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RAINER MARIA RILKE

THE NOTEBOOK OF MALTE LAURIDS BRIGGE

INTRODUCED BY STEPHEN SPENDER

OXFORD

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INTRODUCTION

BY STEPHEN SPENDER

MALTE LAURIDS BRIGGE—Rainer Maria Rilke—the names have the affinity of assonance, and, considered as autobiography, this strange novel written in the form of a journal half-rhymes with Rilke's life. It consists of the recollections, observations, self-revelations of a young Dane of aristocratic forebears and with a poetic vocation, living in Paris at the beginning of the present century. The very sparsity of information which Brigge provides about himself inclines the reader to identify him with the author, as though so little were stated because it is taken for granted that the reader will have some idea who the poet is when he reads the following passage, for example:

I think that I ought to begin to do some work now that I am beginning to see. I am twenty-eight years old and almost nothing has happened. Let us recall what I have done. I have written a study on Carpaccio which is bad, a drama entitled 'Marriage,' which sets out to demonstrate a false thesis by dubious means, and some verses. Ah! but verses amount to so little when one begins to write them young. One ought to wait and gather sense and sweetness a whole life long, and a long life if possible, and then, quite at the end, one might perhaps be able to write ten good lines.

There follows the famous passage in which Brigge

lists those memories of childhood, nights of love, sitting beside deathbeds, going on immense journeys, 'memories which have turned to blood within us' which a poet must have, in order that at the end of his life it may happen that 'in a most rare hour' the first word of a poem should occur to him.

In passages such as this, Brigge is surely the mouthpiece of Rilke. This does not mean, however, that Rilke and Brigge are identical. Brigge's character seems, rather, a kind of penumbra cast by Rilke; a halo of darkness emitting some light surrounding his persona. No physical description is provided of Brigge. Nor are we given any picture of the room in which he lives, nor the cafés he goes to, nor where he eats.

Brigge's feelings in Paris are divided between terror for the scenes of misery he witnesses in the hospital quarter where he lodges—streets near hospitals in which death is an anonymous process carrying away corpses, as on a conveyor belt—and luminous hauntings of a childhood in Denmark, where, in the great manor-house at Ulsgaard, his grandfather Chamberlain Detter Brigge took two months fulfilling the ripeness of his very individual death, before an audience consisting of the whole household, including the dogs. Into this imagined childhood, where his paternal grandfather is a courtier and his maternal grandfather Count Brahe, Rilke projects an aristocratic ancestry for Brigge which was certainly lacking in his own German-speaking family in Prague. His father, after a failed career in the army, was a railway official and his mother daughter of rich bourgeois parents.

Malte Laurid Brigge's childhood dramatizes the dream of the poet as princely changeling with a mysterious vocation of which he is aware. Yet the fantasy is shot through with gleams of reality. The portrait of Brigge's mother, in its very bizarreness, is as striking as some scene out of Tolstoy's *Childhood, Boyhood and Youth*. Malte's mother, as Rilke's did, dressed the boy up as a small girl when he was a child in order that he might fill the place of the daughter who died before he was born.

We remembered that there was a time when Mother wished that I had been a little girl, and not the boy there was no use denying that I was. I had somehow guessed this, and I had hit upon the notion of knocking sometimes in the afternoon at Mother's door. Then when she asked who was there, I took delight in answering from outside: 'Sophie,' making my small voice so elegant that it tickled my throat.

When Rilke went to Paris he had already written several small volumes, including *The Book of Hours* and the *Book of Images*. He had travelled in Italy and Russia. The Russian journeys, made together with Lou Andreas-Salomé, had an influence on him which lasted all his life. He had also been for some months at the artists' colony at Worpswede, near Bremen, and had there met the sculptress Clara Westhoff, who had studied in Paris under Rodin, and the painter Paula Becker, for whom, after her death, he was to write a Requiem lamenting the marriage which prevented her total dedication to her art. In the spring of 1901 he had married Clara Westhoff, and their

daughter was born in December of that year. He had already started writing notes about Rodin, whose secretary he was later to become in Paris.

Rilke's reason for going to Paris was, he said, because Clara and he could not afford to live in Worpswede. But this part-separation fits in with Rilke's view of marriage—particularly the marriage of two artists: that it should be a relationship in which husband and wife each guarded the other's separateness. Malte pays, in his Notebook, ambiguous compliments to women who fulfil their love for men by attaining pinnacles of solitude in separation from them. There are indications of this in Brigge's relations with the rather shadowy figure of Abelone, an early love. Malte, like Rilke, compiles lists of women, such as Goethe's Bettina von Arnim, Héloise, and 'the Portuguese nun', of whom it may be said: 'And the nameless suffering of her love has always been this; that she is asked to limit her giving.'

The horror which Brigge feels for Paris is that which Rilke felt when he first lived there. Soon after his arrival, he wrote to Clara:

I am disturbed by the many hospitals that I come upon everywhere. I understand why they continually recur in Verlaine, Baudelaire and Mallarmé. One sees the sick going there on foot or by conveyance in all the streets . . . One feels, suddenly, that in this vast town there are armies of the sick, hosts of the dying, nations of the dead.

And to Paula Becker's husband, Otto Mondersohn:

Paris, to my anxious feelings, has something unspeakably

terrifying. It has entirely lost itself. It hurtles along towards a frightful crash like a star that has lost its way.

Most revealingly of all, he writes to Lou Andreas-Salomé that Paris reminds him of his experiences as a boy when, at the age of nine, he was sent to the Military Academy in Prague: bringing to an abrupt end his childhood when, as the only surviving child, he had, as we have seen, been mollycoddled.

Just as then, a great frightening amazement took hold of me, so now again I was seized with horror at everything which, in unspeakable confusion, is called life. At that time, when I was a boy among boys, I was alone among them: and how alone I was among these people, how constantly denied by all who met me: the carriages went right through me, and those that were in a hurry made no detour round me but ran over me contemptuously as over a loathsome pot-hole in which foul water had collected.

This, from Rilke to Lou Andreas-Salomé, might well have been a passage from the *Notebook* connecting Brigge's adolescence with his experiences in Paris. It does, indeed, provide a kind of missing link in the narrative, which leaves a gap between Brigge's childhood and his life when he was twenty-eight.

An alternative title to *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge* might perhaps be *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Neurotic* (or, perhaps to update it still further, *as a Young Existentialist*). Brigge diagnoses the nature of his own malady as 'taking on the characteristics of the person it attacks'; and Rilke had, in Paris,

taken on the characteristics of Brigge—but of course being able to analyse the illess, he remains Rilke. He stands outside the situation of Brigge.

The essential feature of this situation is that it confronts Brigge with a terrible external reality which at once seizes on and occupies his imagination and in doing so, at the same time, leaves him powerless to write poetry. Since Brigge is seen purely as epitomizing his own illness, it is not at all clear whether at the end of the novel he recovers from it. Perhaps the only way in which he might convincingly have been made to do so would be if, in the concluding pages, Brigge as it were woke up to discover that he was Rilke. As things are, however, he ends by seeing himself as the prodigal son, 'terribly difficult to love', and feeling that 'One alone was capable of loving him. But he was not yet willing.' A wry interpretation of this might be that instead of providing his fiction with a conclusion, Rilke, looking down on this fictitious *alter ego*, to all intents and purposes, says: 'Pass.' Then, many years later in the *Duino Elegies*, he takes up this hand again and plays it sublimely.

Brigge is confronted by experiences in the face of which he feels himself to be nothing, non-existent. For he has no sense of his identity except as writer of his as yet unwritten poetry. The list of experiences provided at the beginning of the book, which he must undergo in order that at the end of his life 'the first word of a poem' may come into his head, does not include any of those which he actually has in Paris. And those he does have, though they entirely take over the life of his

imagination, cannot be assimilated so that he can transform them into poetry.

The people he sees in the neighbourhood of the hospitals threaten his existence as a poet. He writes:

> Here I sit in my little room, I, Brigge, who have grown to be eight and twenty years old and of whom noone knows. I sit here and am nothing.

By being nothing, Brigge does not mean—as other young writers in his predicament often have done—that he has not as yet achieved public fame. He makes it clear that fame is the last thing he wants. He means that he has no sense of his existence. The reality of the Paris of hospitals destroys in him the potentiality of poetry. It is this which, in some quite literal sense, makes him nothing. He lives in a state of terror because this scene of hospitals is an external world which he can only experience as the force destructive to his inner world. All he has, apart from this immediate and present reality of Paris, is fantasies about his childhood. But these do not connect with his experience of Paris. His is that existential and poetic despair which is at the core of *The Waste Land*:

> I can connect
> nothing with nothing.

The case of Brigge is an extreme version of the situation of other poets at the turn of the century; especially of those brought up in a Romantic tradition, when they were confronted by the ugliness and inhumanity of the modern city in the industrial era. It is the dilemma of the great poet with great ambitions

who seeks to realize the whole of life, as he knows it, in his poetry. For him to do so, it is essential that when he has that experience of reality external to him he should have within himself strength of imagination and intellect which can contain the seemingly anti-poetic reality. Brigge's case is that his ability to transform the world outside him into poetry is limited to the subjective experience of himself as poet up to the present stage of his development: his memories of childhood, his sense of a vocation which has singled him out to be a poet and nothing but a poet. He makes it clear that although he reads a good deal he is not one of those who can organize and discipline his reading so that it can meet the world outside him. He only consoles himself with the thought that poets like Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Verlaine were appalled by the hospitals of Paris.

Brigge's remarks about Baudelaire define pretty well his limitations (they may have been Rilke's also at this time). He cites a poem by Baudelaire which, according to Rilke, Rodin knew by heart:

> Do you recollect Baudelaire's incredible poem *Une Charogne*? Perhaps I understand it now. Except for the last verse he was within his rights. What else could he have done after such an experience? It was his business to see in those terrible things, repulsive in appearance only, that being which alone is of value in all that exists. There is no choice or refusal. This, it seems to me, is the test: whether a man can bring himself to lie beside a leper and warm him with the glow of a lover's heart. From such a deed only good could result.

Baudelaire in that wonderful and terrible poem describes—it will be recalled—his beloved and himself walking beside a footpath on a beautiful day and seeing the carcass of a fly-blown animal, its stomach exposed and its legs sticking up in the air, lying on a bed of pebbles. With a kind of impassioned irony the poet, addressing his mistress, reflects that her adored body after she is dead and buried in the earth will resemble this corpse, devoured by vermin. He tells her to tell her devourer that the poet has retained the form and the divine essence of his decomposed love:

> Alors, o ma beauté! dites à la vermine
> Qui vous mangera de baisers,
> Que j'ai gardé la forme et l'essence divine
> De mes amours décomposés!

Brigge distorts Baudelaire's cruelly and ironically expressed idea of the preservation of the spirit and form of the beloved within the poetry into his own interpretation of the poet as lying down beside the leper. This is to change the objective action of the poetry in Baudelaire for the subjective identification of the poet with a man making love to a leper in Brigge. The most successful passages in the Notebook may indeed be those in which Brigge's—or Rilke's—procedure is most Baudelairean—that is to say, detached, descriptive, and objective—classical almost: for example in the description that begins on p. 43 with the question 'Will anyone believe that such houses exist?' or again twenty pages later in the account of a man who has, apparently, some form of St Vitus's dance—'a tall,

emaciated man in a dark overcoat and with a soft black hat on his short, faded, blonde hair'. Here Brigge seems to enter into the objective reality of the man, his whole body propelled as it were by his terrible tic, and to attain something like a malign joy in watching him. The passage ends however, more characteristically, in bringing Brigge back to the sense of his own nothingness in the face of such horrible reality; 'What sense would there have been in my going any further? I was empty. Like a blank sheet of paper I drifted along past the houses up the boulevard again' (an unBaudelairean thought).

Brigge always returns to his own subjectivity. When he is confronted by the external world in its most modern form of sickness, decay, anonymous dying, he finds in it only that which threatens his inner poetic world. At the same time, he is forever trying to transform it into terms of his own subjective inner world, and then transform it once more into a poetic object, a poem. There is something heroic about the attempt. In his study of Rilke, Rudo Mason writes that what Rilke envisaged for poetry was 'the transformation of everything external into inwardness'. But there was also 'another no less important but contrary process in which inwardness "through art" externalized, once more, turned into "things" '.

So Brigge's inner being is a kind of felt nothingness—the result of his being confronted by the reality which, in Paris, he sees as purely destructive of his inner world. At the same time, he feels—or at any rate the reader feels he feels—that somewhere in the very

depths of his being, this totally alien outer world will become transformed into his inner world and then undergo a further transformation into something objective—a poem. For at the end of the tunnel of subjectivity there is the light of objectivity—'that being which alone is of value in all that exists'—which connects with the external reality.

But alone as Brigge seems, in his Notebook, he is not unique. His reaction is not dissimilar to that of other poets at a historic moment of crisis for poetry. Rimbaud, who seems so very different in many ways from Rilke, expressed a parallel idea when he compared the poet with the piece of wood which discovers itself to be a violin. Like Rilke among the maimed outpatients and lunatics in Paris streets, he discovers it by study of 'the systematic derangement of the senses'. At the extremest point of his self-induced subjective receptiveness and suffering, there is a voice which no longer says 'I' and which is listened to with amazement by the person who says it, like a wounded soldier who suddenly realizes that the voice which he hears screaming in agony is his own: '"je" est un "autre"' and 'On me pense.'

Brigge's idea of the poet as someone who, out of extremes of his own existence, has to accomplish an objective task corresponds to Rimbaud's idea of the poet as '*Voyant*'—Visionary. Brigge puts forward in his Notebook a series of rhetorical questions, all of which require to be answered in the affirmative:

Is it possible that despite our discoveries and progress, despite our culture, religion and world-wisdom, we still

remain on the surface of life? Is it possible that we have even covered this surface which might still have been something, with an incredibly uninteresting stuff which makes it look like drawing-room furniture during summer holidays?

Yes, it is possible.

The questionnaire concludes with Brigge observing that the 'first Comer, he who has these disturbing thoughts, must begin to do some of the neglected things'. The first comer is the new Poet, Rimbaud's Visionary.

So Brigge in his Paris room early in the present century is not quite such a lonely figure as he may first appear to be. Other artists were having similar ideas: hoping, and believing even, that their art, by influencing the ways in which people saw the surrounding world, might transform it. Moreover Brigge was not alone in finding subject-matter for transformatory art in the poor and oppressed, the insane and maimed and addicted. This was the time when Picasso was painting his Blue Period pictures of beggars, absinthe drinkers, cripples, young girls and boys with starved features, circus performers. Poverty provided a bond between these subjects and the artists who were at that time also poor. Neither artists nor outcasts from society were bourgeois. The sense of community with these people, even of inferiority towards them, is shown in another passage of the Notebook:

No it is not that I want to distinguish myself from them. But I should think too much of myself if I sought to be like them. I am not. I possess neither their strength nor their capability. I take nourishment, and from meal to meal I exist, and there

is no secret about it whatever; while they subsist almost like eternal beings. They stand in their corners every day, even in November, and winter does not make them cry out. The fog comes and makes them indistinct and uncertain; they exist notwithstanding. I went travelling, I fell ill, many things happened to me; but they did not die.

There is the appearance of humility about this. Yet it does not altogether disguise the fact that what Brigge is really saying is that 'they' do not exist as individuals in the way that he is an individual. They are 'eternal beings'—true—but this is because they are not quite real. They are, as it were, masks put on by an anonymous suffering, a kind of puppet theatre of misery. There follows an anguished passage in which he turns from his aestheticism to his religion (which is, after all, perhaps here a form of his aestheticism, with God as supreme showman), when he asks 'Dost thou perhaps intend, O God, that I should leave everything and love them? . . . Why do I imagine how I would, with infinite precaution, hold them by my breath, those dolls with whom life has played, making them stretch out their arms for nothing, and again for nothing, until their shoulder-joints are loose? . . . Sometimes I follow one of them the length of two streets. They walk along past the houses: people always come who screen them from view: they vanish away behind them into nothing.'

Certain critics have noticed a parallel between Rilke's empathy, as shown in Brigge's feelings about the hospital patients, and Keats's theory of 'negative capability'. This is expressed most explicitly perhaps in

a letter Keats wrote to Richard Woodhouse (18 October 1818): 'The poetical character is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing—It has no character.' In this way it enters into the nature of things and people outside itself. This is not inconsistent with the view that the young poet's identity might be destroyed through his very empathy with what is outside himself. Keats feared being too much in the company of his brother Tom, when Tom was dying, because his brother's character so pressed upon his own identity.

Rilke at one time thought of becoming a country doctor. Whether the idea was serious or not, it again shows an affinity with Keats, who was a medical student at Guy's Hospital and who, a hundred years earlier than Rilke, experienced the sight of patients in extreme conditions.

In his last ambitious poem (marred by the illness from which he was dying when writing it), *The Fall of Hyperion*, Keats felt that in the face of human suffering, poetry was only saved from the vanity and triviality which he found in the characters of poets, like Byron and Shelley, who were his contemporaries, if the poet had an imagination which rose to heights corresponding to that suffering. Keats attacks those poets who are mere dreamers, and he is harshly conscious of his own weaknesses. The stern prophetess, Moneta, whom the poet meets in his vision, declares:

> The poet and the dreamer are distinct,
> Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes.