no means of meaningfully engaging with the outer world. However, the emphasis on the inner life does not expunge the outer world, as the development of the inner world is important precisely because it allows the poet to perceive the outer world with clarity and accuracy, which in turn allows him to better express himself and his subjectivity. What is essential to remember about Rilke’s conception of the relationship between the inner self and the outer world is that the two exist separately. The poet is able to cultivate his inner world in solitude, completely removed from his environment.

* * *

Unlike Rilke’s letters, which were written as a response to a young poet who wanted an opinion on his own poetry, Woolf’s “A Letter to a Young Poet” was written to describe her opinions on modern poetry in general. In 1932, John Lehmann, the young poet in question, wrote Woolf a letter discussing her recently published novel *The Waves* (1931), in which he asked her to detail her views on modern poetry. However, though directly addressed to Lehmann, Woolf’s letter actually responds to a larger group of young English poets of the 1930s, including her nephew Julian Bell, Stephen Spender, Cecil Day-Lewis, and W. H. Auden, whose works are cited and criticized throughout the text. As such, Woolf’s letter is often read as a piece of literary criticism explaining her views on what modern poetry should aim towards rather than a personal

¹² “If your everyday life seems poor, don’t blame it; blame yourself; admit to yourself that you are not enough of a poet to call forth its riches; because for the creator there is not poverty and no poor, indifferent place” (Mitchell 6).

correspondence (Lee 607). In her biography of Woolf, Hermione Lee writes that in “A Letter to a Young Poet,” Woolf argues that “at a time when the attractions of escapism, solipsism and nostalgia were so strongly felt, it [is] the writer’s job to find “the right relationship... between the self that [they] know and the world outside,” even with “a thousand voices prophesying despair” (610). In this letter, Woolf criticizes the type of poet who only writes about “a self that sits alone in the room at night with the blinds drawn.” Such self-obsessed poets write poetry that is incomprehensibly abstract. Rather, she encourages the poet to “take on the world outside” and write about “whatever comes along the street,” the ordinary facets of everyday life. This is accomplished by opening the poet’s senses to the outside world.

Also unlike Rilke’s letters, in which the poet is encouraged to focus on himself and disregard others, Woolf’s letter begins directly in what she calls “the world of other people.” This is indicated by first sentence of the letter, which reads: “Did you ever meet, or was he before your day, that old gentleman—I forget his name—who used to enliven conversation, especially at breakfast when the post came in, by saying that the art of letter-writing is dead?” (208). In addition to this old man, in just the first paragraph alone Woolf mentions the names of numerous “other people,” such as Horace Walpole, Madame de Sévigné, Mrs. Gape, Miss Curtis, John Donne, and Gerard Hopkins (208-209). Woolf’s young poet is given no time for quiet, solitary reflection; instead, he is immediately thrust into contact with seven others. In fact, Woolf instructs the young poet to “never think [him]self singular” (211). Rather, he must think of himself as “something much humbler and less spectacular ... a poet in whom live all the poets of the past, from whom all poets in time to come will spring” (212). Woolf explains to this young poet that he has a “touch of Chaucer” in him, as well as “something of Shakespeare, Dryden,

Pope, and Tennyson,” to mention “only the most respectable” among his ancestors (212). Thus, Woolf’s young poet is removed from his solitude.

For Woolf, solitude seems to be precisely what prevents the poet from writing good poetry. In her letter, she attempts to put herself in the poet’s position, to “try to imagine ... what it feels like to be a young poet in the autumn of 1931” (213). She describes an evening on which the poet begins to write, only to be dramatically interrupted by an encounter with a “hard and hostile object” which “cannot be made into poetry.” Woolf implies that this object is life itself: “for a long time now poetry has shirked contact with—what shall we call it?—Shall we shortly and no doubt inaccurately call it life?” (213-214). She explains that the poet knows his poetry would be improved by including the “actual and colloquial,” but that his attempts to do so result in a poem that “is cracked in the middle” with “reality” on one side and “beauty” on the other. This fragmentation is due to the poet’s “restricted” range, which is limited to looking within: Woolf explains that “the poet is trying honestly and exactly to describe a world that has perhaps no existence except for one particular person at one particular moment,” a “private universe” that only puzzles the readers (218). This results in a poem that lacks clarity and comprehensibility: “He strains to describe; we strain to see; he flickers his torch; we catch a flying gleam. It is exciting; it is stimulating; but is that a tree, we ask, or is it perhaps an old woman tying up her shoe in the gutter?” (218). The fact that a “tree” could somehow be confused with “an old woman tying up her shoe in the gutter,” two images that have nothing in common, shows just how baffling Woolf believes poems written by the “solitary” poet to be. In direct contradiction to Rilke’s poet, who needs to first develop his inner life in solitude before approaching the world, Woolf’s poet is only hindered by looking within.

Part of Woolf's criticism of these self-interested poets stems from the fact that, in her view, this type of poetry is not modern. Woolf asks:

Why should not poetry, now that it has so honestly scraped itself free from certain falsities, the wreckage of the great Victorian age, now that it has so sincerely gone down into the mind of the poet and verified its outlines... now, I say, that poetry has done all this, why should it not once more open its eyes, look out of the window and write about other people? (219)

Here, Woolf separates the poetry of “now,” which focuses on “other people,” and the poetry of the past, which focuses on “the mind of the poet.” However, Woolf's insistence on “the world of other people” over the “mind of the poet” does not mean that she views the self as unimportant. Rather, she claims that it was essential that poetry had “so sincerely gone down into the mind of the poet and verified its outlines.” She writes that this “was certainly needed,” as “bad poetry is almost always the result of forgetting oneself—all becomes distorted and impure if you lose sight of that central reality” (220). It seems that Woolf interprets the focus on the self during the Victorian age as something similar to the developmental stage of Rilke's poet during which he cultivates his inner life in solitude. Now that “poetry” has patiently waited to understand itself, it can move on to address the outer world. Yet, Woolf and Rilke differ in that, for Woolf, the poet's preoccupation with his inner life is part of a past era. For Rilke, however, the poet's inner life never loses its importance, as it is what the poet continually seeks to describe.

The fact remains that an understanding of the poet's self is necessary before he can find a relationship between his self and the world. Just as Rilke's poet needs a developed inner life in order to accurately perceive the outer world, so too does Woolf's poet need to keep track of his “central reality,” as without it, his perception of the world becomes “distorted.” Woolf asks, “but how are you going to get out, into the world of other people? That is your problem now, if I may hazard a guess—to find the right relationship, now that you know yourself, between the self

that you know and the world outside” (220). This problem, Woolf says, has never been solved by any other poet before, and that there are even those who claim that “there can be no relation between the poet and the present age” (220). Yet Woolf believes this to be “nonsense,” as for her, the problem is solved simply by looking out the window:

All you need now is to stand at the window and let your rhythmical sense open and shut, open and shut, boldly and freely, until one thing melts in another, until the taxis are dancing with the daffodils, until a whole has been made from all these separate fragments. I am talking nonsense, I know. What I mean is, summon all your courage, exert all your vigilance, invoke all the gifts that Nature has been induced to bestow. Then let your rhythmical sense wind itself in and out among men and women, omnibuses, sparrows—whatever comes along the street—until it has strung them together in one harmonious whole. That perhaps is your task—to find the relation between things that seem incompatible yet have a mysterious affinity, to absorb every experience that comes your way fearlessly and saturate it completely so that your poem is a whole, not a fragment; to re-think human life into poetry and so give us tragedy again and comedy by means of characters not spun out at length in the novelist’s way, but condensed and synthesised in the poet’s way—that is what we look to you to do now. (220-221)

The problem first appears to be solved with ease, as “all” the poet needs to do is look outside. He faces no resistance by looking out the window, which is completely transparent. However, the rest of the passage points to a tension between ease and effort in undertaking the task of standing at the window. The poet begins by passively “letting” his “rhythmical sense open and shut,” as if this sense can open and close of its own volition. However, Woolf then reveals that, before letting his rhythmical sense out into the world, the poet must “summon all [his] courage” and “exert all [his] vigilance.” In contrast to the passive construction of “letting” his rhythmic sense open and shut, here the poet must call upon his inner strength in order for this process to begin. In fact, it seems that this takes a great deal of effort, as the poet must summon not just some, but *all* of his courage and vigilance. This suggests that the inner strength of the poet, his courage and vigilance—what Rilke would perhaps call part of his inner life—must be developed before the poet can approach the world outside.

Yet unlike Rilke, the inner life of Woolf's poet is not separate from the outside world. The poet's "rhythmical sense" can be understood as a part of his inner life, as it exists in his mind: As Woolf explains earlier in her letter, "rhythm keeps up its perpetual beat" in "the floor of the poet's mind" (214). This spatial conception of the poet's inner life brings Rilke's understanding of a solitary world in which the poet can "walk for hours" to mind. This means that it is the poet's inner life that "absorbs" the experiences of the outside world, "saturating" them completely. By imbuing his self in the world, Woolf's poet is able to unite the fragmented aspects of life, those things that at once "seem incompatible" and yet "have a mysterious affinity." The image of the window also calls back to Corner's "perfect transparency of perception." By letting the poet's inner rhythmical sense out into the world, such a perception is made possible: the "mysterious affinity" becomes clear; the problem of finding the right relationship between self and world is solved; the boundary between the poet and the outside world seemingly vanishes. Thus, no separation exists between the poet's self and the outer world, a separation that is at the forefront of Rilke's letters. For Woolf, however, this separation results in fragmented poetry, with "beauty" on one side and "life" on the other. This is fundamentally at odds with the task of the modern poet, who, in Woolf's opinion, must release his "rhythmical sense" into the world in order to create a "harmonious whole" out of what was once fragmented.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe similarly faces the task of making a whole out of separate fragments. Returning to finish her painting after ten years have passed, Lily struggles to unite what she sees as fragmented images upon her canvas. For her, the question is one of relation:

She fetched herself a chair. She pitched her easel with her precise old-maidish movements on the edge of the lawn, not too close to Mr. Carmichael, but close enough

for his protection. Yes, it must have been precisely here that she had stood ten years ago. There was the wall; the hedge; the tree. The question was of some relation between those masses. She had borne it in her mind all these years. It seemed as if the solution had come to her: she knew now what she wanted to do. (161)

Like Woolf's poet, Woolf's artist solves her problem with her "rhythmical sense," as discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

The Depiction of the Artistic Process in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

Virginia Woolf never dedicated any of her twelve published novels. However, if she had dedicated *To the Lighthouse*, she would have dedicated it to Roger Fry, English art critic and fellow member of the Bloomsbury group, an informal association of artists, writers, and intellectuals working in London in the first half of the 20th century (Lee 358). “I am immensely glad that you like the Lighthouse,” Woolf confides to Fry in a letter from May 27th, 1927. “Now I wish I had dedicated it to you ... for you have, I think, kept me on the right path, so far as writing goes, more than anyone—if the right path it is” (*The Letters of Virginia Woolf III* 385).

The exact reason why Woolf would have dedicated *To the Lighthouse* to Fry is not stated outright in this letter. The rationale that she does provide—that Fry “kept [her] on the right path”—itself seems uncertain, as Woolf is not even sure if the path that Fry kept her on was the “right” one. Yet the reason why she did *not* dedicate her novel to Fry is clarified in the second half of the letter. In response to Roger Fry’s presumption that “I’m sure that there’s lots I haven’t understood ... for instance, that arriving at the Lighthouse has a symbolic meaning which escapes me” (*Letters* 385), Woolf writes:

I meant *nothing* by The Lighthouse. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together. I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to this, but I refused to think them out, and trusted that people would make it the deposit for their own emotions—which they have done, one thinking it means one thing another another. I can't manage Symbolism except in this vague, generalised way. Whether it's right or wrong I don't know, but when directly I'm told what a thing means, it becomes hateful to me. (*Letters* 385)

The vocabulary Woolf uses to describe the role that the Lighthouse plays in her novel, as the “central line down the middle of the book” which “hold[s] the design together,” echoes that of Fry’s own formalist aesthetic principles. According to Fry, the “chief aspect of order in a work of

art is unity; unity of some kind is necessary for our restful contemplation of the work of art as a whole ...” (20). In a work of art, this unity is “due to a balancing of the attractions of the eye about the *central line* of the picture. The result of this balance of attractions is that the eye rests willingly within the bounds of the picture” (“An Essay in Aesthetics” 21, my emphasis).

From Woolf’s familiarity with Fry’s terminology, it is apparent that she would have been acquainted with Fry’s concepts as expressed in his essay. It should, then, come as no surprise that many critics have commented on the influence of Fry’s formalist theories in Woolf’s texts, particularly in *To the Lighthouse* due to its focus on visual art. In fact, such a reading is supported by more than this letter alone, as the idea of the “unifying center line” resurfaces in her novel itself. “The curious thing about [Woolf’s] explanation of the lighthouse as ‘a central line’ is that she used much the same words to describe the completion of Lily Briscoe’s painting and the novel,” writes Henry R. Harrington, supported by the following quotation from the final moments of *To the Lighthouse*:

She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. (“The Central Line down the Middle of ‘To the Lighthouse’” 363)

Given Woolf’s claim that “The Lighthouse” is the “center line” of her novel, it is reasonable to assume that the line Lily draws down the middle of her picture itself represents the lighthouse. As Lily completes her painting, so too does Woolf complete her novel, both, apparently, with the help of the center line. Without this center line, that being the unifying force which simultaneously holds the novel and the picture together, the completion of both would not be possible.

My purpose in including this information is not to argue that Woolf’s novel proves Fry’s principles. On the contrary, Woolf’s “center line,” though identically phrased, seems to convey a

different meaning from Fry's. This is first evidenced in her 1927 letter responding to Fry's confusion over the symbolic meaning of "the Lighthouse." Though Fry comments on the recurring image of the lighthouse in the novel, when Woolf responds with "I meant *nothing* by The Lighthouse," her unusual capitalization of "The" appears to indicate that she is specifically referring to the third and final section of her novel, which is titled "The Lighthouse." This makes Woolf's following claim that "one has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together" appear quite contradictory, because the section "The Lighthouse" is not "in the middle of the book," but at the end. Thus, Woolf's "center line" is strikingly not in the center of her novel. Even if "The Lighthouse" refers to the image of the lighthouse itself and not to the last section of the novel, the fact remains that the "center line" is not in the novel's center, as the image of the lighthouse recurs throughout the book and is never fixed to one specific point. From this, we can see that Woolf's center line does not pertain entirely to form, as Fry's does, but is more likely a metaphorical center line.

Furthermore, though *To the Lighthouse* has been called "a work of art about art," the novel notably lacks a concrete, detailed description of Lily's painting. Rather, the novel is chiefly concerned with the process of creating the work of art, and thus, its main focus shifts from the work of art to the artist herself. This, in turn, shifts the "center line" as conceived by Fry, for his is necessary "for our restful contemplation of the work of art as a whole." In *To the Lighthouse*, however, the reader is not asked to contemplate the work of art, but the work of the artist. The focus is not on the product, but the process; we do not observe a static image, but instead experience the dynamic artistic process. This is why the novel ends precisely when Lily completes her picture, as finishing the painting necessarily concludes her artistic process. In Woolf's own words, as expressed in a diary entry on September 30, 1926, just a few weeks after

finishing *To the Lighthouse*: “But by writing I don’t reach anything. All I mean to make is a note of a curious state of mind” (*A Writer’s Diary* 98). Woolf’s primary goal is not to “reach” a completed product, but to replicate a “curious state of mind,” which, in the case of *To the Lighthouse*, is the perceiving mind of the artist in the midst of the artistic process.

Yet the fact remains that Fry’s formalist principles are relevant, at least for Lily, whose problem of not being able to “achieve that razor edge of balance between two opposite forces; Mr. Ramsay and the picture” (209) is resolved by drawing a line down the center of her picture. Ultimately, there are two artists at work in *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe and Virginia Woolf, both of whom utilize the “center line” in different ways. Lily adheres to Fry’s principles, using the center line to balance the opposing sides of her picture. Woolf, on the other hand, conceives of a symbolic center line which unites her novel on a thematic level. Part of this symbolic center line is the recurring image of the lighthouse itself, an image which is central to the novel not due to its location, but because it enters the consciousnesses of every character in the novel, consciousnesses which are otherwise entirely separate. More concretely, however, Woolf’s center line is symbolic for the artistic process, which constitutes the thematic “center” of the novel. In this sense, Woolf’s capitalization of “The Lighthouse” in referring to the center line is intentional, because “The Lighthouse” is the section of the novel that focuses most extensively on Lily’s artistic process.

However, the purpose of Woolf’s thematic center line is not to achieve “balance,” as it is for Fry and Lily. It is also not necessarily a unifying force, as the consciousnesses of Woolf’s characters remain separate, though they share the common setting of the lighthouse. Rather, the center line allows Woolf to convey the notion of simultaneity in her novel. It is necessary for the reader to experience this simultaneity in order to understand Lily’s artistic process. The way in

which Woolf describes Lily's artistic process provides insight into how she is ultimately able to achieve her vision and finish her painting.

As she is representative of the artistic process, Lily herself becomes part of Woolf's center line. "It is in her effort to express her sense of reality through colour and form that we are exposed to some of the many aesthetic problems the artist faces in communicating [their] private vision to the world outside," writes Mitchell Leaska. "As deputy for the artist and as chief sentient centre, she is the reader's most reliable source of information and [their] most effective emotional and intellectual guide" (*Virginia Woolf's Lighthouse: A Study in Critical Method* 89-90). As readers, we embark alongside Lily on her pursuit to make something permanent out of the ephemerality of perceptions and lived experiences. Her difficulties in articulating her vision are put on full display, immediately accessible by us. To read Lily as "deputy for the artist" is to attain an intimate glimpse of the complexities that an artist faces in trying to express her vision. Woolf herself was concerned with the difficulties of being an artist under the modern condition, leading many to note the similarities between Lily Briscoe and Virginia Woolf herself, including Leaska: "Lily Briscoe, the painter, is a silhouette of Virginia Woolf, the novelist" (173). Regardless of whether or not Woolf and Lily can be so completely equated, Woolf's fictive painter remains a compelling example of the artist and the problems they must overcome in order to articulate their vision. Though Lily encounters an array of problems as she attempts to express her vision, finding balance by means of a center line that unites what appear to be opposing entities allows her to overcome them.

The first problem that Lily faces is interruption. When introduced, she is not painting, but being interrupted: "... [Mr. Ramsay] almost knocked her easel over, coming down upon her with his hands waving, shouting out 'Boldly we rode and well...'" (22). This initial encounter is

significant in that it marks the first of many interruptions from Mr. Ramsay, interruptions that occur with even more frequency and intensity as Lily attempts to finish her painting in the final section of the novel, “The Lighthouse.” These interruptions pose one of the most prevalent obstacles that Lily must overcome in order to articulate her vision, as they result in a complete disruption of her artistic process. This is indicated when Lily attempts to conceptualize her picture in her mind after returning to the Lighthouse:

The grey-green light on the wall opposite. The empty places. Such were some of the parts, but how bring them together? she asked. As if any interruption could break the frail shape she was building on the table she turned her back to the window lest Mr. Ramsay should see her. She must escape somehow, be alone somewhere. (161)

In this passage, Lily perceives the world around her, trying to think of how to order what she sees as several fragmented images into a whole. It is clear that these interruptions significantly impede Lily’s artistic ability, as they prevent her from conceptualizing her “private vision” before the process of painting even begins. What she is able to conceive of is merely a “frail shape” which could not withstand the destructive force of an interruption. Thus, she cannot focus on conceptualizing her painting but must instead put her energy into avoiding being seen. When she does begin to paint, she “[gets] up quickly, before Mr. Ramsay [turns]” to look at her; once again, she does not even think of her painting itself, only of how she can avoid being seen by Mr. Ramsay, which directs her focus away from her work and further impedes her artistic process.

Though the possibility of being seen by Mr. Ramsay is what worries Lily in the previous passage, it is later revealed that Mr. Ramsay’s presence itself is enough to prevent her from painting:

But with Mr. Ramsay bearing down on her, she could do nothing. Every time he approached—he was walking up and down the terrace—ruin approached, chaos approached. She could not paint. She stooped, she turned; she took up this rag; she squeezed that tube. But all she did was to ward him off a moment. He made it impossible for her to do anything. (162)

Here, the destructive ability of Mr. Ramsay's presence on Lily's artistic process is dramatized: he is the bringer of chaos and ruin who prevents her not only from painting, but from doing anything at all, a sentiment which both begins and ends this passage: "she could do nothing;" "he made it impossible for her to do anything." The repetition of this statement shows how strongly Mr. Ramsay's hold is over Lily, as well as highlighting her annoyance with his constant, disruptive presence.

From Lily's resistance to interruption, as well as her desire to "escape somewhere, be alone somehow," it may seem that solitude is a necessary condition in order for her to paint, as working in solitude is the only way to avoid being interrupted. However, such an insistence on solitude appears to be at odds with the critique that Woolf makes of the solitary artist in her essay "A Letter to a Young Poet." She argues that in a time "when the attractions of escapism, solipsism and nostalgia were so strongly felt, it [is] the writer's job to find 'the right relationship ... between the self that [they] know and the world outside,' even with 'a thousand voices prophesying despair'" (Lee 610). For Woolf, the artist cannot separate themselves from the world entirely, as it is the relationship between the artist and the world outside that matters.

In fact, working in solitude proves to be no solution to Lily's problem, for she feels Mr. Ramsay's presence in her mind, even when he is not physically around her:

She set her clean canvas firmly upon the easel, as a barrier, frail, but she hoped sufficiently substantial to ward off Mr. Ramsay and his exactingness. She did her best to look, when his back was turned, at her picture; that line there, that mass there. But it was out of the question. Let him be fifty feet away, let him not even speak to you, let him not even see you, he permeated, he prevailed, he imposed himself. He changed everything. She could not see the colour; she could not see the lines; even with his back turned to her, she could only think, But he'll be down on me in a moment, demanding—something she felt she could not give him. (163)

Despite the barrier that Lily imposes between herself and Mr. Ramsay, and despite how far Mr. Ramsay may physically distance himself from Lily, she cannot escape him; his presence permeates her mind. Her canvas barrier is not “sufficiently substantial” to keep him out precisely because it *is* substantial; that is, real and tangible. In this case, Mr. Ramsay’s presence is not tangible; rather, it imposes itself in Lily’s imagination. Here, the extent to which Mr. Ramsay’s interruptions deter Lily’s artistic process is fully revealed: not only can she not paint, she also cannot perceive the world around her, as she is unable to “see the colour [or] the lines.” Even when she attempts to direct her focus to her canvas, all she can do is think of Mr. Ramsay and his “insatiable hunger for sympathy, this demand that she should surrender herself up to him entirely” (165-66).

Yet it is precisely her fear of being interrupted, of being seen, that keeps Lily’s attention focused on the outside world, a tendency which is addressed as early as the introductory interruption in which Mr. Ramsay nearly knocks over her canvas. Lily explains that “even while she looked at the mass, at the line, at the colour, at Mrs. Ramsay sitting in the window with James, she kept a feeler on her surroundings lest someone should creep up, and suddenly she should find her picture looked at” (22). This statement reveals a simultaneity in her artistic process: she keeps a “feeler” on the outside world at the same time as she works on her picture. Lily’s attention, then, is split between the outside world and her canvas.

However, it is clearly not *only* out of fear that Lily immerses herself in the outside world. After all, her surroundings—the Lighthouse, Mrs. and Mr. Ramsay, the tree, the hedge—comprise the subject matter of her art. In fact, in her diaries, Woolf consistently refers to Lily as “Lily on the lawn,” a formulation which implies that she is inextricable from the outside world, as she is partially identified by being outside “on the lawn” (*A Writer’s Diary* 98). Lily does not

paint “alone in the room at night with the blinds drawn” (“A Letter to a Young Poet” 218); instead, she sets her easel outside on the grass, where she can carefully observe her surroundings. Lily’s openness to the outside world is shown throughout the novel in metaphors of opening windows and doors, such as the doors in Lily’s mind that go “banging and swinging to and fro” (160). The windows of Lily’s mind are not closed off; the blinds are not drawn. Opening her senses to the outside world is an essential part of her artistic process.

Lily’s involvement with the outside world explains why, when Mr. Ramsay finally does leave, she feels not only “relief,” but “disappointment:”

So they’re gone, she thought, sighing with relief and disappointment. Her sympathy seemed to fly back in her face, like a bramble sprung. She felt curiously divided, as if one part of her were drawn out there — it was a still day, hazy; the Lighthouse looked this morning at an immense distance; the other had fixed itself doggedly, solidly, here on the lawn. (171)

Yet this quote suggests that Lily is not entirely immersed in “the world outside.” Her attachment to her surroundings does not result in a loss of self: though part of her does seem inextricable from the outside world, in this case to Mr. Ramsay, Cam, and James on the boat to the lighthouse, another part of her remains “fixed” on the lawn. Lily’s out-of-body connection to the outside world can be understood as a type of mystical experience, as Martin Corner argues in “Mysticism and Atheism in *To the Lighthouse*.” His differentiation between “introvertive” and “extravertive” mystical experiences clarifies the kind of connection that Lily has with the outside world. According to Corner, in an “introvertive” mystical experience, one turns “inwards to the pure self,” and in an “extravertive” mystical experience, one turns “outwards to the world, so that the mystic blends into a union with natural objects or with ‘Nature’ as a ‘whole’” (410). The “mystical experiences” that Woolf describes in her fiction are usually of the extravertive kind; however, for Woolf, there are two additional types of extravertive experiences: A “fusing”

experience, one in which “the self blends into unity with something else, a single object or the world as a whole” and a “facing” experience in which “the self faces a reality which is of a different order from that given in commonplace awareness, something supremely worth attention, but yet remains quite distinct; no blending or merging takes place” (410). Lily’s relationship to the outside world is best understood as a “facing” experience, in which she maintains a balance between retaining her sense of self and being pulled into the outside world. Ultimately, she needs both human involvement and artistic detachment in order to express her vision.

This need for both involvement in and detachment from the world is related to Lily’s desire to see her surroundings as both “ordinary” and “miraculous,” to find something phenomenal in what Woolf refers to as “the common objects of daily prose” (“A Letter to a Young Poet” 214). Lily voices this desire as she is on the cusp of finishing her painting: “One wanted, she thought, dipping her brush deliberately, to be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that’s a chair, that’s a table, and yet at the same time, It’s a miracle, it’s an ecstasy” (218). Here, the chair and table are the “common objects” which exist on the worldly level of “ordinary experience.” Lily wants to be “on a level” with these objects, however, she also wants to feel that they have a miraculous, mystical quality to them. It is not enough to be entirely immersed in the world of “ordinary experience,” as this would prevent her from seeing the chair as “a miracle” and the table as “an ecstasy.” Ultimately, she wants to occupy multiple levels, not only the level of “ordinary experience,” but also a level that would allow her to see the miraculousness in the ordinary. The desire to be on multiple “levels” is indicated by the vague destination of “being on *a* level with ordinary experience” (my emphasis). The indefinite article allows for the existence of other levels beyond that of “ordinary experience”—in other words,

this is one level of many. The level upon which Lily could see these ordinary objects as miraculous may be described as the “imaginative level,” as it is Lily’s imagination which allows her to see the miraculousness in the everyday. If the level of “ordinary experience” can be likened to “human involvement,” then it is Lily’s imagination which provides her with the “artistic detachment” necessary to see the ordinary as miraculous.

An example of Lily combining the ordinary and the imaginative occurs when she thinks of the Rayleys as she paints. This section begins with a simultaneous experience of painting and remembering: for as Lily “dip[s] into the blue paint, she dip[s] into the past there” (187). She goes on to “collect her impressions of the Rayleys,” whose lives appear to her “in a series of scenes.” Yet, though these scenes at first appear to be memories, it is later revealed that they are “made up” by her imagination:

And this, Lily thought, taking the green paint on her brush, this making up scenes about them, is what we call ‘knowing’ people, ‘thinking’ of them, ‘being fond’ of them! Not a word of it was true; she had made it up; but it was what she knew them by all the same. She went on tunnelling her way into her picture, into the past. (188)

Here, remembering and painting are intertwined, as the process of “tunnelling into the past” is simultaneous with “tunnelling into her picture.” However, these “memories” are ultimately products of Lily’s imagination; they are not recollections, but imaginative creations.

Yet Lily resists the idea that her memories are entirely fabricated, as seen when she later attempts to “collect her impressions” of Mrs. Ramsay. She describes the scene from her memory of Mr. Ramsay proposing to Mrs. Ramsay:

... Mr Ramsay had thought (Lily supposed) the time has come now; Yes, she would say it now. Yes, she would marry him. And she stepped slowly, quietly on shore. Probably she said one word only, letting her hand rest still in his. I will marry you, she might have said, with her hand in his; but no more. Time after time the same thrill had passed between them — obviously it had, Lily thought ... She was not inventing; she was only trying to smooth out something she had been given years ago folded up; something she had seen. (215)

In contrast to Lily's "recollected" scene of Minta and Cam, there are numerous indications that this scene arises not entirely from Lily's memory, but has been embellished by her imagination: Lily only "supposes" that this is what Mr. Ramsay thought, and admits that Mrs. Ramsay did not definitely, but "probably" said "one word only." Of course, there is no way that Lily could have known what either Mr. or Mrs. Ramsay were thinking simply from looking at them; thus, these memories are necessarily affected by her imagination. However, despite acknowledging these apparently fabricated aspects of her memory, Lily argues that they are not entirely "inventions." Instead, her additions to this memory work to "smooth out" her recollection of this scene, embellishing it with more meaning that she could have perceived in the moment that she actually saw it happen. These "embellishments" to her memories can be read as constituting that imaginative level on which ordinary experiences can be seen as miraculous.

By embellishing her memories with her imagination, Lily finally attains a vision of Mrs. Ramsay that she can transfer to her canvas. Before, Lily felt that Mrs. Ramsay evaded her perception: "She must try to get a hold of something that evaded her. It evaded her when she thought of Mrs. Ramsay; it evaded her now when she thought of her picture" (209). It is not until later in the novel that she is able to "get a hold" of Mrs. Ramsay. As Lily thinks back to her memories of Mrs. Ramsay, she looks out the window, continuing to paint her picture. Suddenly, she realizes that a "wave of white went over the window pane." She then feels that "her heart leapt at her and seized her and tortured her" as she sees Mrs. Ramsay:

'Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!' she cried, feeling the old horror come back — to want and want and not to have. Could she inflict that still? And then, quietly, as if she refrained, that too became part of the ordinary experience, was on a level with the chair, with the table. Mrs. Ramsay ... sat there quite simply, in the chair, flicked her needles to and fro, knitted her reddish-brown stocking, cast her shadow on the step. There she sat. (219)

Lily's vision begins on the imaginative level, as Mrs. Ramsay appears in front of her eyes like an apparition, as if rising from the dead. Yet, after her initial outburst of shock and horror, Lily confines this moment to the level of "ordinary experience." The intense emotions that Lily felt upon seeing Mrs. Ramsay are replaced with a quiet contemplation. It is as if this vision has been "leveled out:" the miraculousness of "seeing" the apparition of Mrs. Ramsay is removed and she is chained to the chair, to the singular level of "ordinary experience." At its end, her vision appears to be entirely factual: "There she sat," not miraculously, but "quite simply."

Lily confines her vision of Mrs. Ramsay to a single level in order to portray it in her picture. Though it appears that Lily has placed Mrs. Ramsay entirely on the level of "ordinary experience," she has actually put her on a level between the miraculous and the ordinary. For, though Lily might think of Mrs. Ramsay on the chair as "ordinary," the fact remains that Mrs. Ramsay cannot entirely inhabit the level of "ordinary experience" because she is dead; she is no longer truly a part of reality. This vision is not a result of Mrs. Ramsay actually rising from the dead; rather, it is Lily's imagination which seemingly brings her to life. In this sense, Lily's vision of Mrs. Ramsay still retains a touch of the miraculous. Ultimately, Lily has created a "balanced" vision, one that exists between the extremes of "real" and "imagined." She instills a sense of unity between two opposing visions of Mrs. Ramsay, one real and one surreal. This reveals a major difference between Woolf and Lily's artistry: due to her need to create a static product, Lily cannot depict the multiplicity of her vision to its fullest extent, instead needing to confine it to one level. In order to paint Mrs. Ramsay on her canvas, Lily must essentialize her, reducing her vision to one crucial aspect so that, to use the words of Fry, "the eye rests willingly within the bounds of the picture." Woolf, by contrast, is able to show how Lily's vision is formed and processed, allowing her to preserve the intensity of the moment in its entirety.

Yet even after having *a* clear vision of Mrs. Ramsay, Lily has not had “her vision,” which is the complete image of her finished picture, as Mrs. Ramsay is only a part of the whole. This leads to the most pressing problem that Lily faces: the question of “relation between [the] masses” (161):

The disproportion ... seemed to upset some harmony in her own mind. She felt an obscure distress ... For whatever reason she could not achieve that razor edge of balance between two opposing forces; Mr. Ramsay and the picture, which was necessary. Was it, she wondered, that the line of the wall wanted breaking, was it that the mass of the trees was too heavy? (209)

Here, the extent to which this feeling of disproportion affects Lily is made clear: it is not just bothersome, but distressing; achieving balance in her picture is not merely a want, but a need. It is not until Lily knows how to balance these “opposing forces” that she achieves her vision. This occurs at the very end of the novel, when Lily looks out at Mr. Ramsay, Cam and Minta reaching the lighthouse with her paintbrush in hand:

She looked at the steps; they were empty, she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision. (226)

When she picks up her paintbrush, her focus does not shift entirely to the canvas—Lily continues to take in the outside world. What this passage reveals is a simultaneity of perceiving and painting in Lily’s artistic process. In other words, looking out to the world and working on her picture are not disconnected actions—in fact, they are purposefully joined by a semicolon. There is a pause, but not a complete separation. One leads immediately into the next. Yet this indicates a problem in conveying the notion of simultaneity in a novel. Writing cannot entirely escape its sequential nature, as one must first read one thing and then move on to what follows. It is impossible to take in all aspects of a novel at the same time; if words were to be printed on top of one another, they would become illegible.

Conveying this notion of simultaneity was a pressing concern of Woolf's as she worked on the final section of *To the Lighthouse*. In a diary entry from September 5, 1926, she writes:

At this moment I'm casting about for an end. The problem is how to bring Lily and Mr. R. together and make a combination of interest at the end. I am feathering about with various ideas. The last chapter which I begin tomorrow is In the Boat: I had meant to end with R. climbing on to the rock. If so, what becomes of Lily and her picture? Should there be a final page about her and Carmichael looking at the picture and summing up R.'s character? In that case I lose the intensity of the moment. If this intervenes between R. and the lighthouse, there's too much chop and change, I think. Could I do it in a parenthesis? So that one had the sense of reading the two things at the same time? (98)

Woolf ultimately elected not to use a parenthesis to convey this "sense of reading two things at the same time" at the point in the novel which she discusses in this diary entry, when Mr.

Ramsay climbs on the rock. However, Woolf does take this parenthetical approach to depict simultaneity throughout the novel's third section. One notable example of this technique occurs after Mr. Ramsay has left for the lighthouse and Lily begins to work on her picture. She then has the following revelation:

What is the meaning of life? That was all — a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other; herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent) — this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsay said. 'Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!' she repeated. She owed this revelation to her. (175-76)

Here, Woolf uses parenthetical expressions to portray thinking and perceiving as simultaneous processes. This passage opens with Lily deep in contemplation of a rhetorical question—we begin in the realm of her thoughts. Lily then calls upon her memories when she speaks of "this, that, and the other ... herself and Charles Tansley ... Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together." As Lily is alone, and Mrs. Ramsay is dead, it is clear that she is recalling her memories of them, not

perceiving them in real life. Next is the first parenthetical expression, in which Lily compares herself to Mrs. Ramsay. This expression does convey a simultaneity of thought, as it is an instance of Lily interrupting her flows of thoughts with another related thought, a recollection of a past event “from another sphere.” However, it does not show that the processes of thinking *and* perceiving are simultaneous, which is most convincingly achieved by the second parenthetical expression. Though the rest of this passage takes place within the confines of Lily’s mind, the second parenthetical expression describes Lily looking out at the sky and trees. Thus, we are reminded that even while Lily is deep in contemplation, she is still taking in the outside world. In fact, it appears as if her thoughts are influenced by her perception of the outside world. For example, “the clouds going” that Lily sees outside seem to refer to what Lily calls “this eternal passing,” allowing for a reading of the clouds continually moving across the sky as a visual representation of the abstract idea of an “eternal passing.” This shows that the processes of thinking and perceiving are not just sequential, but simultaneous: Lily does not first think, and then direct her attention to the world afterwards, as her thoughts are shaped by what she perceives outside.

This passage also emphasizes the artist’s task to find “shape” in the “midst of chaos,” which is precisely what Lily’s revelation is: to make “life stand still,” to strike the “eternal passing and flowing” into stability. This revelation is reflected in the poetics of this passage. After Lily has had her revelation, Woolf uses alliteration to create a sound structure: “this eternal passing and flowing...was struck into stability. Life stand still here... .” This phrase conveys the dynamic momentum of shaping the “eternal passing and flowing” into a stable shape, which is achieved by the repetition of “st” in the words “struck,” “stability,” “stand,” and “still,” all of which have to do with the formation of this structure. Through artful composition, Woolf

replicates the artist's task of forming a static shape from the "eternal flow" of life. This is an example of writing and painting coming together: Woolf creates in prose what Lily will later create on her canvas.

Throughout the novel, the process of painting additionally corresponds with both thinking and feeling, indicating that all of these processes occur simultaneously. For example, after having her revelation, Lily takes in the silence around her, hoping that no one will disturb it:

All was silence ... She hop[ed] nobody would open the window or come out of the house, but that she might be left alone to go on thinking, to go on painting. She turned to her canvas. But impelled by some curiosity she walked a pace or so to the end of the lawn to see whether, down there on the beach, she could see that little company setting sail. (176)

In this passage, only a comma separates the actions of thinking and painting, both of which are written in a parallel structure (to go on thinking/painting), further aligning these processes. Not only do thinking and painting occur in this passage, but feeling as well—Lily's curiosity impels her to leave the silence of her surroundings, so that she can see the boat on its way to the lighthouse. Additionally, it is the act of turning to her canvas that inspires Lily to walk out on the lawn. This shows an interaction between what is on and off of the canvas, as contemplating her painting is what initiates Lily to go out and contemplate her surroundings. The result is an interesting reversal of expectations, as one typically assumes that the painter, inspired by their surroundings, would then transfer their perceptions of the world onto their canvas. Here, Woolf is "making note of a curious state of mind," her intention as stated in her diary entry. Lily's state of mind is curious in two ways: first, in her eagerness to explore the world around her, and second, in the unusual or mysterious connection she sees between what is on the canvas and what is out in the world.

The processes of feeling and painting are directly connected when Lily struggles to achieve the “razor edge of balance between two opposing forces” in her painting. Lily wonders if there is “perhaps something wrong with the design,” if “the line of the wall wanted breaking” or if “the mass of trees was too heavy” (210):

She smiled ironically; for had she not thought, when she began, that she had solved her problem?

What was the problem then? She must try to get hold of something that evaded her. It evaded her when she thought of Mrs. Ramsay; it evaded her now when she thought of her picture. Phrases came. Visions came. Beautiful pictures. Beautiful phrases. But what she wished to get a hold of was that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything. Get that and start afresh; get that and start afresh; she said desperately, pitching herself firmly again before her easel. It was a miserable machine, an inefficient machine, she thought, the human apparatus for painting or for feeling; it always broke down at the critical moment; heroically, one must force it on. She stared, frowning. There was the hedge, sure enough. But one got nothing by soliciting urgently. One got only a glare in the eye from looking at the line of the wall, or from thinking she wore a grey hat. She was astonishingly beautiful. Let it come, she thought, if it will come. For there are moments when one can neither think nor feel. And if one can neither think nor feel, she thought, where is one? (209-210)

In this passage, Lily refers to “the human apparatus for painting *or* for feeling,” which seems to indicate that a single apparatus embodies both of these processes. The rest of this passage shows how feeling is ultimately inextricable from painting; Lily must obtain a clear perception of the world, “the thing itself before it has been made anything,” before she can begin painting.

However, it is not that simple, as in order to attain this vision Lily does not contemplate her surroundings, but “pitches herself against the easel.” Though one expects Lily to turn toward the outside world to perceive “the thing itself,” she instead turns to her canvas. This action of “pitching herself against her easel” can be read as painting, where the artist takes initiative to express their vision on the canvas. Another potential contradiction arises when Lily claims that “one must force [the apparatus] on” while also waiting to let whatever is evading her perception come to her: “Let it come, she thought, *if* it will come” (my emphasis). Here, the conditional “if”

further emphasizes the passive nature of waiting for this missing perception to appear: maybe it will come, but maybe it won't. This "waiting" might be understood as feeling, as feeling is not necessarily active, but can be reactive, responding to a situation rather than controlling it. Though contradictory, these processes both occur simultaneously. Additionally, though this passage explicitly connects feeling and painting, it also subtly implies that thinking is occurring as well: "One got only a glare in the eye from *looking* at the line of the wall, or from *thinking* she wore a grey hat" (my emphasis). Here, thinking and feeling are connected by an "or," again suggesting that these processes are interchangeable.

This passage also provides a glimpse into how Lily tries to get a hold on something that is evading her, which is reflected in the writing itself. Her thought process works with repetition, as indicated by the density of parallel structures and recurring phrases, such as: "Phrases came. Visions came. Beautiful pictures. Beautiful phrases." This move from "phrases," "visions," "pictures," and back to "phrases" provides an impression of Lily's thought process, which has both a visual and verbal dimension. This movement is not sequential, as it both begins and ends with "phrases." Instead of a movement from one thing to another, it can be understood as a movement between layers of the same moment of contemplation. The rhythm created by these repetitions and parallel structures allows us to see the verbal and visual aspects of Lily's thought process as simultaneous. Additionally, not only does the style of this passage create a structure, the content of this passage also pertains to form, as Lily ponders the hedge. Here, the hedge stands as a solid form in the chaos, hinting at the artist's task to create shape. This hedge can be read as a primitive version of the "line" that will balance the opposing masses of her painting, a role ultimately filled by the lighthouse.

The coinciding visual and verbal dimension of Lily's artistic process conveyed in this passage brings Charles Tansley's reproach that "women can't paint, women can't write," to mind. This unfounded criticism stays in Lily's mind throughout the rest of the novel, as indicated in the following passage, in which Lily contemplates how to begin her painting:

Can't paint, can't write, she murmured monotonously, anxiously considering what her plan of attack should be. For the mass loomed before her; it protruded; she felt it pressing on her eyeballs. Then, as if some juice necessary for the lubrication of her faculties were spontaneously squirted, she began precariously dipping among the blues and ambers, moving her brush hither and thither, but it was now heavier and went slower, as if it had fallen in with some rhythm which was dictated to her (she kept looking at the hedge, at the canvas) by what she saw, so that while her hand quivered with life, this rhythm was strong enough to bear her along with it on its current. Certainly she was losing consciousness of outer things. And as she lost consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance, and whether Mr. Carmichael was there or not, her mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurting over that glaring, hideously difficult white space, while she modelled it with greens and blues. (173-74)

The simultaneity of painting, thinking, feeling could not be any clearer: somehow, Lily looks at the hedge and canvas at once, as indicated by the parallel structure in the parenthetical expression. And while she paints, various ideas resurface in her mind.

Equally important as the representation of simultaneity in this passage is the introduction of Lily's "rhythm," a word which is repeated twice. Lily's rhythm is both governed by what she sees, as well as being what guides her in her painting. This rhythmic sense is precisely what allows Lily to balance these simultaneous processes of thinking, feeling, and painting, a balance that is necessary to establish in order for Lily to finish her painting. It is rhythm that finally allows Lily to create a stable shape out of the "eternal flowing" of these three simultaneously occurring processes. Lily's rhythmic sense is further emphasized by the way in which Woolf describes it, as her use of varied punctuation creates rhythm in the passage. This is especially evident in the last sentence, whose flow is interspersed with many commas, resonating with the

image of the “spurting fountain” that Woolf uses as a simile for Lily’s artistic process. In portraying the dynamic, rhythmic flow of Lily’s artistic process, Woolf demonstrates her own poetic mastery of language.

Ultimately, Woolf and Lily share the same task: to make “life stand still,” to create stability out of ephemerality. By utilizing their rhythmic senses, they are able to convey the notion of simultaneity in their works. However, they achieve different types of simultaneity. A painting conveys simultaneity by conveying multiple images on one surface. This allows for one to perceive these multiple images simultaneously, as they are all depicted within the same field. The images themselves, however, are static. Woolf, taking visual art as inspiration, creates a dynamic form of simultaneity in her writing. Despite the inherently sequential nature of writing, by replicating Lily’s “curious state of mind,” Woolf retains the simultaneous and dynamic nature of the artistic, poetic process.

CHAPTER THREE

The Process of Becoming an Artist in Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids**Brigge*

Rainer Maria Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* resists categorization. It is not exactly a novel—instead of abiding by the "fictional convention of telling the story of an individual bound by a defined space and by chronological time," the *Notebooks* are comprised of a collection of narrative fragments held together by a "consciousness and subjectivity in crisis" (Hussien 74). And though "key passages of the text are lifted almost verbatim from the poet's correspondence, not even rewritten, but directly copied into the text," these passages are "displaced and rewritten as the life crisis of an other, a fictional figure," Malte Laurids Brigge (Huysen 74), which means that the *Notebooks* cannot exactly be considered an autobiography, either.

One wonders why Rilke chose to narrate the *Notebooks* through the persona of Malte, despite much of the text drawing from his own lived experiences. Rilke's following remark to his French translator, Maurice Betz, might offer some insight into this decision:

The unity I needed was no longer that of a poem but that of a personality which, in all its infinite diversity, had come to life, from start to finish. The rhythm that forced itself upon me was chopped and broken, and I was drawn in many an unforeseen direction. One moment it was childhood memories, the next Paris, then the atmosphere of Denmark, then images that seemed to have no connection with my own self. At times I well nigh merged into Malte, at others I lost him from sight: if I made a journey, he seemed out of my range, but once I returned to Paris I found him again, more present than ever. Many pages I wrote without knowing what would come of them. Some were letters, others notes, fragments of a diary, prose poems. Despite the density of this prose, I was forever groping about or heading off on a seemingly never-ending march into the dark. But in the end it turned out that he really was there, my companion of so many nights, my friend and confidant. He had accompanied me to Venice, he had wandered the streets of Paris as I had, he had stood with me in the shadow of Les Alyscamps, together we had met the shepherd at Les Baux. In Copenhagen I saw him on the Langelinie, we met in the yew

avenues of Fredensborg, he recalled the heavily sweet scent of phlox in summer, his childhood was mine, he was my self and someone else. (Hulse xxi)

Malte is the necessary unifying force holding together the fragmented excerpts that comprise the *Notebooks*. He is also a unifying force within himself, as he merges Rilke with this imagined persona. This passage suggests that Rilke's relationship to Malte is convoluted—there is no clear line separating Rilke and Malte. At the beginning of this remark, it appears that Malte is entirely an outward invention that Rilke brings to life. Yet, though Rilke claims that “at times, [he] lost [Malte] from sight,” the end of this passage reveals that even when Malte seemed lost, he “really was there” all along, and that he and Rilke share the same childhood. Despite this, Rilke still asserts that Malte is not *entirely* his “self,” but also “someone else.”

The complexity of Rilke's relation to Malte, the narrative voice of the *Notebooks*, is reflected in the disjointed perspective from which the text is written. At times, Malte confidently imparts refined and illuminating reflections on the artistic process. Rilke has been called “a literary seer on the role of the artist” (Puknat 245), a claim that these refined and confident passages seem to uphold. Yet, the *Notebooks* are simultaneously written from the perspective of the artist who is still “learning to see,” the unconfident poet who struggles to make sense of “the metropolitan onslaught on the self” (Hulse xviii). Beyond unifying the fragmented narratives of the *Notebooks*, Malte allows Rilke to write from two different perspectives, that of the experienced, established artist, and that of the inexperienced, disoriented artist. This duality of perspective allows for an increased understanding of both what it means to be an artist under the modern condition as well as how to become one.

Becoming an artist starts with “learning to see” (4). The importance of the act of seeing is evident from the first page of the novel. Rilke conveys Malte's experience of Paris primarily

through his sense of sight, a sense which is accentuated by the repetition of the verb “sehen” (to see) in the following passage:

Ich habe gesehen: Hospitäler. Ich habe einen Menschen gesehen, welcher schwankte und umsink ... Ich habe eine schwangere Frau gesehen. Sie schob sich schwer an einer hohen, warmen Mauer entlang ... Dahinter? Ich suchte auf meinem Plan: Maison de l'Accouchement ... Weiter, rue Saint-Jacques, ein großes Gebäude mit einer Kuppel. Der Plan gab an Val-de-grâce, Hôpital militaire ... Dann habe ich ein eigentümlich starblindes Haus gesehen, es war im Plan nicht zu finden, aber über der Tür stand noch ziemlich leserlich: Asyle de nuit. Neben dem Eingang waren die Preise. Ich habe sie gelesen. Es war nicht teuer.¹³

However, in this passage Rilke is not only seeing, but reading: as Malte observes the people around him, so too does he look at his map and read the words over the doors of buildings.

“[Reading] is also a way of seeing ... but it is a way that tries to interpret, tries to make sense of, the other kind of seeing,” notes Macleod in “Writing as Paradox in Rilke’s ‘Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge’” (405). This distinction between seeing and interpreting is one that Rilke explicitly makes in a letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé on 8 August 1903, notes Macleod, between “begin[ning] to see anew” and “interpretation.” Macleod explains that “whereas the latter holds the world at a distance ... the former looks to a kind of unmediated relation of presence which takes the form of a ‘penetration’ of the subject. This understanding of seeing is echoed in the *Notebooks*: “Ich lerne sehen. Ich weiß nicht, woran es liegt, es geht alles tiefer in mich ein und bleibt nicht an der Stelle stehen, wo es sonst immer zu Ende war. Ich habe ein Inneres, von dem ich nicht wußte. Alles geht jetzt dorthin. Ich weiß nicht, was dort geschieht.”¹⁴ Here, Malte does not force an interpretation upon the world; rather, he opens himself up to the world, which results

¹³ “I have been out. I saw hospitals. I saw once a man who tottered and then collapsed ... I saw a pregnant woman. She was inching ponderously along by a high, sun-warmed wall ... And behind the wall? I located it on my map: Maison d’Accouchement ... Further on, rue Saint-Jacques, a large building with a cupla. The map read: *Val-de-grâce, hôpital militaire* ... Then I saw a building curiously blinded with cataracts, unmarked on the map, though the words over the door were still quite legible: *Asyle de nuit*. I read it through. It was not expensive” (Hulse 3).

¹⁴ “I am learning to see. Why, I cannot say, but all things enter more deeply into me; nor do the impressions remain at the level where they used to cease. There is a place within me of which I knew nothing. Now all things tend that way. I do not know what happens there” (Hulse 4).

in the “things,” or sensations, of the world entering “deeply” into him. The barrier between his inner self and the outside world becomes permeable.

For Malte, there exists a relationship not only between seeing and reading, but between seeing and writing. This connection is made when Malte states “ich glaube, ich müßte anfangen, etwas zu arbeiten, jetzt, da ich sehen lerne.”¹⁵ According to Macleod, Rilke understands “Arbeit” (work) as “a sustained effort at writing;” therefore, it follows that writing is initiated by seeing. Here, however, writing is not a necessity, as Malte is still “learning to see;” this explains the relative uncertainty in Malte’s phrasing that he “supposes he ought to” begin working on “something.”

His uncertainty to undertake this project of writing is also a result of Malte’s lack of experience in the world, as he goes on to explain later in this passage. He states that so far in his 28 years of life he has written a “poor” study of Carpaccio, a play titled *Marriage* that is riddled with “ambiguities,” and verses. Malte is similarly dissatisfied with these verses: “Ach, aber mit Versen ist so wenig getan, wenn man sie früh schreibt. Man sollte warten damit und Sinn und Süßigkeit sammeln ein ganzes Leben lang und ein langes womöglich, und dann, ganz zum Schluß, vielleicht könnte man dann zehn Zeilen schreiben, die gut sind.”¹⁶ Here, “good” poetry is reliant upon experience in the world; Malte, writing at 28, has not yet “gather[ed] meaning and sweetness a whole life long,” his verses seem “paltry.” Yet experience does not necessarily guarantee that one will write good poetry, as it is only “perhaps” possible that one could write good verses even at the end of a long life.

¹⁵ “I suppose I ought to embark on some work or other, now that I am learning to see” (Hulse 13).

¹⁶ “Ah, but verses are so paltry an achievement if they are written early in life. One should wait, and gather meaning and sweetness a whole life long, a long life if possible, and then, at the very end, one might perhaps be able to write ten good lines” (Hulse 13).

Malte's definition of poetry clarifies the importance that experience plays in writing good poetry, because poetry *is* experience:

Denn Verse sind nicht, wie die Leute meinen, Gefühle (die hat man früh genug),—es sind Erfahrungen. Um eines Verses willen muß man viele Städte sehen, Menschen und Dinge, man muß die Tiere kennen, man muß fühlen, wie die Vögel fliegen, und die Gebärde wissen, mit welcher die kleinen Blumen sich auftun am Morgen.¹⁷

The repeated use of the verb “muß” in this passage emphasizes the necessary role that experiencing the world plays in one's ability to write poetry. Even to write a single verse, one *must* have these experiences, and not only a handful of experiences, but many. Here, one gains an understanding of the world not only by seeing, but also by understanding the inner workings of nature, by “feeling how birds fly” and “knowing the manner in which the little flowers open every morning.” The progression from *seeing* cities and people, to *understanding* animals, to *sensing* how birds fly, and to *knowing* how flowers open implies that the more experience in the world one attains, the more about the world they are able to know. Malte, due to his limited experience in the world, can only “see” cities, people and things; this is indicated by the subject matter of many of the notebooks, which describe his visual perceptions of Paris.

The idea that an increased understanding of the outside world allows one to better poetry is modelled in the progression from “seeing” to “understanding” itself. Each level of awareness of the outer world—seeing, understanding, sensing, and knowing—is accompanied by an image. These images become increasingly more complex: For example, the first image, “many cities, people, and things,” is indescriptive and imprecise—it is not clear which cities, nor how many cities, nor what kind of people and things are seen. The last image, however, is detailed and poetic. First, the word “Gebärde” (gestures) relates the human-made verses to the outer world of

¹⁷ “For verses are not feelings, as people imagine—those one has early enough; they are experiences. In order to write a single line, one must see a great many cities, people and things, have an understanding of animals, sense how it is to be a bird in flight, and know the manner in which the little flowers open every morning” (Hulse 13).

nature, the flowers. The flowers can also be read as a metaphor for the up-and-coming poet. These flowers are small, still in the process of growing, and they “auftun,” they “open up” and simultaneously “start and go.” In other words, they are embarking on something, as the young poet embarks on his calling. Additionally, this process begins in the morning, connoting the idea of a new beginning, the start of the poet’s ability to write good poetry once he has achieved this heightened awareness and understanding of the outer world. The complexity of this image indicates that once the poet reaches this level of understanding, he can begin to think and write poetically.

However, there are more conditions beyond merely experiencing the world—even if this experience eventually gives way to a supreme knowledge of the inner workings of nature—that need to be met in order to write good poetry, as one needs a certain amount of distance from their experiences in order to understand and reflect upon them.

Man muß zurückdenken können an Wege in unbekanntem Gegenden, an unerwartete Begegnungen und an Abschiede, die man lange kommen sah,—an Kindheitstage, die noch unaufgeklärt sind, an die Eltern, die man kränken mußte, wenn sie einem eine Freude brachten und man begriff sie nicht (es war eine Freude für einen anderen—), an Kinderkrankheiten, die so seltsam anheben mit so vielen tiefen und schweren Verwandlungen, an Tage in stillen, verhaltenen Stuben und an Morgen am Meer, an das Meer überhaupt, an Meere, an Reisenächte, die hoch dahinrauschten und mit allen Sternen flogen ...¹⁸

In this passage, the focus shifts from the outside world to Malte’s inner life, the memories of his childhood. In order to understand his “unenlightened” or “unresolved” childhood memories, Malte must think back to them. The initial experience in the world does not give way to

¹⁸ “In one’s mind there must be regions unknown, meetings unexpected and long-anticipated partings, to which one can cast back one’s thoughts—childhood days that still retain their mystery, parents inevitably hurt when one failed to grasp the pleasure they offered (and which another would have taken pleasure in), childhood illnesses beginning so strangely with so many profound and intractable transformations, days in peacefully secluded rooms and mornings beside the sea, and the sea itself, seas, nights on journeys that swept by on high and flew past filled with stars ... ” (Hulse 13-14).

understanding; distance in the form of time is required to make sense of those experiences. Yet despite this focus on the inner, Malte's descriptions are not entirely abstract, as he continues to describe the outside world in concrete terms, the sea and stars. One's memory is comprised of internalized experiences, experiences which first originate in the outside world and later occupy the "unknown regions" of one's mind.

These internalized memories are presented in a complex spatial and temporal structure which is reflected in the poetics of this passage. The sound of the word "Wege" (paths) echoes both the unknown "Gegenden" (areas) as well as the unexpected "Begegnungen" (encounters). This creates a resonance between these paths, regions, and encounters. While "paths" and "regions" relate to the spatiality of one's childhood memories, the "encounters" have more to do with their temporality. The rest of the passage highlights the complexity of the time-structure that contains these childhood memories. This passage refers to partings that *are anticipated* and memories that are *not yet* enlightened, both of which will happen in the future, as well as speaking of events that seem to be currently happening, such as the beginning of childhood illnesses and the days in secluded rooms. Finally, the "journeys at night" seem to have occurred in the past, as the verb tense changes to the *Präteritum* with "saw" and "flew." Additionally, it appears that the end of this passage breaks free of both the time and spatial structure, as Malte speaks not of the sea in relation to his childhood memories, but of the sea in general, "das Meer überhaupt." This elevation is echoed in how the memories of the nightly journeys on the sea can somehow ascend to the stars.

Additionally, the poetic aspiration suggests that one must have more than their childhood memories, but a multitude of memories:

... Und es ist noch nicht genug, wenn man an alles das denken darf. Man muß Erinnerungen haben an viele Liebesnächte, von denen keine der andern glich, an Schreie

von Kreißenden und an leichte, weiße, schlafende Wöchnerinnen, die sich schließen. Aber auch bei Sterbenden muß man gewesen sein, muß bei Toten gesessen haben in der Stube mit dem offenen Fenster und den stoßweisen Geräuschen.¹⁹

Here, the allusions to both childbirth, or the beginning of life, as well as death, the end of life, imply that one needs to experience the whole of life in order to write good poetry. This goes beyond childhood memories, which, of course, occur only in the early stages of one's life. However, these experiences of birth and death are not necessarily personal, as one need not actually be dying, but only be "with" the dying and sit in a room with them. Being present for these experiences in some way, even when experienced by others, seems to substitute for actually experiencing them, which would be impossible, as one cannot retain memories of their own birth, just as one cannot have firsthand knowledge of what it is like to die before they do so.

Despite all this, further conditions must be met in order for one to write good poetry, as one must also forget their memories:

Und es genügt auch noch nicht, daß man Erinnerungen hat. Man muß sie vergessen können, wenn es viele sind, und man muß die große Geduld haben, zu warten, daß sie wiederkommen. Denn die Erinnerungen selbstes noch nicht. Erst wenn sie Blut werden in uns, Blick und Gebärde, namenlos und nicht mehr zu unterscheiden von uns selbst, erst dann kann es geschehen, daß in einer sehr seltenen Stunde das erste Wort eines Verses aufsteht in ihrer Mitte und aus ihnen ausgeht.²⁰

If one's memories are internalized experiences, then the process of forgetting one's memories allows them to not only be internalized, but embodied, as they become "the blood within us."

Only when memories have become an indistinguishable part of one's being can poetry be

¹⁹ "... and still it is not enough to be able to bring all this to mind. One must have memories of many nights of love, no two alike; of the screams of women in labour; and of pale, white, sleeping women in childbed, closing again. But one must also have been with the dying, have sat in a room with the dead with the window open and noises coming in at random" (Hulse 14).

²⁰ "And it is not yet enough to have memories. One has to be able to forget them, if there are a great many, and one must have great patience, to wait for their return. For it is not the memories in themselves that are of consequence. Only when they are become the very blood within us, our every look and gesture, nameless and no longer distinguishable from our inmost self, only then, in the rares of hours, can the first word of a poem arise in their midst and go out from among them" (Hulse 14).

written. And all of this is essential to even write the very first word of a poem, to begin writing at all.

Yet, immediately after these reflections on the poetic process, Malte reveals that “alle [s]eine Verse aber sind anders entstanden, also sind es keine.”²¹ This acknowledgement further reveals the absolute necessity of the previously stated conditions—if they are not followed, then whatever verses that one writes cannot even be called poetry. Additionally, Malte’s confession marks a shift in perspective: If the previous passages can be said to represent the perspective of the established, experienced poet, then this sudden acknowledgement brings the perspective of the inexperienced, aspiring poet back into the picture. However, it is clear that these two perspectives are not entirely separated, not only because the aspiring poet is self-aware enough to know the exact conditions needed to write good poetry (despite not implementing them), but also because these reflections on the poetic process demonstrate a mastery of the process through the way in which they are written. Writing simultaneously from two apparently contradictory perspectives remains consistent with the narrative process of the *Notebooks* themselves, which are not ordered chronologically, but meant to evoke the feeling of finding disordered papers in a drawer, as Rilke notes to Manon zu Solms-Laubach in a letter dated on March 11, 1910, after he had finished the manuscript:

Ich weiß nicht, wieweit man aus den Papieren auf ein ganzes Dasein wird schließen können. Was dieser erfundene junge Mensch innen durchmachte (an Paris und an seinen über Paris wieder auflebenden Erinnerung), ging überall so ins Weite; es hätten immer noch Aufzeichnungen hinzukommen können; was nun das Buch ausmacht, ist durchaus nichts Vollzähliges. Es ist nur so, als fände man in einem Schubfach ungeordnete Papiere und fände eben vorderhand nicht mehr und müßte sich begnügen. Das ist, künstlerisch betrachtet, eine schlechte Einheit, aber menschlich ist es möglich, und was dahinter aufsteht, ist immerhin ein Daseinsentwurf und ein Schattenzusammenhang sich rührender Kräfte. (*Rilke-Handbuch* 324)²²

²¹ “All of my poems, however, originated in a different manner, and so they are not poems” (Hulse 14).

²² “I don’t know how far an entire existence can be concluded from the papers. What this young invented person experienced within (of Paris and of his memory revived through Paris) expanded all over into vastness;

This letter also calls attention to Rilke's uncertainty if it is possible to depict an "entire existence" in writing, "on paper." The previously mentioned instance of Malte writing from two perspectives can be read as such an attempt to portray a more complete representation of his being, as the reader encounters both his perspective as an established poet as well as an aspiring one. This suggests that Rilke is not only concerned with describing the poetic process, but also the process of becoming a poet.

It appears that Malte's experiences in the outside world, especially his fear of the oppressive onslaught of the city, make writing a necessity. "Ich fürchte mich. Gegen die Furcht muß man etwas tun, wenn man sie einmal hat,"²³ writes Malte, later identifying that writing provides him with a way to "ward off" his fear: "Ich habe etwas getan gegen die Furcht. Ich habe die ganze Nacht gesessen und geschrieben, und jetzt bin ich so gut müde wie nach einem weiten Weg über die Felder von Ulsgaard."²⁴ This clarifies the connection between seeing and writing: his observations of Paris, and the terror that arises within him as a result of what he perceives, are what apparently urge Malte to begin writing. Not only does the poet need experience in the world to write good poetry, his experiences in the world are seemingly what inspire him to begin writing in the first place.

Later it is revealed that imagination is no replacement for lived experience, which further places poetic inspiration on the outside world as opposed to the inner world:

notes could have still been added all the time; what constitutes the book is by no means complete. It is just as if one were to find disordered papers in a drawer and hadn't found anything else for the time being and would have to be satisfied. Considered from an artistic perspective, that is a bad unity, but it is humanly possible, and what stands behind it is, after all, a conception of an existence and a shadow-connection of moving forces" (my translation).

²³ "I am afraid. It is essential to do something about your fear once you are afraid" (Hulse 6).

²⁴ "I have been doing something to ward off fear. I have sat up all night writing, and now I am as tired out as if I had taken a long walk through the Ulsgaard fields" (Hulse 11).

Nein, nein, vorstellen kann man sich nichts auf der Welt, nicht das Geringste. Es ist alles aus so viel einzigen Einzelheiten zusammengesetzt, die sich nicht absehen lassen. Im Einbilden geht man über sie weg und merkt nicht, daß sie fehlen, schnell wie man ist. Die Wirklichkeiten aber sind langsam und unbeschreiblich ausführlich.²⁵

Here, the impossibility of imagining the world is emphasized, as Malte argues that one cannot imagine “anything” in the world, not even the “Geringste” (smallest thing). Even when reality is patiently observed, there are still “indescribably detailed” things that evade one’s perception. In other words, reality is so detailed that it exists partially outside the bounds of human comprehension. The impossibility of imagining reality is confirmed when Malte “embark[s] on the task of imagining” his neighbor, a man at whom he had previously “refused” to look (Hulse 134). Malte describes the difficulty of this endeavor: “Ich war beschäftigt, ihn mir vorzustellen, ich unternahm die Arbeit, ihn einzubilden, und der Schweiß trat mir aus vor Anstrengung. Denn ich mußte ihn machen wie man einen Toten macht, für den keine Beweise mehr da sind, keine Bestandteile; der ganz und gar innen zu leisten ist.”²⁶ This explanation highlights the fact that Malte’s imagination of his neighbor is not grounded in the outside world, but originates completely within. The image of his neighbor that Malte creates is as follows:

Ich weiß jetzt, daß es mir ein wenig half, an die vielen abgenommenen Christusse aus streifigem Elfenbein zu denken, die bei allen Althändlern herumliegen. Der Gedanke an irgendeine Pietà trat vor und ab—: dies alles wahrscheinlich nur, um eine gewisse Neigung hervorzurufen, in der sein langes Gesicht sich hielt, und den trostlosen Bartnachwuchs im Wangenschatten und die endgültig schmerzvolle Blindheit seines verschlossenen Ausdrucks, der schräg aufwärts gehalten war. Aber es war außerdem so vieles, was zu ihm gehörte; denn dies begriff ich schon damals, daß nichts an ihm nebensächlich sei: nicht die Art, wie der Rock oder der Mantel, hinten abstehend, überall den Kragen sehen ließ ... nicht die grünlich schwarze Krawatte, die weit um das Ganze herumgeschnallt war; und ganz besonders nicht der Hut, ein alter, hochgewölbter, steifer

²⁵ “No, no, there is nothing in the world that we can imagine, not the least thing. In everything there are so many unique details which are impossible to predict. In imagination, we pass over them in our haste, not noticing that they are lacking. But realities are slow and indescribably detailed” (Hulse 102).

²⁶ “I was preoccupied with picturing his life; I had embarked on the task of imagining him, and the effort had brought out a sweat on me. For I had to make him up as you would make up a dead man for whom no evidence and no remains exist, one who has to be constituted entirely within himself” (Hulse 134).

Filzhut, den er trug wie alle Blinden ihre Hüte tragen: ohne Bezug zu den Zeilen des Gesichts ...²⁷

Malte's imagination of his neighbor consists entirely of outward physical descriptions, such as the way that his clothing looks and the appearance of his face. In fact, Malte begins his imaginative description by comparing his neighbor to statues, which suggests that he must rely on memories of what he has already seen in the real world to even begin imagining what his neighbor might look like. Though this description is thoroughly detailed, and despite Malte's acknowledgement that "nothing about him was unimportant," it is clear that his initial imagination of his neighbor is entirely insubstantial once confronted with external reality. When Malte sees his neighbor in the park, he states:

Ich wußte sofort, daß meine Vorstellung wertlos war. Die durch keine Vorsicht oder Verstellung eingeschränkte Hingegebenheit seines Elends übertraf meine Mittel. Ich hatte weder den Neigungswinkel seiner Haltung begriffen gehabt noch das Entsetzen, mit dem die Innenseite seiner Lider ihn fortwährend zu erfüllen schien. Ich hatte nie an seinen Mund gedacht, der eingezogen war wie die Öffnung eines Ablaufs. Möglicherweise hatte er Erinnerungen; jetzt aber kam nie mehr etwas zu seiner Seele hinzu als täglich das amorphe Gefühl des Steinrands hinter ihm, an dem seine Hand sich abnutzte.²⁸

The only inwardly descriptive aspect of Malte's initial imagination is "die endgültig schmerzvolle Blindheit seines verschlossenen Ausdrucks." When confronted with the reality of his neighbor, however, Malte's understanding of his neighbor's condition deepens: "Die durch

²⁷ "I now know that it helped me a little to think of all those Christs of striated ivory, unmounted from their crosses, that lie around in every antique shop. The thought of some pietà occurred, and passed again—no doubt merely to call to my mind the particular angle at which his long face was bowed, and the desolate aftergrowth of stubble in the hollows of his cheeks, and the painful finality of the blindness in his closed-up expression, turned obliquely upwards. But there was so much besides that was very much his; for even then I grasped that nothing about him was unimportant: not the way that his jacket or coat, sitting too loosely at the back, exposed the whole of his collar... not the greenish-black cravat fastened loosely about all of these; and most especially not his hat, an old, high-crowned, stiff felt hat which he wore as all blind men wear their hats, with no regard to the lines of their faces ..." (Hulse 134).

²⁸ "I knew at once that my image of him was valueless. The absoluteness of his misery, mitigated by no wariness and no role-playing whatsoever, was beyond the power of my imagination. I had understood neither the angle at which he was bowed nor the terror with which the insides of his eyelids seemed continually to fill him. I had never given a thought to his mouth, which was drawn in like the spout of a drain. Possibly he had his memories, but now nothing found its way into his soul any more, except every day the amorphous feel of the stone coping that his hand rubbed behind him" (Hulse 135).

keine Vorsicht oder Verstellung eingeschränkte Hingegenheit seines Elends übertraf meine Mittel.” Malte’s inability to accurately describe his neighbor’s misery, here indicated by his uncertainty if it is the lack of caution *or* the lack of pretense that surpasses his means, further suggests how “indescribably detailed” the reality of his neighbor is. Malte realizes that, in addition to the inaccuracy of his imagination’s physical description of his neighbor, he had failed to understand the terror inside of him, nor had he thought of the possibility that he had memories before becoming blind. The deepening of Malte’s understanding of his neighbor upon encountering him in reality seems to further anchor poetic inspiration in external reality.

This passage also performs the associative quality of imagination, as seen in the words “Vorstellung” (mental image), “Verstellung” (pretense), and “Vorsicht” (attention), all of which are closely related in sound and appearance. The association between “Vorstellung” and “Verstellung” is the most clear, as these words differ only by one letter. The similarity of these words leads the reader to associate their meanings, which further suggests that Malte’s imagination is unable to create an accurate image of his neighbor, as his mental image (“Vorstellung”) is related to the idea of a pretense (“Verstellung”). The word “Vorsicht” brings the sense of sight and vision into the picture, as the word literally translates to “foresight.” After this word appears in the passage, it seems as if Malte’s sense of sight is heightened, as he describes his neighbor’s appearance in close detail. Additionally, Malte focuses on his neighbor’s eyes—specifically, the insides of his eyelids. “Vorsicht” also connotes the idea of looking ahead, which is part of the imaginative power of association.

Though he believes that reality provides a better basis of inspiration for poetry than imagination, Malte’s relationship to the outside world is still fraught, as explained by his recollection of an early childhood memory of drawing. This memory features Malte “engaged in

a primitive process of artistic creation” (Schoolfield 168): “Ich zeichnete langsam, ohne sehr entschiedene Absicht, und sah alles, wenn ich nicht weiter wußte, mit ein wenig nach rechts geneigtem Kopfe an; so fiel mir immer am raschesten ein, was noch fehlte.”²⁹ Here, it seems that Malte still relies on looking to the outside world for inspiration in order to discover what his drawing is missing. Once Malte drops his crayon on the floor and has to climb under the table to retrieve it, however, his relationship to the outside world changes drastically:

Ungeschickt, wie ich war, kostete es mich allerhand Veranstaltungen, hinunterzukommen; meine Beine schienen mir viel zu lang, ich konnte sie nicht unter mir hervorziehen; die zu lange ein gehaltene knieende Stellung hatte meine Glieder dumpf gemacht; ich wußte nicht, was zu mir und was zum Sessel gehörte. Endlich kam ich doch, etwas konfus, unten an und befand mich auf einem Fell, das sich unter dem Tisch bis gegen die Wand hinzog. Aber da ergab sich eine neue Schwierigkeit. Eingestellt auf die Helligkeit da oben und noch ganz begeistert für die Farben auf dem weißen Papier, vermochten meine Augen nicht das geringste unter dem Tisch zu erkennen, wo mir das Schwarze so zugeschlossen schien, daß ich bange war, daran zu stoßen. Ich verließ mich also auf mein Gefühl und kämte, knieend und auf die linke gestützt, mit der andern Hand in dem kühlen, langhaarigen Teppich herum, der sich recht vertraulich anfühlte; nur daß kein Bleistift zu spüren war ...³⁰

Malte’s discomfort gives way to the dissolution of the boundary between perceiver and perceived, as he is unsure what belongs to him and what belongs to the chair. This uncertainty then extends to his eyesight, as he is unable to see clearly in the darkness beneath the table. But as Malte spends more time in the darkness, his eyes begin to adjust:

... Ich merkte, daß für meine unwillkürlich angestregten Augen das Dunkel nach und nach durchsichtiger wurde. Ich konnte schon hinten die Wand unterscheiden, die mit

²⁹ “I drew slowly, without any very definite intention, and whenever I did not know how to go on, I would consider the whole thing with my head inclined a little to the right; that way, I always realized fastest what was still missing” (Hulse 60).

³⁰ “Awkward as I was, it was quite a business to get down; my legs seemed far too long, and I couldn’t draw them out from under me: remaining too long in a kneeling position had numbed my limbs; I could not tell what was mine and what was the chair’s. At length, rather at sixes and sevens, I did make it to the floor, and found myself on an animal fell that extended under the table to the wall. But at this point I was confronted with a fresh difficulty. My eyes, accustomed to the brightness above and still wholly entranced by the colours on the white paper, were unable to make out anything at all below the table, where the blackness seemed so dense that I was afraid of knocking against it; so I fell back on my sense of touch and, kneeling and supporting myself on my left hand, combed through the cool, long-haired, familiar-feeling fell with my other hand. But there was no sign of the crayon ... “ (Hulse 60).

einer hellen Leiste abschloß; ich orientierte mich über die Beine des Tisches; ich erkannte vor allem meine eigene, ausgespreizte Hand, die sich ganz allein, ein bißchen wie ein Wassertier, da unten bewegte und den Grund untersuchte. Ich sah ihr, weiß ich noch, fast neugierig zu; es kam mir vor, als könnte sie Dinge, die ich sie nicht gelehrt hatte, wie sie da unten so eigenmächtig heruntastete mit Bewegungen, die ich nie an ihr beobachtet hatte. Ich verfolgte sie, wie sie vordrang, es interessierte mich, ich war auf allerhand vorbereitet.³¹

Though the darkness becomes more penetrable to Malte's vision, it is clear that this darkness transmutes what he sees, as he describes his hand as if it had separated from his body, moving completely alone like an aquatic animal. It seems that his hand has a mind of its own, as it is capable of things that Malte had never taught it and moves in ways that he had never seen before. Malte observes his disembodied hand curiously, thinking that he is prepared for anything, until he is confronted with another disembodied hand coming out of the wall:

Aber wie hätte ich darauf gefaßt sein sollen, daß ihr mit einem Male aus der Wand eine andere Hand entgegenkam, eine größere, ungewöhnlich magere Hand, wie ich noch nie eine gesehen hatte. Sie suchte in ähnlicher Weise von der anderen Seite her, und die beiden gespreizten Hände bewegten sich blind aufeinander zu. Meine Neugierde war noch nicht aufgebraucht, aber plötzlich war sie zu Ende, und es war nur Grauen da. Ich fühlte, daß die eine von den Händen mir gehörte und daß sie sich da in etwas einließ, was nicht wieder gutzumachen war. Mit allem Recht, das ich auf sie hatte, hielt ich sie an und zog sie flach und langsam zurück, indem ich die andere nicht aus den Augen ließ, die weitersuchte. Ich begriff, daß sie es nicht aufgeben würde, ich kann nicht sagen, wie ich wieder hinaufkam. Ich saß ganz tief im Sessel, die Zähne schlugen mir aufeinander, und ich hatte so wenig Blut im Gesicht, daß mir schien, es wäre kein Blau mehr in meinen Augen.³²

³¹ "I realized that, as my eyes strained involuntarily, the dark was gradually growing more penetrable. Already I could distinguish the wall at the back, at the foot of which a light-coloured skirting-board ran; I took my bearings from the table legs, and in particular made out my own outspread hand, moving all alone down below, a little like some aquatic animal exploring the seabed. I still recall that I watched it almost with curiosity; as it groped about down there with a mind of its own, moving in ways I had never seen it move, it seemed able to do things I had not taught it. I observed it as it pushed onwards; I was interested, and prepared for anything" (Hulse 60-61).

³² "But how could I have expected another hand suddenly to come towards it from the wall, a larger and unusually thin hand, such as I had never seen before? It was searching in a similar fashion, from the other side, and the two outspread hands moved blindly towards each other. My curiosity was not yet satisfied, but all at once it was at an end, and all that remained in its place was horror. I sensed that one of the hands belonged to me and that it was about to enter into something that could never be righted again. Asserting all the rights I had over it, I stopped it and withdrew it, slowly and held flat, never taking my eyes off the other hand as it continued to search. I realized it would not abandon the search. I cannot say how I got up again; I sat deep

Upon seeing this “unusually lean” hand, Malte’s curiosity is replaced with horror. However, it seems that the origin of Malte’s horror arises not only out of seeing this other, unfamiliar hand, but from sensing that his own hand is about to enter into something “irreversible” that could “never be righted again.” Gathering his courage, Malte manages to pull back the hand that belongs to him while simultaneously keeping his eyes on the other hand, preventing his own hand from confronting the other hand and entering into this irreversible contract. This shadowy, disembodied hand has been interpreted by Idris Parry as “‘the hand of God which comes to [Malte] from the wall,’ and from which, unprepared, he withdraws; he finds that to fulfill his artistic mission ‘he must seek and clasp that hand, which will guide him in the pure gesture of art’” (Schoolfield 167). Regardless of whether or not it is the hand of God, the passages following the initial encounter with the other hand suggest that it can be interpreted as a symbol for the call to become an artist. Directly after this event, Malte wants to tell his governess what had happened, however, he finds himself unable to do so:

Aber wie? Ich nahm mich unbeschreiblich zusammen, aber es war nicht auszudrücken, so daß es einer begriff. Gab es Worte für dieses Ereignis, so war ich zu klein, welche zu finden. Und plötzlich ergriff mich die Angst, sie könnten doch, über mein Alter hinaus, auf einmal da sein, diese Worte, und es schien mir fürchterlicher als alles, sie dann sagen zu müssen. Das Wirkliche da unten noch einmal durchzumachen, anders, abgewandelt, von Anfang an; zu hören, wie ich es zugebe, dazu hatte ich keine Kraft mehr.³³

This passage first reveals Malte’s frustration at his inability to find the words to describe this experience. However, his frustration is replaced by fear, as the mere thought of being able to

down in the armchair, my teeth chattering and so little blood in my face that I felt there could not be any blue left in my eyes” (Hulse 61).

³³ “But how? I made an indescribable effort to pull myself together, but it could not be expressed so that someone else would understand. If there were words for what had happened, I was too small to find them. And suddenly I was gripped by the fear that they might all at once be there, those words, in spite of my age, and the most terrible thing of all seemed to me that I would then have to utter them. To have to relive that reality down there once more, with a difference, transmuted, from the very beginning; to hear myself admitting it: I did not have the strength left for that” (Hulse 61).

recount this experience terrifies him, because this would cause him to relive a version of the horrible event. The repetition of words beginning with “a” forms a sound structure in this passage, beginning with Malte’s “Angst.” This word both inspires and infiltrates the desire to find the words to describe this event, as the words Malte does find, many of which begin with “a,” continually relate back to his fear of both the event itself as well as his fear of having to relive this memory, “anders, abgewandelt” and “von Anfang an.” Here, it is clear that Malte is not ready to embark on the path to becoming an artist that the other hand has offered him, a calling he does not yet have the strength and courage to undertake.

Yet it seems that the reason why Malte is unable to embark on his journey to becoming an artist is not just because Malte is too weak, but because this calling to become an artist did not originate within himself, but outside of himself, in the image of this uncanny, disembodied hand. Returning to the beginning of the *Notebooks* provides some insight into this reasoning. After Malte realizes that he has yet to write any good verses, he thinks:

Es ist lächerlich. Ich sitze hier in meiner kleinen Stube, ich, Brigge, der achtundzwanzig Jahre alt geworden ist und von dem niemand weiß. Ich sitze hier und bin nichts. Und dennoch, dieses Nichts fängt an zu denken und denkt, fünf Treppen hoch, an einem grauen Pariser Nachmittag diesen Gedanken.³⁴

Despite thinking that he is “nothing,” Malte goes on to ask himself a litany of questions pertaining to perception, epistemology, memory, and God, such as “ist es möglich, denkt es, daß man noch nichts Wirkliches und Wichtiges gesehen, erkannt und gesagt hat?”³⁵ Malte answers

³⁴ “It is ridiculous. Here I sit in my little room, I, Brigge, twenty-eight years old now and known to no one. Here I sit, and I am nothing. And yet, this nothing begins to think, and five flights up, on a grey Paris afternoon, thinks this:” (Hulse 15).

³⁵ “Is it possible, it thinks, that we have neither seen nor perceived nor said anything real or of any importance yet?” (Hulse 15).

all of his questions to himself with the affirmative “Ja, es ist möglich.”³⁶ He then has the realization:

Wenn aber dieses alles möglich ist, auch nur einen Schein von Möglichkeit hat,—dann muß ja, um alles in der Welt, etwas geschehen. Der Nächstbeste, der, welcher diesen beunruhigenden Gedanken gehabt hat, muß anfangen, etwas von dem Versäumten zu tun; wenn es auch nur irgend einer ist, durchaus nicht der Geeignetste: es ist eben kein anderer da. Dieser junge, belanglose Ausländer, Brigge, wird sich fünf Treppen hoch hinsetzen müssen und schreiben, Tag und Nacht. Ja er wird schreiben müssen, das wird das Ende sein.³⁷

Malte understands that, even though he believes himself to be “nothing” and perhaps not even up to the task, by simply having these thoughts, he is being called to become a poet— “he will have to write.” This calling is not just a feeling, but a complete certainty, as indicated again by the repetition of the verb “muß.” Unlike the other hand, this calling arises not from an outside source, but from within, out of the process of self-questioning. This is consistent with Rilke’s view as expressed in his *Letters to a Young Poet* that the poet’s reason to write must originate from deep within themselves, free of external pressures:

Erforschen Sie den Grund, der Sie schreiben heißt; prüfen Sie, ob er in der tiefsten Stelle Ihres Herzens seine Wurzeln ausstreckt, gestehen Sie sich ein, ob Sie sterben müßten, wenn es Ihnen versagt würde zu schreiben. Dieses vor allem: fragen Sie sich in der stillsten Stunde Ihrer Nacht: muß ich schreiben? (8)³⁸

Though it is necessary for the poet to learn to see the outside world, and though the poet must have experiences in the outside world to write good poetry, their reason for becoming a poet still must originate within. Furthermore, the poet can only encounter the outside world once this

³⁶ “Yes, it is possible” (Hulse 15).

³⁷ “But if all of this is possible, if there is even so much as a glimmer of possibility to it, then something must be done, for pity’s sake. Anyone—anyone who has had these disquieting thoughts—must make a start on some of the things that we have omitted to do: anyone at all, no matter if he is not yet the aptest to the task: the fact is, there is no one else. This young foreigner of no consequence, Brigge, will have to sit himself down, five flights up, and write, day and night: yest, that is what it will come to—he will have to write” (Hulse 16-17).

³⁸ “Find out the reason that commands you to write; see whether it has spread its roots into the very depths of your heart; confess to yourself whether you would have to die if you were forbidden to write. This most of all: ask yourself in the most silent hour of your night: must I write?” (Mitchell 6).

reason, and, by extension, their inner life, has been realized and developed, otherwise their experience in the outside world will result not in inspiration, but in horror. Writing from the perspective of Malte, Rilke is able to convey both of these experiences, allowing for an understanding of the difficulties one encounters on the path to becoming an artist.

Closing Reflections

Sie sind so jung, so vor allem Anfang, und ich möchte Sie, so gut ich es kann, bitten, lieber Herr, Geduld zu haben gegen alles Ungelöste in Ihrem Herzen und zu versuchen, die Fragen selbst liebzuhaben wie verschlossene Stuben und wie Bücher, die in einer sehr fremden Sprache geschrieben sind. Forschen Sie jetzt nicht nach den Antworten, die Ihnen nicht gegeben werden können, weil Sie sie nicht leben könnten. Und es handelt sich darum, alles zu leben. Leben Sie jetzt die Fragen. Vielleicht leben Sie dann allmählich, ohne es zu merken, eines fernen Tages in die Antwort hinein.

—Rainer Maria Rilke (*Briefe an einen jungen Dichter* 23)³⁹

What is the meaning of life? That was all — a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other; herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent) — this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsay said. ‘Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!’ she repeated. She owed this revelation to her.

—Virginia Woolf (*To the Lighthouse* 175-76)

When answering the question that the title of this project posits, perhaps what Rainer Maria Rilke and Virginia Woolf would first point to is the importance of questioning itself—for that is ultimately where the artistic process begins. Both Malte and Rilke’s young poet realize their artistic calling through the process of questioning. Questioning also plays a vital role in Lily

³⁹ “You are so young, so much before all beginning, and I would like to beg you, dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don’t search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer” (Mitchell 13-14).

Briscoe's artistic process. Upon returning to the Ramsays' family cottage to finish the picture she had started ten years prior, Lily asks herself many questions, such as "what does it all mean then, what can it all mean?" (159) and "why is one sitting here after all?" (160), questions that inspire her to begin working on her painting again. These questions are as unfathomable as the ones put forth by Malte: "Ist es möglich, daß alle diese Menschen eine Vergangenheit, die nie gewesen ist, ganz genau kennen? Ist es möglich, daß alle Wirklichkeiten nichts sind für sie; daß ihr Leben abläuft, mit nichts verknüpft, wie eine Uhr in einem leeren Zimmer—?"⁴⁰

The importance lies not in answering these questions, but in living with them. As Woolf states in her diary: "... by writing I don't reach anything. All I mean to make is a note of a curious state of mind" (*A Writer's Diary* 98). By "curious," Woolf might simply mean "strange" or "unusual." However, I read "curious" in the sense of "inquisitive." This curiosity about the world is present in both authors' conception of the artist.

Perhaps this tendency towards questioning is a result of the time in which both authors lived, a time characterized by dislocation, disillusionment, and alienation. Uncertainty is an inevitable result when everything is called into question. However, for the artist, uncertainty is meant to be embraced, not feared. When faced with uncertainty, the artist trusts their intuition—be that their rhythmical sense or the feeling that they must write.

Ultimately, what makes engaging with these texts so valuable and illuminating is how their ideas on artistry resonate within their writing itself. Rilke and Woolf not only tell us how to be artists—they show us.

⁴⁰ "Is it possible that all these people have an exact knowledge of a past that never happened? Is it possible that all realities are nothing to them; that their life is winding down, connected to nothing at all, like a clock in an empty room—?" (Hulse 16).

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