

The Critical Cosmos Series

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

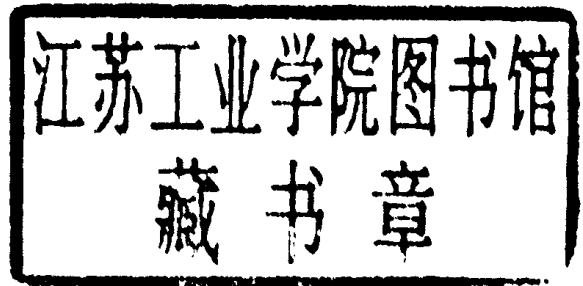
Modern German Poetry



THE CRITICAL COSMOS SERIES

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Edited and with an introduction
by *HAROLD BLOOM*
Sterling Professor of the Humanities
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Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best criticism available in English upon the principal modern German poets from Rilke to the present, thus excluding such figures as George and Hofmannsthal, who are included in the previous volume of this series. Because standard translations do not exist for some of these poets, originals remain untranslated where the critics have left them so. I am grateful to Barbara Vinken for her devoted labor as a researcher for this volume.

My introduction concerns Rilke, by common consent the major German poet of our century, and seeks to counter Paul de Man's influential deconstruction of Rilke's figurative language. De Man's essay is reprinted here, after Erich Heller's thematic study of Nietzsche's influence upon Rilke's similar revisionary stance towards prior modes of thought and feeling.

Two articles by Michael Hamburger follow, the first a general survey of the Expressionist mode in modern German poetry, the second on Gottfried Benn, Expressionist who degenerated into a racist.

Georg Trakl, who seems to me the best of modern German poets, superior even to Rilke and Hofmannsthal, is considered in two essays, the first by the philosopher Heidegger, who traces in Trakl's language a "going under" to the "yet concealed evening land." That revisionary language of descent is uncovered also by Brigitte Peucker, who celebrates Trakl's extraordinary triumph over belatedness, his transumption of Hölderlin and other precursors.

Bertolt Brecht, dramatist and Marxist revolutionary, is the subject of two commentaries by Reinhold Grimm, one studying Brecht's dialectic between politics and the aesthetic and the other his war quatrains. The prose poems of Günter Eich are analyzed by Anselm Haverkamp, who judges them to be miniature masterpieces of irony in our belated time.

Paul Celan, worthy inheritor of Trakl and a gnomic seer in the Jewish

Kabbalist tradition, is examined as an exemplar of the aphoristic, mystical mode by Joachim Schulze, while John Felstiner explores Celan's poetics by means of translation.

The equally tragic Ingeborg Bachmann is studied by James K. Lyon as a mythologist of the private life. William S. Sewell concludes this volume with an account of the image of the double in the poetry of Hans Magnus Enzensberger, widely regarded as the leading German poet of his generation.

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Introduction

I

Can there be *poetic* structures of transcendence? A brilliant but neglected study by Justus George Lawler, *Celestial Pantomime* (1979), treated structural patterns as varied as chiasm and parentheses, refrains and oscillatory imagery, and found them to be valid forms for representing transcendence. The question thus becomes: Can the most ambitious and accomplished poetry be written at all, if its structures do not somehow try to represent transcendence? If poetry is completely identical with figuration, how can it survive rhetorical self-consciousness when such rhetoricity is carried beyond all limits? Indeed, carried far enough, the poem becomes, as Lawler said, a *canon* "in the musical sense of a contrapuntal melody that derives from the dominant theme . . . a sonic chiasitic structure reflecting the duality, deception, or confusion expressed in the rhetorical statements." Can such a structure persuade us, even for a moment, to believe in a fiction, even with what Wallace Stevens called the nicer knowledge of belief, which is that what one believes in is not true?

No poet of our century, none at least of overwhelming achievement, surpasses Rainer Maria Rilke in those rhetorical gestures that dare "to affirm and to promise, as few others do, a form of existential salvation that would take place in and by means of poetry." I quote from the late Paul de Man's formidably brilliant essay on Rilke's tropes in *Allegories of Reading*, a definitive study of some of the cognitive limits of figurative language. De Man's critique (first published in French, in 1972) has haunted my own rereadings of Rilke for some fifteen years now, though I will argue against some of its procedures and conclusions here. But I would not dispute de Man's final sentences in his essay:

The promise contained in Rilke's poetry, which the commentators, in the eagerness of their belief, have described in all its severe

complexity, is thus placed, by Rilke himself, within the dissolving perspective of the lie. Rilke can only be understood if one realizes the urgency of this promise together with the equally urgent, and equally poetic, need of retracting it at the very instant he seems to be on the point of offering it to us.

One reason I would not dispute this is that it would be just as valid, and yet no more or less valid, if one substituted the name of Shelley or of Whitman or of Hart Crane, or of almost any visionary poet, for the name of Rilke. Deconstruction alas is after all a kind of double-entry bookkeeping. Draw a severe line down the center of a page in your ledger, and call that line the *aporia*, or trope of doubt. Head the left-hand column "rhetoric as trope" and the right-hand column "rhetoric as persuasion." Then enter every figuration first on the left hand, then on the right, discount both, and you will be left only with that line down the middle, which is where you began. But what has happened to those ensembles of tropes that we call poems by Rilke and by Shelley, by Whitman and by Hart Crane?

Yet Paul de Man's strictures upon Rilke are haunting, if only because Rilke must be the most pretentious of modern visionary poets in nearly all of his too-frequent affirmations. It did not wait for de Man to protest this aspect of Rilke; the young Samuel Beckett, reviewing an English translation of Rilke, annihilated the poet's spiritual self-deceptions, his mistaking of his own tropes as transcendental realities:

Such a turmoil of self-deception and naif discontent gains nothing in dignity from that prime article of the Rilkean faith, which provides for the interchangeability of Rilke and God. . . . He has the fidgets, a disorder which may very well give rise, as it did with Rilke on occasion, to poetry of a high order. But why call the fidgets God, Ego, Orpheus and the rest?

That rhetorical question is not going to be bettered. No one (except possibly de Man) would be uneasy with Rilkean affirmations if they presented themselves as the cry of the human, rather than transcendent, verities. The poetic and critical issue, I take it, is Rilkean authority. He was not a wisdom writer, offering us the sagacity of Ecclesiastes or of Dr. Johnson, nor does he have the gnomic intensity of Trakl or of Celan. He sought the prophetic stance of his heroic precursor, Hölderlin, but prophets are hard to accept in our century, and Rilke will not bear too close a comparison to Hölderlin, or to William Blake. De Man, who did not really like Rilke's poetry at all, rather astonishingly preferred Rilke's very late poems, particularly those written in French! Slight as these are, they suggested to de Man a Rilkean affinity to poets themselves more deconstructive, as it were:

These poems are by necessity brief and enigmatic, often consisting of one single sentence. One might well consider them to be Rilke's

most advanced poetic achievement. It is through them that he is related to poets such as Trakl or Celan. The figure stripped of any seduction besides that of its rhetorical elasticity can form, together with other figures, constellations of figures that are inaccessible to meaning and to the senses, located far beyond any concern for life or for death in the hollow space of an unreal sky.

I feel the force of this, but can I know what it means? Is it also "inaccessible to meaning and to the senses"? Has the critic writing this truly renounced any claim to extratextual authority? Has he, as well as Rilke, relied too much upon what he calls "the determining figure . . . of chiasmus, the crossing that reverses the attributes of words and of things"? Despite these questions, which de Man always welcomed in arguments between us, I do not know how to refute de Man's most damaging arguments against Rilke, which are concentrated in a single long paragraph:

Chiasmus, the ground-figure of the *New Poems*, can only come into being as the result of a void, of a lack that allows for the rotating motion of the polarities. As long as it is confined to objects, this structural necessity may seem harmless enough: the declining motion of a fountain or of a ball, the reflection of a mirror or the opening of a window casement have, in themselves, nothing of pathos about them. But Rilke's figuration must also involve subject/object polarities, precisely because it has to put in question the irrevocability of this particularly compelling polarity. This implies the necessity of choosing as figures not only things but personal destinies or subjective experiences as well, with the avowed purpose of converting them into impersonal over-things, but without being able (or wanting) to prevent that the subjective moment first function on the level of meaning. However, these experiences, like the figural objects, must contain a void or a lack if they are to be converted into figures. It follows that only negative experiences can be poetically useful. Hence the prevalence of a thematics of negative experiences that will proliferate in Rilke's poetry: the insatiability of desire, the powerlessness of love, death of the unfulfilled or the innocent, the fragility of the earth, the alienation of consciousness—all these themes fit Rilke's rhetoric so well, not because they are the expression of his own lived experience (whether they are or not is irrelevant) but because their structure allows for the unfolding of his patterns of figuration. And just as the kinetic totalization had to encompass rising and falling motions into one single trope, or just as the reflective totalization must include both sides of the mirror, so the totalization of subjective experience must lead to a positive assertion that only chiasmus can reveal. The reversal of a negativity into a promise, the ambivalent thematic strategy of the *Duino Elegies*, allows for a linguistic

play that is analogous to that in the most discreet of the *New Poems*. They call, however, for a very different tone, whose pathos, fervor, and exaltation make one forget the formal and fictional nature of the unity they celebrate. It is inevitable that the *Elegies* are being read as messianic poems: all their thematic assertions confirm this claim, and it is borne out by the virtuosity of the figuration. Yet the promise asserted by these texts is grounded in a play of language that can only come about because the poet has renounced any claim to extra-textual authority. In conformity with a paradox that is inherent in all literature, the poetry gains a maximum of convincing power at the very moment that it abdicates any claim to truth. The *Elegies* and the *Sonnets* have been the main source of evidence in trying to prove the adequation of Rilke's rhetoric to the truth of his affirmations, yet his notion of figural language eliminates all truth-claims from his discourse.

Is it true that chiasmus is not possible without a void, a lack? I would prefer as more descriptive the observation of Justus Lawler, who finds "man's confusion" at the center of the whirl of antinomies, at the intersection of male and female, finite and infinite, experience and innocence restored. A human confusion is not a void or a lack, but a plethora that cannot be mastered. Chiasm meant completion to some of the ancients, but was primarily a figure of elaboration in the Renaissance. Sonic chiasm, in which Rilke abounds, is most extraordinary in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where Lawler studies it, following hints from Kenneth Burke. Milton's Satan scarcely can orate without chiasm, because duplicity is his mode and confusion his necessary condition. Divisiveness, rather than lack or void, is what attends and stimulates chiasmus into being, and Rilke is the great modern poet of divisiveness within one's being, and so the Milton of our century.

II

A more amiable (though no less rigorous) view of Rilke than de Man's would show us a poet who has the audacity to represent his own confusions, between finite and infinite, as the chiasms that are his maturest poems. This is to say that the prose-Rilke, as it were, was willing to call them confusions, but the poet-Rilke was found by the chiasms that enshrine confusions memorably, even inevitably. Consider the First Elegy of *Duino Elegies*. In a series of interpretive letters, Rilke sonorously and pretentiously magnifies his human confusions so that a critic can begin to wonder if the poet ever knew what he thought he was writing about. We receive a celebrated series of noble idealizations:

Affirmation of *life-AND-death* turns out to be one in the *Elegies*.
 . . . Everywhere transience is plunging into the depths of Being.
 . . . We wildly collect the honey of the visible, to store it in the

great golden hive of the invisible. . . . To show the *identity* of dreadfulness and bliss. . . . Death is the *side of life* that is turned away from us and not illuminated. . . .

And so on. If the First Elegy had only the rhetorical authority of these fidgets, then Beckett would be totally vindicated, and de Man's skepticism would be sustained. Fortunately Rilke's poetry is very different from his interpretive prose:

Freilich ist es seltsam, die Erde nicht mehr zu bewohnen,
kaum erlernte Gebräuche nicht mehr zu üben,
Rosen, und andern eigens versprechenden Dingen
nicht die Bedeutung menschlicher Zukunft zu geben;
das, was man war in unendlich ängstlichen Händen,
nicht mehr zu sein, und selbst den eigenen Namen
wegzulassen wie ein zerbrochenes Spielzeug.
Seltsam, die Wünsche nicht weiterzuwünschen. Seltsam,
alles, was sich bezog, so lose im Raume
flattern zu sehen. Und das Totsein ist mühsam
und voller Nachholen, daß man allmählich ein wenig
Ewigkeit spürt.—Aber Lebendige machen
alle den Fehler, daß sie zu stark unterscheiden.
Engel (sagt man) wüßten oft nicht, ob sie unter
Lebenden gehn oder Toten. Die ewige Strömung
reißt durch beide Bereiche alle Alter
immer mit sich und übertönt sie in beiden.

(Of course, it is strange to inhabit the earth no longer,
to give up customs one barely had time to learn,
not to see roses and other promising Things
in terms of a human future; no longer to be
what one was in infinitely anxious hands; to leave
even one's own first name behind, forgetting it
as easily as a child abandons a broken toy.
Strange to no longer desire one's desires. Strange
to see meanings that clung together once, floating away
in every direction. And being dead is hard work
and full of retrieval before one can gradually feel
a trace of eternity.—Though the living are wrong to believe
in the too-sharp distinctions which they themselves have
created.

Angels [they say] don't know whether it is the living
they are moving among, or the dead. The eternal torrent
whirls all ages along in it, through both realms
forever, and their voices are drowned out in its thunderous
roar.)

(translated by Stephen Mitchell)

The crucial word is *seltsam*, "strange," a remarkable litotes or understatement, here a trope of the Sublime. Angels become the agents of chiasmus here, moving through the intersections of confusion, between the living and the dead. Our human confusion becomes the angelic element in us, by an irony that is mordantly persuasive. The central trope is the most memorable here: "*Und das Totsein ist mühsam* (And being dead is hard work)." That is rather in the spirit of Maud Gonne's sister, who remarked to the poet of "Adam's Curse" that "it's hard work being beautiful, Mr. Yeats."

Is this an instance of what Paul de Man called "the reversal of a negativity into a promise, the ambivalent thematic strategy of the *Duino Elegies*"? I hardly hear promise or affirmation in Rilke's sublimely wry passage, which seems to be wholly characteristic of the *Elegies*. Rilke's interpretive prose promises and affirms incessantly, and his exegetes promise and affirm after him. But the *Elegies* are beautifully evasive, rather resembling the Wallace Stevens of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" and "The Rock," another modern poet who writes of death through the perpetual trope of chiasmus. The Angel of the *Duino Elegies* is very different from the Angel of Stevens's *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, but both are tropological messengers of evasion, of the gestures that make Sublime poems, rather than the promises and affirmations that cannot sustain a rigorous deconstructive analysis.

Rilke and Nietzsche: Orpheus, Dionysus and the Revision of Thought and Feeling

Erich Heller

Rilke may be to Nietzsche what Orpheus is to Dionysus; and Rilke's Orpheus and Nietzsche's Dionysus are brother deities, by virtue of that peculiar adjustment to more modern attitudes of the soul which was forced upon Greek mythology by the spiritual need and hunger of modernity. But before we establish this equation, we shall have to attend to what else they have in common.

They are both initiates in the alchemy of loneliness and suffering. Rilke as well as Nietzsche discovers the fountainhead of joy in the very heart of the land of sorrow. Happiness for them is not, as it was for Schopenhauer, in the absence of pain; it is the fruit of so radical an acceptance of suffering that abundant delight springs from its very affirmation. For the denial of pain means the denial of existence. Existence is pain, and joy lies not in non-existence, as Schopenhauer would have it, but in its tragic transfiguration. This is the theme of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* as well as of *Zarathustra* and of *The Will to Power*, where it is treated with ever growing assurance by a man, it is well to remember, who wrote to a friend: "The terrible and all but incessant torture of my life makes me thirst for the end. . . . As far as agony and renunciation are concerned, my life during these last years is a match for that of any ascetic at any time. . . . Yet no pain has been able or shall be able to tempt me into giving false testimony about life as I recognize it." And this recognition is praise. From the darkest night of the soul rises Zarathustra's "Trunkenes Lied," his Dionysian song of the deep suffering of the world, which is yet surpassed in depth by that rapture of delight which wills, not that the world with its pain should pass away, but that it should last for ever:

From *The Disinherited Mind*. © 1959 by Meridian Books.

doch alle Lust will Ewigkeit—,
—will tiefe, tiefe Ewigkeit!—

an eternity not of joy (as Nietzsche is so often misunderstood to mean) but of the world *with* all its sorrow, transfigured in the act of willing it.

If we bear in mind what has been said about the difference in tone and gesture between Rilke and Nietzsche, there remains hardly a single element in Nietzsche's acceptance and transformation of suffering that could not also be found in Rilke. Indeed, the parallels appear to be exact. As early as his *Tuscan Diary* he writes: "To think that I myself was once among those who suspect life and distrust its power. Now I would love it at all events. . . . Whatever of it is mine . . . I would love with tenderness, and would bring to ripeness within myself all possibilities that its possession offers to me." And much later, in the Tenth Elegy, we encounter what is an elegiac version of the theme of *The Birth of Tragedy*: Rilke's *Klage*, the embodiment of Lamentation, guiding the dead youth through the country of her ancestors with its mines of sorrow, until they reach the terminus where *Klage* and youth must part, that gorge

wo es schimmert im Mondschein:
die Quelle der Freude. In Ehrfurcht
nennt sie, sagt: "Bei den Menschen
ist sie ein tragender Strom."

(where it gleams in the moonlight:
the source of Joy. With awe
she names it, says "Among men
it is a carrying stream.")

And not even an intonation alien to Nietzsche's, but *merely* the presence of the Angels seems (and *merely seems*) to render the beginning of Rilke's Tenth Elegy unsuitable as an epitaph for Nietzsche:

Dass ich dereinst, an dem Ausgang der grimmigen Einsicht,
Jubel und Ruhm aufsinge zustimmenden Engeln.
Dass von den klargeschlagenen Hämmern des Herzens,
keiner versage an weichen, zweifelnden oder
reissenden Saiten.

(Some day, emerging at last from the vision of terror,
may I burst into jubilant praise to assenting Angels.
May no one of the clear-struck keys of the heart
fail to respond through alighting on slack or doubtful
or rending strings!)

Nietzsche, who for so long believed that he was a musician as well as a philosopher, once composed a "Hymn to Life," the text of which is—

strangest of biographical coincidences—by Lou Salomé. In *Ecce Homo* he says that he chose it because its last lines possess greatness; their meaning is that suffering is no argument against life: "Hast du kein Glück mehr übrig mir zu geben, wohlan! noch hast du deine Pein. . . ." It is a bad poem. The future lover of the poetess would have done better. If Nietzsche discovered some greatness in those verses, persuaded no doubt by the theme of praise, the great persuasion of the *Sonnets to Orpheus* would have overwhelmed him.

For instance, the sonnet "Singe die Gärten, mein Herz, die du nicht kennst." It almost sounds like Lou's "Hymn to Life" set to music by Rilke (though perhaps in this sonnet the music is actually not very much better than Nietzsche's):

Meide den Irrtum, dass es Entbehrungen gebe
für den geschehnen Entschluss, diesen: zu sein!
Seidener Faden, kamst du hinein ins Gewebe.

Welchem der Bilder du auch im Innern geeint bist
(sei es selbst ein Moment aus dem Leben der Pein),
fühl, dass der ganze, der rühmliche Teppich gemeint ist.

(Do not believe you will be deprived
of something by your resolution: to *be*.
Silken thread, you have entered the weaving.

With whatever pattern you are inwardly blended
[and be it a scene from the story of Agony],
feel that the whole, the praiseworthy carpet is meant.)

And the sonnet which begins with the beautiful lines:

Nur im Raum der Rührung darf die Klage
gehn, die Nymphe des geweinten Quells

(Only in the realm of Praise may Lamentation move,
naiad of the wept fountain)

is indeed Rilke's "Trunkenes Lied," the lyrical echo of Zarathustra's Dionysian song. For in this song too sorrow transcends itself in the *knowing* certainty of jubilation, raising to the skies a constellation of immaculate joy:

Jubel weiss, und Sehnsucht ist geständig,—
nur die Klage lernt noch; mädchenhändig
zählt sie nächtelang das alte Schlimme.

Aber plötzlich, schräg und ungeübt,
hält sie doch ein Sternbild unsrer Stimme
in den Himmel, den ihr Hauch nicht trübt.

(1.8)

(Triumph knows, and Longing makes confession,—
Lamentation learns: in nightly session
counts, with maiden-hands, old tribulation.

Then, however inexpertly limned,
lifts our voices in a constellation
to the sky her breathing has not dimmed.)

Delighted as Nietzsche would have been by these sonnets, would he necessarily have recognized Orpheus as their divine inspiration? He himself was preoccupied with gods of fuller status: with Dionysus and Apollo. His early *Birth of Tragedy* interpreted the Attic drama as the outcome of an age-old struggle which these two gods waged within the Greek soul. In tragedy, at last, the two hostile gods came together and concluded peace: Dionysus, the god of chaotic ecstasy, rapturously abandoning all claims to form and shape, all individuality, to the amorphous oneness of life; and Apollo, the god with the lyre at whose call all things were arrested within their own contours and their own articulate order. Would Europe, after the end of the "tragic" period of Greece, ever again know such reconciliation, and achieve so profound a harmony between the deepest and most conflicting impulses of the human soul? Shall we ever create an order which is not, as all our orders are, at the expense of the fullness of life, but its richest unfolding; a pattern which is not imposed upon chaos, but overreaching and surpassing it, its beauty still tremulous with the ancient terror? Or is the ancient god of ecstasy doomed to an ignominious existence in the murky corners of sin and depravity, and the god of order to be imprisoned in the petrified structure of classicism and morality? Or *shall* Dionysus and Apollo be united again, as they were in Attic tragedy?

Such were the youthfully enthusiastic questions which Nietzsche asked in his *Birth of Tragedy*. At the time his equally enthusiastic answer was: the old gods have risen again; they live in the work of Richard Wagner. It was to prove an agonizingly provisional answer. Perhaps Rilke's Orpheus would have made good the promise that Wagner's Parsifal broke.

The attempt of scholars to unravel the complex of historical reminiscences, images, insights, feelings that make up the story of Dionysus, Apollo and Orpheus in modern German literature and thought, and then to relate it to what may be the Greek reality of these divine creatures, is as heroic as it is doomed to failure. For a scholar's guarded steps cannot possibly keep pace with the rush and dance of the passions of the mind swirling around those names and arrested only for brief moments in innumerable figurations. Nietzsche, from *The Birth of Tragedy* onwards, is seeking spiritual employment in the service of a god who is a synthesis of Dionysus and Apollo. In this composite Nietzschean deity, Apollo, it is true, more and more loses his name to the other god, but by no means the power of his artistic creativeness, for ever articulating the Dionysian chaos in distinct shapes, sounds and images, which are Dionysian only because they are still aglow with the heat of the primeval fire. At the end of his