“A Fragment from Another Context”: Modernist Classicism and the Urban Uncanny in Rainer Maria Rilke

IN HIS GROUNDBREAKING ESSAY “Paris/Childhood: The Fragmented Body in Rilke’s The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge,” Andreas Huyssen asks a surprising question about Rilke’s classic novel. Is it possible, wonders Huyssen, to consider Malte Laurids Brigge—with his hallucinations, delusions, and fractured subjectivity—as “a paradigmatic case of male subjectivity within modernity”? (135). For Huyssen, Malte’s paradigmatic status derives not only from his fragmented selfhood but also from its genesis in both the traumas of childhood and the modern city. In what follows I want to return to the nexus of Paris/childhood and give a somewhat different account of Malte’s constitution as a modern subject. While Huyssen is interested in a post-Freudian notion of subjective fragmentation and its relation to Walter Benjamin’s conception of urban shock, my focus is on the role of the uncanny (in both its pre-psychoanalytic and Freudian forms) in Malte’s disintegrating selfhood. Romantic writers insisted on the uncanny nature of the emerging industrial city; Freud removed the unheimlich from the public sphere and resituated it in the inner space of the psyche. Rilke’s novel, I argue, demonstrates the crucial dialogical interaction of both these modalities of the uncanny in the formation of modern forms of selfhood. But if this uncanny, splintered self marks Malte as paradigmatically modern, he is typical as well in his flight from fragmentation into fantasies of a prior wholeness. While in Malte Laurids Brigge this takes the form of an escape to a phantasmatic medieval and biblical past, more typical of modernity is a nostalgic return to an idealized classicism. The nature of the classical past and its relation to modernity are sites of intense controversy in the Rilkean corpus. If at certain moments Rilke also seems to long for a lost antique wholeness, at others he provides a radical rereading of the antique as fragmentation and lack, and posits this uncanny classicism as the...
ideal form for a Baudelairean modernity defined by “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent” (Baudelaire 12).

I.

When he arrived in Paris in late August, 1902, Rainer Maria Rilke was full of hope and expectation. Commissioned to write a study of the sculptor Auguste Rodin, Rilke was excited by the prospect of spending time with the great artist and establishing himself in a place that would provide the atmosphere he required for his own artistic labors. However, even though he quickly established an ideal rhythm for himself—“Thinking, rest, solitude, everything I longed for” (Rilke, qtd. in Prater 88)—he also found his hope and optimism turning into feelings of dread and affliction. The city seemed to him like a vast sepulcher filled with the dead and the dying. It was “infinitely strange and hostile,” a lost city “rushing like a star out of orbit towards some fearful collapse,” and a year later he was teetering on the verge of a complete psychic breakdown (92). Turning to the writer Lou Andreas Salomé, his friend and former lover, he revealed his state of mind in a stream of confessional letters. He describes “interminable nights of fever and great anxiety” and days full of vague and mysterious physical symptoms that he was only able to resist by a tremendous exertion of the will. “But then,” he writes, “came something so full of dread. . . came and came again, never really leaving me since . . . and took hold of my heart and held it over the void. . . . Everything changes, falls away from my senses, and I feel myself cast out of this world . . . into another, uncertain environment full of nameless fear. . . . I felt as though I would not recognize anyone coming in and as though I too was strange to everyone, like one dying in a foreign land, alone, superfluous, a fragment from another context” (qtd. in Prater 98).

Even though she was intensely interested in Freudian theory, Salomé decided that traditional psychoanalysis was not the solution for Rilke. In her view the act of writing was Rilke’s only salvation, and she later noted that “poetry for him was self-transfiguration” (Prater 99, 127). Rilke’s own comments reflected and underscored this position. While maintaining a life-long interest in Freud, he steadfastly refused to be analyzed, claiming that his work was “nothing but a self-treatment of the same sort” as analysis (Kleinbard 9). Thus, in The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge Rilke gives us a fictionalized account of his Parisian breakdown and seems to be working through his psychic collapse. While it would be ludicrous to insist on a complete identification of narrator and author, the fact that Malte shares both Rilke’s Paris address and his age, as well as quotes passages from Rilke’s letters and diaries verbatim, should be enough to establish the strongly autobiographical nature of the character and the novel (Prater 173; Huyssen 115). Yet, despite these suggestive associations and the comments from Salomé and the poet himself, Rilke scholarship has traditionally been hesitant to explore the connection between Rilke’s writing and psychoanalytic issues. Huyssen has observed that “the insights of psychoanalysis have by and large been shunned by Rilke scholars as irrelevant,” and David Kleinbard has added that “a number of recent commentators on Rilke’s work continue to divorce the poetry from the poet’s life, as if any...
attempt to read the *Duino Elegies*, *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, and other great poems by Rilke with understanding enhanced by consideration of his life and by psychoanalytic insights deems the poetry and deprives it of proper aesthetic appreciation” (Huysen 116; Kleinbard 13).¹

Both Huysen and Kleinbard are of course exceptions to this tendency; however, it is not to Freud or Lacan that they turn when interpreting Rilke, but rather to the post-Freudian object relations theorists (Klein, Balint, Kohut, etc.) who first theorized the existence of borderline personality disorders. Invoking Melanie Klein, Huysen argues, for example, that Phia Rilke’s inconsistent mothering, her tendency to be both unaccepting of her son and overprotective and all-embracing prevented a proper “transition from symbiosis to object relations” and produced “psychic disturbances” (123). The disturbed and ecstatic states described by Malte, moreover—“murderous phantasies of the violent, fragmented body, anxieties of fragmentation, of objects that enter the body or grow inside it, fear of merger and dissolution” (123)—are according to Huysen typical of patients suffering from narcissistic and borderline illnesses. Similarly, Kleinbard notes that “it would be absurd to classify Rilke as a schizophrenic, but the anxieties and fantasies that we find in his writings about his first year in Paris closely resemble some of those characteristic of the disease.” Ultimately, however, he turns to “closely related forms of narcissistic and borderline illness [studied] by Heinz Kohut, R.D. Laing, and D.W. Winnicott” to understand “what Rilke was going through when he first came to Paris” (4–5).

In what follows I would like to build on this work by looking at Rilke’s text from a somewhat different psychoanalytic perspective. Specifically, I want to pursue a line of inquiry initiated by Huysen, who asks “whether there is not some more substantial link between Malte’s psychological constitution and the experience of modernity as produced by urban life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (132). Huysen turns to accounts of the psychic implications of modern city life produced by Baudelaire, Georg Simmel, and Walter Benjamin, and ultimately concludes that Malte’s ego weakness leaves him defenseless against the sensory overload produced by the modern city. The shocks of this overstimulation “penetrate right down to the deepest layers of unconscious memory traces, hurling themselves, as it were, like shells into the quarry of Malte’s unconscious childhood memories, breaking loose large chunks that then float up to the surface as fragments in the narrative” (Huysen 134). My own reading will emphasize a somewhat different etiology. While not discounting the importance of shock and overstimulation, I see Malte’s breakdown as much more closely tied to his experience of the uncanniness of the urban environment. The estranging and *unheimlich* effects of the modern city were observed and rendered in fictional form by a number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors, including E.T.A Hoffmann, Edgar Allen Poe, Nikolai Gogol, and Charles Dickens. In 1919 Freud removed this notion of the uncanny from the urban space of the industrial city and placed it resolutely in the interior space of the human psyche. What is radical about Rilke’s

¹ More recently, the field of psychoanalytical interpretations of Rilke has expanded dramatically and includes a wide variety of approaches: Eva-Maria Simms’s Freudian reading of dolls in Rilke’s œuvre, Kenneth Calhoon’s psychoanalytically inspired interpretation of the poet’s cinematic visuality, Gerlad Peters’s Lacanian reading of prosopopoeia in *The Notebooks*, and Eric Santner’s “psychotheological” interpretation of “creaturely life” in Rilke, among them.
text is that it combines both the subjective and the urban strands of the uncanny—
intimating that they are related and mutually affirm one another. In The Note-
books of Malte Laurids Brigge Rilke shows that childhood trauma predisposes one
to see the unheimlich nature of the modern city (a fact covered over and mysti-
fied by capitalism), and that the urban uncanny, by recapitulating this trauma in
displaced form, reawakens repressed childhood memory traces. The city, then,
does not primarily reawaken childhood trauma through the mechanical opera-
tions of shock, but by uncannily restaging this trauma in displaced and external-
ized forms.

Starting with E.T.A. Hoffmann’s “My Cousin’s Corner Window” and continuing
with such works as Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd,” Gogol’s “Nevsky Prospect,” and
Dickens’s Bleak House, Romantic and Gothic fiction returned repeatedly to the
topos of the uncanny modern city. While not precisely supernatural, the cities in
these texts nevertheless appear sinister, mysterious, and disquieting in ways that
defy rational comprehension. In The Architectural Uncanny Anthony Vidler has
argued that the eerie atmosphere of these works is profoundly related to anxieties
generated by the rapid industrialization and urbanization undergone by the capi-
tal cities of Europe at this time (4–5). As millions of people flooded into metro-
opolitan areas to take up factory jobs, their new homes revealed themselves as
decidedly unheimlich—un-homely. For the young Marx, this was true at even the
most literal level:

We have said . . . that man is regressing to the cave dwelling, etc.,—but he is regressing to it in an
estranged and malignant form. The savage in his cave—a natural element which freely offers itself
for his use and protection . . . feels as much at home as a fish in water. But the cellar dwelling of the
poor man is a hostile element, “a dwelling which remains an alien power and only gives itself up to
him insofar as he gives up to it his own blood and sweat”—a dwelling which he cannot regard as his
own hearth—where he might at last exclaim: “Here I am at home”—but where instead he finds him-
self in someone else’s house, in the house of a stranger, who always watches him and throws him out
if he does not pay his rent. (Marx and Engels, Collected Works 3: 314)

In Marx, then, the sinister nature of the modern city was a function of its literal
unheimlichkeit, its status as a site of estrangement, an alien place to which the major-
ity of the population would never truly belong. The class tensions engendered by
modernity resulted in the bourgeois experience of the urban uncanny as well. Vidler argues that a central motif in the texts of the Romantic uncanny is invasion
by an alien presence and that “at the heart of the anxiety provoked by such alien
presences was a fundamental insecurity: that of a newly established class, not quite
at home in its own home” (3–4). Troubled by their own security and legitimacy,
surrounded by what they perceived as a hostile and alien class, haunted by the
specter of a declassement that would plunge them into the midst of that very class,
the bourgeoisie experienced the modern city as a place of profound discomfort
and unease.

Although greatly inspired by the Romantic forays into the unheimlich, and Hoff-
mann’s texts in particular, Freud fundamentally transformed the notion of the
uncanny in his 1919 essay. While the city could still serve as the backdrop for uncanny
experiences (including Freud’s own oneiric wanderings through the streets of
Napoli), urban life itself was no longer seen as a potential cause of the unheimlich.
The uncanny was instead inscribed into the individual psyche as the return of previ-
ously repressed traumatic material. As Freud notes, approvingly citing Schelling,
the uncanny is “something which ought to have been kept concealed but which nevertheless has come to light” (166).

On one level, Rilke’s text reads like an application of Freud’s transvalued notion of the *unheimlich*. The weird events experienced by the young Malte correspond exactly to the modalities of the uncanny outlined in Freud’s paper. In his essay, Freud deals at length with the relation between the uncanny blinding in Hoffmann’s “The Sandman” and the castration complex. He notes further that it is this castration anxiety “that gives the idea of losing other organs its intense colouring,” turning to the scene in Hoffmann’s text in which “Coppellius, after sparing Nathaniel’s eyes had screwed off his arms and legs as an experiment” to illustrate such a “castration equivalent” (161 and 167, n.5). Malte’s memories reveal a similarly disarticulated body—for example, his account of an incident in which he is forced to crawl under a table to retrieve a crayon. Climbing down from his chair, his legs numb from sitting, Malte notes that “ich wußte nicht, was zu mir und was zum Sessel gehörte” (*Sämtliche Werke* 6:794; “I didn’t know what belonged to me and what was the chair’s,” *Notebooks* 93). His sense of the profoundly otherness of his own body is further exacerbated when he reaches for the crayon: “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 könne sie Dinge, die ich sie nicht gelehrht, wie sie da unten so eigenmächtig herumtastete mit Bewegungen, die ich nie an ihr beobachtet hatte” (6:795; “above all I recognized my own outspread hand moving down there all alone, like some strange crab, exploring the ground. I watched it, I remember, almost with curiosity; it seemed to know things I had never taught it, as it groped down there so completely on its own, with movements I had never noticed in it before,” 94). This scene moves from the strange to the sinister when Malte hallucinates a ghostly dismembered hand reaching for his own, threatening to take it over or take it elsewhere, “was nicht wieder gutzumachen war” (6:795; “into something it could never return from,” 94). Malte also projects this fragmentation onto others: thus, in another passage he describes his cousin in terms reminiscent of a Cubist portrait: one eye moves while “das andere immer in dieselbe Ecke gerichtet blieb, als wäre es verkauft und käme nicht mehr in Betracht” (6:732; “the other eye remained pointed toward the same corner, as if it had been sold and was no longer taken into account,” 28).

Freud also deals extensively with the theme of the double, linking this uncanny figure to a transvalued image of archaic primary narcissism. While detailing various manifestations of this trope he cites the work of Otto Rank and mentions in particular “the connotations the ‘double’ has with reflections in mirrors” (162). Amazingly, Rilke likewise stages an encounter with an uncanny mirrored double. As a child, Malte discovers a room in his family’s ancestral manor that is filled with costumes. Delirious with the joy of self-transformation that the costumes afford,
he dresses in a particularly elaborate outfit that includes a large mask. But when he looks at himself in a mirror he finds, to his horror, not himself but another: “ich starrte diesen großen schrecklichen Unbekannten vor mir an, und es schien mir ungeheuerlich, mit ihm allein zu sein” (6:808; “I stared at this large, terrifying stranger in front of me and felt appalled to be alone with him,” 107). Recalling Freud’s notion that the double easily “becomes a vision of terror, just as after the fall of their religion the gods took on daemonic shapes,” Malte’s quickly becomes persecutory: “ich verlor allen Sinn, ich fiel einfach aus. Eine Sekunde lang hatte ich eine unbeschreibliche, wehe und vergebliche Sehnsucht nach mir, dann war nur nach er: es war nichts außer ihm” (6:808; “I lost all sense of myself, I simply ceased to exist. For one second I felt an indescribable, piercing longing for myself, then only he remained: there was nothing except him,” 107).

Furthermore, although the novel is ambivalent about the etiology of Malte’s disordered subjectivity, one recollection does emerge as something like a primal scene. About halfway through the text Malte recalls “daß es eine Zeit gab, wo Maman wünschte, daß ich ein kleines Mädchen wäre und nicht dieser Junge, der ich nun einmal war” (6:800; “a time when Maman wished I had been a little girl and not the boy that I undeniably was,” 99). In order to please his mother Malte begins to present himself to her as “Sophie,” the daughter she never had. Malte describes Maman as an active participant in these wish-fulfillment games, braiding her son’s hair so that “keine Verwechslung stattfinde mit dem bösen Malte, wenn er je wiederkäme” (“she wouldn’t be mistaken for that naughty Malte, if he should ever come back”) and “daß sie Maltes Unarten aufzählten und sich über ihn beklagten” (6:800; “enumerating Malte’s misdeeds and complaining about him,” 99–100). This transformation of Malte into Sophie—surely an instance of emasculation—should be seen as a traumatizing moment of castration that furthermore has been profoundly repressed. Towards the beginning of the text Malte laments: “Hätte man doch wenigstens seine Erinnerungen. Aber wer hat die? Wäre die Kindheit da, sie ist wie vergraben” (6:721; “If at least you had your memories. But who has them? If childhood were there: it is as though it had been buried,” 17). Having elided the moment of his traumatic emasculation from conscious thought, Malte finds it returning in the form of uncanny projections and hallucinations, particularly those of disarticulated bodies and fragmented surfaces, Freud’s Ur-form of castration anxiety.

But if Rilke presents Malte’s disturbances as an uncanny return of repressed childhood trauma, he also hearkens back to an older school of thinking about the unheimlich, explicitly staging Malte’s breakdown in an industrial city that is both sinister and strange. The very first line of the novel situates Malte in a city figured as eerie, even deathly: “So, also hierher kommen die Leute, um zu Leben, ich würde eher meinen, es stürbe sich hier” (6:709; “So this is where people come to live; I would have thought it is a city to die in,” 3). As the text progresses, the parallel between the industrial character of the city and its uncanniness is further elaborated. The association of the city with both capitalism and death is likewise made perfectly explicit in Malte’s comparison of the Hôtel-Dieu with a factory: “Dieses ausgezeichnete Hotel ist sehr alt, schon zu König Chlodwigs Zeiten starb man darin in einigen Betten. Jetzt wird in 559 Betten gestorben. Natürlich fabrikmäßig. Bei so enormer Produktion ist der einzelne Tod nicht so gut ausgeführt, aber darauf kommt es auch nicht an. Die Masse macht es” (6:713; “This excellent hotel
is very ancient; already in the time of King Clovis people were dying here, in a few beds. Now there are 559 beds to die in. Like a factory of course. With production so enormous, each individual death is not made very carefully; but that isn’t important. It’s the quantity that counts,” 8–9). In this two-pronged critique Malte not only associates the factory and the industrial order with death, but further associates this vast death machine with a prominent landmark in the urban topography of Paris. Paris thus becomes a giant factory for the production of corpses—an uncanny image if ever there was one.

Those who have not been killed by the great urban machine (which recalls Freder Frederson’s vision of Moloch in Lang’s Metropolis) have been transformed into its uncanny mechanized doubles. As Hal Foster argues, the machine, from the moment of its inception, was seen as a “demonic master.” While in premodern times the machine was thought to mimic the organic movements of human or animal bodies, “in the modern instance . . . the machine becomes the model, and the body is disciplined to its specifications . . . as the worker resembles the machine, it begins to dominate him, and he becomes its tool, its prosthetic.” In an uncanny reversal, the machine “assumes our human vitality” as we “take on its deathly facticity” (129). The literature of the urban uncanny is full of examples of these unheimlich transformations of metropolitan subjects into mechanized objects. Indeed, Walter Benjamin points out precisely such a transformation in Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd”: “Poe’s text makes us understand the true connection between wildness and discipline. His pedestrians act as if they had adapted themselves to the machines and could express themselves only mechanically. Their behavior is a reaction to shocks. ‘If jostled, they bowed profusely to the jostlers.’” According to Benjamin, “the shock experience which the passer-by has in the crowd corresponds to what the worker ‘experiences’ at his machine” (176).

Rilke also describes the uncanny industrialization of the body of the modern city dweller. While out walking in the boulevards one day, Malte comes upon a man who performs a series of strange hops. He quickly sees, however, that the man is not simply jumping, but that his entire body is possessed by an uncanny and compulsive rhythm. Malte notes: “Ich begriff, daß dieses Hüpfen in seinem Körper herumirrte, daß es versuchte, hier und da auszubrechen” (6:771; “I saw that the hopping was wandering through his body, trying to break out here or there,” 68). When the man tries to restrain himself by putting a cane behind his back, his disciplinary efforts prove useless: “Der Wille war an zwei Stellen durchbrochen, und das Nachgeben hatte in den besessenen Muskeln einen leisen, lockenden Reiz zurückgelassen und den zwingenden Zweitakt” (6:773; “His willpower had cracked in two places, and the damage had left in his possessed muscles a gentle alluring stimulation and this compelling two-beat rhythm,” 70). If this moment recalls the compulsive, mechanized movements of Poe’s pedestrians, it even more forcefully anticipates the bizarre industrialized St. Vitus’s dance performed by Charlie Chaplin in Modern Times. Working on an assembly line where he repeatedly tightens two screws with a pair of spanners, Chaplin’s character finds that when he leaves the line to have a cigarette he is unable to stop the repetitive movements. A victim of uncanny alienation, his very body has been possessed by the industrialized rhythms of the machine.

While Malte’s ability to register the deathly nature of the city and the mechanization of its inhabitants is presented as a function of his superior insight, in
Rilke’s novel, as in other fictional accounts of the *unheimlich* city, the vicissitudes of vision is a key theme. Thus, when the narrator and his cousin settle in to watch crowds from a second-floor apartment in Hoffmann’s “My Cousin’s Corner Window,” the cousin notes that the narrator needs “an eye that can really see” and so attempts to teach him “the rudiments of the art of seeing” (380). Similarly, the convalescent narrator of Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” presents himself as inhabiting a state in which “the film from the mental vision departs.” In this condition of heightened visuality he watches the metropolitan throng and finds that he is able to identify subtle details and observe “with minute interest the innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance” (425–26). With his repeated iterations that “Ich lerne sehen” (710; “I am learning to see,” 5, 6), Malte very much places himself in this tradition of urban visuality.

Poe’s narrator, however, quickly finds that his idealized powers of observation are frustrated by the inhabitants of the industrial city. Instead of the transparent forms through which he had expected to see, he finds opaque signs in need of interpretation. As the story shifts from the register of visuality to that of textuality, it is invaded by a profound uncanniness. The narrator becomes obsessed with an old man, whom he compares to “the fiend,” following him compulsively on a series of meanderings through the dark underside of London. Finding himself utterly unable to interpret and understand this uncanny figure, the narrator ends by comparing him to a book that “does not permit itself to be read” (430). Malte also finds his ability to “see” frustrated by the opacity of the city. On the boulevards he begins to feel that he is being watched and that strangers are showing him signs pregnant with a significance that he is utterly unable to divine:

Was in aller Welt wollte diese Alte von mir, die, mit einer nachttischschublade, in der einige Knoepfe und Nadeln herumrollten, aus irgendeinem Loch herausgekrochen war? Weshalb ging sie immer neben mir und beobachtete mich? Als ob ich versuchte, mich zu erkennen mit ihren Triefaugen, die aussahen, als hätte ihr ein Kranker grünen Schleim in die blutigen Lider gespuckt. Und das Seltsamste war, daß ich immerfort das Gefühl nicht los wurde, es bestünde tatsächlich eine gewisse Verabredung, zu der dieses Zeichen gehörte, und diese Szene wäre im Grunde etwas, was ich hätte erwarten müssen. (6:743–44)

What in the world did the old woman want of me, who had crawled out of some hole carrying a night table drawer with a few buttons and needles rolling around inside it? Why did she keep walking at my side, keep looking at me? As if she were trying to recognize me with her bleary eyes, which looked as though some diseased person had spat a greenish phlegm under the bloody lids. And how did that small grey woman come to be standing at my side for a whole quarter of an hour in front of a store window, showing me an old long pencil that pushed infinitely slowly up out of her wretched, clenched hands. I pretended that I was busy looking at the display in the window and hadn’t noticed a thing. But she knew I had seen her; she knew I was standing there trying to figure out what she was doing. For I understood quite well that the pencil was in itself of no importance: I felt that it was a sign, a sign for the initiated, a sign only outcasts could recognize; I sensed that she was directing me to go somewhere or do something. And the strangest part was that I couldn’t get rid of the feeling that there actually existed some kind of secret language which this sign belonged to, and that this scene was after all something I should have expected. (40–41)
Like Poe’s narrator, Malte finds that the city changes uncannily from a visual object to a language he cannot comprehend; in so doing it overwhels him with interpretive delirium.

This indeterminacy of signs recalls Jentsch’s notion of the uncanny as “intellectual uncertainty” (Freud 154), a characterization that has more recently been revived by Derrida, for whom the unheimlich lurks behind the unstable links between signer and signified, author and text (see Derrida, “La Double séance”; see, also, Vidler 10). While it is tempting to see this uncanniness as a function of the immutable indeterminacy of signs, it is important to note that the writers I am considering here all insist on the specific social, historical, and spatial situation of the early industrial city as the site of this collapse of signification. The reasons for this are explained by Marx in The Communist Manifesto. Describing the demonic nature of capitalism, Marx notes that “constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify” (83). Giving Marx’s comments a semiotic gloss, perhaps one can say that with the emergence of the industrial city during the era of high capitalism formerly stable and seemingly immutable interpretive codes were thrown into the vortex of relentless change. Unable to find a position from which to read the maelstrom of signs generated by capitalist production, the citizens of the new urban metropolises found themselves plunged into an interpretive vertigo.

In The Notebooks, Rilke shows us the breakdown of formerly stable interpretive codes in the modern city and the unheimlich effects that this breakdown provokes. This is particularly evident regarding signifiers of class. Malte, a former aristocrat, is acutely conscious of subtle gradations and indications of class status. But he is also aware that the meanings and hierarchies to which he clings no longer hold up. In Malte’s notebooks the streets of Paris seem to be overrun with “outcasts”: “Denn das ist mir klar, daß das die Fortgeworfenen sind, nicht nur Bettler; nein, es sind eigentlich keine Bettler, man muß Unterschiede machen. Es sind Abfälle, Schalen von Menschen, die das Schicksal ausgespieen hat. Feucht vom Speichel des Schicksals kleben sie an einer Mauer, an einer Laterne, an einer Plakatsäule, oder sie rinnen langsam die Gasse herunter mit einer dunklen, schmutzigen Spur hinter sich her” (6:743; “For it’s obvious they are outcasts, not just beggars; no, they are really not beggars, there is a difference. They are human trash, husks of men that fate has spewed out. Wet with the spittle of fate, they stick to a wall, a lamp-post, or they trickle slowly down the street, leaving a dark filthy trail behind them,” 40). These are not simply the poor, but the Lumpenproletariat, the human refuse chewed up and spit out by the industrial order. Not only does Malte fear them, but he also fears that the signifiers of class status that distinguish him from them have ceased to function properly. At the Bibliothèque Nationale he speculates at length about his appearance and his relation to the urban poor.

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1 In Marx’s writings, the emergent capitalist order is consistently figured as uncanny and demonic. See, for example, Marx’s classic statement in the Manifesto: “Modern bourgeois society with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells” (85–86).
At first he seeks to make a rigid distinction based on sartorial and bodily signs. He clings to his difference:

Obwohl ich arm bin. Obwohl mein Anzug, den ich täglich trage, anfängt, gewisse Stellen zu bekom-
men, obwohl meine Schuhe sich, und ich könnte, wie ich bin, in eine beliebige Konditorei gehen, womöglich auf
den großen Boulevards, und könnte mit einer Hand getrost in einen Kuchenteller greifen und etwas
nehmen. Man würde nichts Auffälliges darin finden und mich nicht schelten und hinausweisen, denn
es ist immerhin eine Hand aus den guten Kreisen, eine Hand, die vier- bis fünfmal täglich gewaschen
wird. Ja, es ist nichts hinter den Nägeln, der Schreibfinger ist ohne Tinte, und besonders die Gelenke
sind tadellos. Bis dorthin lasse arme Leute sich nicht, das ist eine bekannte Tatsache. Man kann
also aus ihrer Reinlichkeit gewisse Schlüsse ziehen. (6:742)

even though I am poor. Even though the jacket I wear every day has begun to get threadbare in cer-
tain spots; even though my shoes are not entirely beyond criticism. True my collar is clean, my under-
wear too, and I could, just as I am, walk into any café I felt like, possibly on the grand boulevards, and
confidently reach out my hand to a plate full of pastries. No one would find that surprising; no one
would shout at me or throw me out, for it is after all a genteel hand, a hand that is washed four or five
times a day. There is no dirt under the nails, the index finger isn’t ink-stained, and the wrists espe-
cially are irreproachable. Poor people don’t wash so far up; that is a well-known fact. Certain conclu-
sions can therefore be drawn from the cleanliness of these wrists. (38–39)

But even as he hysterically insists on the transparency of these signs, he acknowl-
edges that in the boulevards of Paris they have lost their unequivocal meaning:

"Aber es giebt doch ein paar Existenzen, auf dem Boulevard Saint-Michel zum Beispiel und in der rue Racine, die lassen sich nicht irremachen, die pfeifen auf
die Gelenke. Die sehen mich an und wissen es. Die wissen, daß ich eigentlich zu
ihnen gehöre, daß ich nur ein bißchen Komödie spiele" (6:742; “Though there are
still one or two individuals on the Boulevard Saint-Michel, for example, or on the
rue Racine, who are not fooled, who don’t give a damn about my wrists. They look
at me and know. They know that in reality I am one of them, that I’m only acting,”
39). Later, when forced to wait alongside the abject poor at the Salpêtrière hospi-
tal, Malte once again feels that the signifiers of his class status have misfired and
that he has been relegated to the ranks of human refuse: “Es kam mir in den Sinn,
daß man mich hierher gewiesen hatte, unter diese Leute . . . Es war, sozusagen die
erste öffentliche Bestätigung, daß ich zu den Fortgeworfenen gehörte; hatte der
Arzt es mir angesehen? Aber ich hatte meinen Besuch in einem leidlich guten
Anzuge gemacht, ich hatte meine Karte hingingeschickt. Trotzdem, er mußte es
irgendwie erfahren haben, vielleicht hatte ich mich selbst verraten” (6:758–59;
“It occurred to me that I had been directed here, among these people . . . It was, so
to speak, the first official confirmation that I belonged to the category of outcast.
Had the doctor known by my appearance? Yet I had gone to his office in a fairly
decent suit; I had even sent in my card. In spite of that, he must have somehow
discovered it; perhaps I had given myself away,” 55–56).

In both these cases, an interpretive ambiguity stemming from the changing
conditions of the industrial city leads to eruptions of the uncanny. If Malte begins
his account of his visits to the Bibliothèque Nationale and Salpêtrière in a rela-
tively lucid and coherent frame of mind, the confusion and anxieties concerning
class he experiences ultimately lead to paranoia and hallucinations. At the end of
the Bibliothèque Nationale episode Malte begins to feel that he is being watched
and that weird and sinister strangers are showing him signs, pregnant with signifi-
cance. Similarly, after being “found out” in the hospital waiting room, Malte begins
to see the patients as a collection of disjointed body parts: “Und viele Verbände
gab es. Verbände, die den ganzen Kopf Schichte um Schichte umzogen, bis nur noch ein einziges Auge da war, das niemandem mehr gehörte . . . Verbände, die man geöffnet hatte und in denen nun, wie in einem schmutzigen Bett, eine Hand lag, die keine mehr war; und ein eingebundenes Bein, das aus der Reihe herausstand, groß wie ein ganzer Mensch" (6:759–60; “And there were many bandages. Bandages wrapped around a whole head, layer by layer, until just a single eye remained that no longer belonged to anyone . . . Bandages that had been opened and in which, as if in a filthy bed, a hand lay now, that was no longer a hand; and a bandaged leg stuck out of the line on the bench, as large as a whole man,” 56–57).

Both of these episodes confirm my intuition that the modern city is not merely a stage for the emergence of the uncanny, understood as the manifestation of a prior (childhood) trauma: rather, the city can generate the uncanny in and of itself. Although the main culprit here is the instability of traditional class identity brought on by capitalism, another factor that the novel considers is the unheimlich experience of exile and emigration. Malte, a Dane, often refers to himself as a foreigner, usually in conjunction with his anxieties over being poor. During the Bibliothèque Nationale episode he describes himself as “vielleicht der armsäbigste von diesen Lesenden, ein Ausländer” (6:742; “perhaps the shabbiest of all these readers and a foreigner,” 38). At other moments he links his foreign status to his more general sense of subjective nullity. For instance, a scene that begins with Malte noting that he is a “nothing” that thinks ends with him describing himself as “dieser junge, belanglose Ausländer, Brigge” (6:728; “this young insignificant foreigner, Brigge,” 24). The famous Salpêtrière scene also contains several oblique references to Malte’s foreignness. When several doctors appear for a second consultation Malte tells the one to whom he has already spoken: “Halten Sie es für nötig, daß diese Herren eingeweiht werden, so sind Sie nach unserer Unterredung gewiß imstande, dies mit einigen Worten zu tun, während es mir sehr schwer fällt” (6:761; “If you think it is necessary for these gentlemen to be initiated, you are certainly able, from our conversation, to do that in a few words, while I would find it very difficult,” 58). Although his words may in part refer to his difficulty in relating the complexity of his medical case, they also intimate that Malte’s difficulties stem from a lack of linguistic facility. Malte even prefaces his statement to the doctor by noting, “I heard myself say in French,” thus drawing attention to the strangeness and singularity of hearing himself speak in this foreign tongue.

Later, after suffering hallucinations in the waiting room, Malte rushes out of the hospital:


I can’t remember how I got out through the many courtyards. It was evening, and I lost my way in the unknown neighborhood, and walked up boulevards with endless walls in one direction and, when there was no end to them, walked back in the opposite direction until I reached some square or other. Then I began to walk down one street, and other streets came that I had never seen before, and still
others. Electric trolleys, too brightly lit, raced up and past, their harsh bells clanging into the distance. But on their signboards were names I couldn’t recognize. I didn’t know what city I was in, or whether I had a room somewhere, or what I had to do so that I could stop walking. (62)

While the passage evokes the generalized confusion of a psychotic episode, it also suggests that Malte’s disorientation—and perhaps the psychotic episode that preceded it—is ultimately the result of being exiled in a city and speaking a language he does not fully understand. 4 For Malte is not only psychically or existentially lost, but also physically lost in the strange streets and neighborhoods of a city to which he does not belong. That is why, when a trolley passes him, he is unable to recognize the French names on the signboards, a linguistic limitation that recalls his inability to express himself to the examining doctors.

This scene in The Notebooks (uncannily) echoes a personal anecdote that Freud relates in his 1919 essay:

Once I was walking through the deserted streets of a provincial town in Italy which was strange to me, on a hot summer afternoon. I found myself in a quarter the character of which could not long remain in doubt. Nothing but painted women were to be seen at the windows of the small houses, and I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning. But after having wandered about for a while without being directed, I suddenly found myself back in the same street, where my presence was now starting to excite attention. I hurried away once more, but only to arrive yet a third time by devious paths in the same place. Now, however, a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny, and I was glad enough to abandon my exploratory walk and get straight back to the piazza I had left a short while before. (163)

While Freud uses the anecdote as a metaphor for the demonic nature of the repetition compulsion, it seems clear that in this particular case Freud experiences the upsurge of the uncanny not because he is compulsively repeating some repressed childhood trauma but because he is a disoriented stranger in an unknown space. Lost in the labyrinthine streets of a foreign city, accidentally in violation of unknown and unstated codes of conduct, Freud experiences the unheimlich character of semiotic indeterminacy. Paradoxically, then, while Freud rejects Jentsch’s notion of the uncanny as “intellectual uncertainty,” “that in which one does not know where one is,” his examples seem to repeat this very definition. Thus, while resituating the uncanny in the internal space of the psyche, he unwittingly demonstrates its continued presence in the external topography of the modern city.

4 This reading is supported by Rilke’s description of his own breakdown, which I quoted at the beginning of this essay. When Rilke refers to himself as “strange to everyone, like one dying in a foreign land, alone, superfluous, a fragment from another context,” he invokes his émigré status both as a trope and as literally true. As an immigrant whose point of origin was a trans-national state, Rilke had a very weak sense of national belonging at a time when this was becoming a crucial marker of identity within Europe. Having been born in Prague to a family belonging to the German-speaking minority that formed the city’s professional class in the latter part of the nineteenth century, his sense of national identity was always unclear: “He was insulted once to be called a German, and, when the speaker corrected himself, ‘I meant, Austrian,’ Rilke said, ‘Not at all. In 1866, when the Austrians entered Prague, my parents shut their windows’” (Hass xi). Although he felt tightly connected to the German language, Rilke never thought of himself as an Austrian or a German, and his aversion to all things Germanic grew in direct proportion to the level of militarism and bellicosity that these two nations displayed during the interwar period. At the same time, while he felt sympathy for the artistic and national aspirations of the Czechs, he knew very well that he did not belong there either, and he grew to resent Prague—“that, God forgive me, miserable city of subordinate existences” (Hass xi)—for a good portion of his life. Ultimately, Rilke’s sense of belonging was purely a matter of elective affinity, and he chose Russia and Paris as his spiritual homelands. But even in Paris, as noted above, he often felt displaced, uncomfortable, alien. See, also, Kristeva and Bhabha for different attempts to connect the uncanny with the figure of the foreigner.
What Rilke’s novel demonstrates (and alerts us to in Freud) is the imbrication of the two registers of the uncanny. Rilke makes it clear that the city is not just the stage on which the uncanny plays itself out; rather, it is in and of itself uncanny. What the novel further seems to argue is that there is a dialogical relationship between these two registers. Malte’s early trauma conditions him to see the uncanniness of the city, a fact that is mystified by the spectacle and glittering surfaces of the metropole. At the same time, his experience of the unhomeliness of the city calls up the unhomeliness of his childhood home, revealing its character not as a nurturing womb, but as the site of alienation and castration.

However, after identifying the site of the constitution of the modern subject as the intersection point of personal and social trauma, Rilke backs away from his findings. In the second half of the novel, Malte abandons his efforts to learn how to see and attempts to recuperate his shattered wholeness in an Edenic language. Earlier in the book, as a preface to what is to come, Malte notes that “Die Zeit der anderen Auslegung wird anbrechen, und es wird kein Wort auf dem anderen bleiben, und jeder Sinn wird wie Wolken sich auflösen und wie Wasser niedergehen . . . Aber diesmal werde ich geschrieben werden. Ich bin der Eindruck, der sich verwandeln wird” (756; “The time of that other interpretation will dawn, when there shall not be left one word upon another, and every meaning will dissolve like a cloud and fall down like rain . . . this time, I will be written. I am the impression that will transform itself,” 52–53). Huyssen interprets this statement as a longing for “modernist epiphany, the transcendence into a realm of writing that would leave all contingency behind and achieve some ultimate truth and coherence” (126). Thus, in the second half of the novel Malte disappears as an object of investigation and exists only as an effaced writer who presents us with his reflections on Gaspara Stampa, Mariana Alcoforado, Bettina Bretano, and others, written in the “glorious language” of modernist transcendence. As Huyssen astutely points out, however, this turn to language is not a solution to the problems of the self posed by the first part of the novel, but their evasion. In the end, Malte simply achieves the voiding of his subjectivity in another register instead of reintegration or transcendence. The novel shows an increasing abstraction as the reality of modern city life and Malte’s own ego weakness are abandoned in favor of bloodless speculations on historically distant “women in love” and the final mythical anecdote of the prodigal son. The problems of visuality and subjectivity have been avoided, not resolved.

II.

If at the end of The Notebooks Rilke flees from modernity into an aestheticized medieval and biblical past, elsewhere in his corpus he takes as his destination an idealized classical antiquity. The turn to classicism as a means of transcending the fragmentation of modernity has been a recurrent trope in Western culture since the aesthetics of Winckelmann in the eighteenth century. In Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture (1755) and History of Ancient Art (1764) Winckelmann presents the contemplation of the artifacts of antiquity as a therapeutic gesture that will shore up or restore the embattled wholeness of the mod-
ern subject. In Winckelmann’s aesthetic system “the classicist artwork regulates the viewer’s vision, so that, while the image is still pleasing to sight, that apprehension in sense perception is immediately sublated; it passes automatically into a rational comprehension of how beauty is constituted out of abstract principles” (Mah 76). This Platonic beauty and wholeness “constitutes an equivalent state of mind in the viewer” (76), establishing or confirming the spectator’s own sense of his or her rational, moral, and somatic integrity. In Lacanian terms, the classical object functions something like the speculum of the mirror stage. Gazing at it, the spectator sees an image of coherence that he misrecognizes as a reflection of his own unity. The paideia of the subject theorized by Winckelmann’s aesthetics, the subject’s move from fragmentation to integration, parallels the drama of the mirror stage “whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation—and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of totality that I shall call orthopaedic” (Lacan 4).

In the 1907 poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo” Rilke presents the aesthetic contemplation of just such an integrated and integrating classical object. The poem describes the early-fifth-century BC Statue of a Youth from Miletus that Rilke had seen in the Salle Archaique of the Louvre. It begins with a startling affirmation of absence: “Wir kannten nicht sein unerhörtes Haupt, / darin die Augenäpfel reiften” (Selected Poetry 60; “We cannot know his legendary head / with eyes like ripening fruit,” 61). The sculpture is shattered, missing its head and with it its eyes—the seat of life, intelligence, and presence. However, despite this decapitation, the statue “glüht noch wie ein Kandelaber, / in dem sein Schauen, nur zurückgeschraubt, // sich hält und glänzt” (“is still suffused with brilliance from the inside, / like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low, // gleams in all its power”). The animating gaze has been displaced from the eyes to the entire surface of the body, and this diffusion invests the statue with a startling auratic power: we are told that it now “dazzle[s]” (“blenden”) and “burst[s] like a star” (61; “brächte nicht aus allen seinen Rändern / aus wie ein Stern,” 60). The torso, it seems, is the quintessential Winckelmannian object: although physically fragmented it possesses a transcendental wholeness, beauty, and power. This coherence is affirmed in a sexual trope: “Sonst könnte nicht der Bug / der Brust dich blenden, und im leisen Drehen / der Lenden könnte nicht ein Lächeln gehen / zu jener Mitte, die die Zeugung trug” (60; “Otherwise / the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could / a smile run through the placid hips and thighs / to the dark centre where procreation flared,” 61). Rilke’s classical sculpture possesses not only materiality, but animality, with shoulders that “flimmerte . . . wie Raubtierfelle” (60; “glisten like a wild beast’s fur,” 61). While seemingly castrated, the statue is in fact strikingly phallic.

As the poem progresses, however, Rilke radically undermines the conventions of Winckelmannian aesthetics. The contemplation of the statue’s perfect integration does not constitute an equivalent state of mind in the viewer, but quite the opposite: “Da ist keine Stelle, / die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern” (60; “For here there is no place / that does not see you. You must change your life,” 61). In the final lines of the poem the statue emerges as the funhouse double of the Lacanian speculum, showing the viewer not an idealized image of
her or his wholeness, but a devastating vision of inadequacy and lack. This image causes the emergence not of the auratic look, but of the uncanny and annihilating Lacanian gaze.5

Why has this auratic statue led the viewer to a renewed and even intensified sense of fragmentation and castration? Two reasons suggest themselves—one psychoanalytic and one cultural. Hal Foster has argued that for Benjamin auratic experiences involve the perception of a “forgotten human dimension” in at least three registers: the natural, the cultural/historical, and the subjective. The aura of the third register involves “the memory of the primal relationship to the body, to the maternal body” (196). This “memory” evokes fantasies of “maternal plenitude, of a space-time of bodily intimacy and psychic unity before any separation and loss” (193). But this memory, Foster argues, also depends on a prior repression of the phallic mother, a repression that invests the maternal gaze, and the aura founded upon it, with an edge of anxiety. If this is generally true of the structural development of the subject, it is particularly true in the case of Rainer Maria Rilke. As fictionalized in The Notebooks, Rilke’s experience with his mother was profoundly ambiguous, oscillating wildly between her empathic recognition and her annihilating rejection. For Rilke, then, the reassuring look of the auratic object (founded on the mother’s look of recognition) would always have beneath it the threat and memory of castration. Indeed, given Maman/Phia Rilke’s oscillation between look and gaze, any bestowal of recognition would lead inevitably to the anxious anticipation of its withdrawal, an expectation of the imminent canceling of subjective integrity.

The perfection of the classical object evokes not only psychoanalytical anxieties but also those of a cultural sort. From the very beginnings of neoclassicism, the celebration of antiquity was accompanied by corresponding worries about the status and accomplishments of modernity. Modern culture-makers feared being epigones, latecomers who could do nothing but chase after and feebly imitate the attainments of a long-distant era (Mah 83). Attempting to learn how to see in order to produce powerful modern poetry, Rilke must have felt acutely the burden of the classical past. Faced with the prospect of perpetual inadequacy in comparison with the heroic accomplishments of the Greco-Roman past, Rilke must have experienced the shattered statue of Apollo as an uncanny figure of modernity’s cultural castration.6

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5 Benjamin notes that “to perceive the aura of an object we look at, means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return” (188).

6 There is one further problem with the visuality of the Dinggedichten. Not only do the objects gaze back at Rilke, threatening the integrity of his subjectivity, but as his career progresses he becomes distinctly uncomfortable with the Medusan gaze that he trains on objects so as to be able to represent them. In the poem “Turning-point” Rilke takes stock of this optical project. He has perhaps “learned to see,” but he now regards the whole enterprise as flawed and inadequate. The poem makes it perfectly clear that while Rilke has developed tremendous scopic power, it is essentially violent and coercive. In the first and last stanzas he tells us that “beneath his compelling vision” “stars would fall to their knees,” gods become weary and give way to his insistence, that images have been “imprisoned” within him because he has “overpowered them.” This rhetoric of domination and aggressive mastery ultimately proves hollow because, as he confesses, “even now you don’t know them.” The rewards of pure vision are meager indeed, “for there is a boundary to looking. And the world that is looked at so deeply wants to flourish in love.” For Rilke, true knowledge cannot be attained in the scopic register, but must be sought in an empathetic engagement with the Other, a sympathetic entry into the interiority of the object that is reminiscent of Bergson’s intuition. There is a further, gendered aspect to this (self) critique, for Rilke makes it clear that aggressive visuality is a quintessentially male problem.
III.

In “The Painter of Modern Life,” one of the first and still most important celebrations of modern life and culture, Charles Baudelaire engages directly this split between classicism and contemporaneity. Attempting to articulate the difference between these two eras or sensibilities, Baudelaire notes that “by ‘modernity’ I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable” (12). But immediately after rearticulating a conventional view of classicism as transcendental wholeness and modernity as fragmentation and lack, Baudelaire begins to problematize the binary opposition of the two terms: “Every old master has had his own modernity,” he tells us. For Baudelaire, modernity is not the debased other of a glorious antiquity, but the flip side of the same coin: just as classicism was the modernity of its time, so the modernity of his era will one day become a kind of classicism. But “for any ‘modernity’ to be worthy of one day taking its place as ‘antiquity,’” Baudelaire writes, “it is necessary for the mysterious beauty which human life accidentally puts into it to be distilled from it” (13). One cannot flee the present and inhabit a phantasmatic vision of a pristine antique wholeness. One must instead radically embrace “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent” nature of modern life.

If in certain areas of his work Rilke unsuccessfully attempts to escape the uncanny dislocations of the modern city by privileging an auratic classical past, in other areas he accepts this Baudelairean challenge and attempts to articulate a truly modern classicism.Remarkably, it is the sculpture of Auguste Rodin that Rilke takes as his model for this radically new classical form. In the autumn of 1902, Rilke spent considerable time with the French sculptor, talking with him and viewing his works at Rodin’s studio in the rue de l’Université and visiting the Rodin residence at Meudon— as well as contemplating Rodin’s place in the history of art during long sessions at the Bibliothèque Nationale. The result was Rilke’s Rodin, a text that reflects the poet’s attempts to understand and internalize the wisdom embodied in the sculptor’s artwork.

In contrast to Rilke’s flight into the transcendent and abstract at the end of The Notebooks, Rilke found in Rodin’s sculpture an insistence on materiality, a dogged affirmation of the thing-ness of art. According to Rilke, Rodin knew that “Was die Dinge auszeichnet, dieses Ganz mit-sich-Beschäftigtsein, das war es, was einer Plastik ihre Ruhe gab; sie durfte nichts von außen verlangen oder erwarten, sich auf nichts beziehen, was draußen lag, nichts sehen, was nicht in ihr war” (Auguste Rodin 5:159; “That which gave distinction to a plastic work of art was its complete self-absorption. It must not demand nor expect aught from outside, it should refer to nothing that lay beyond it, see nothing that was not within itself,” Rodin 19). For Rilke, Rodin’s sculptures do not refer to some transcendent realm far from the flux and contingency of the material world; they are, rather, resolutely part of that material world. As such, they take as their subject matter the sheer physicality of being in the world: as Rilke phrases it, “Ihre Sprache war der

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Recall that Apollo, whose panoptic gaze seemed to annihilate Rilke, was described in expressly phallic terms. “Turning-point” suggests the cultivation of a feminine counter-balance to this male scopic violence. Rilke first tells himself that the “work of the eyes is done, now go and do heart work”; then, as if connecting this imperative to an expressly sexual division of labor, he adds, “Learn, inner man, to look on your inner woman” (Selected Poems 132–35). It is only by nurturing his inner femininity that Rilke will move beyond aggressive visuality to a loving and creative identification with the world.
In her fascinating chapter on rodin in Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France, Debora Silverman provides an interpretation of the sculptor’s work that may serve as a useful supplement to Rilke’s more abstract reading. Silverman argues that Rodin’s understanding of the body and subjectivity was greatly influenced by Charcot’s theories regarding the corporal expression of nervous over-stimulation due to the excessive sensory barrage of the modern city (229–70). The parallels and connections to Rilke are obvious and extremely suggestive.

Interestingly, what Rodin discovers (and what Rilke discovers in Rodin) is that the modern body is no longer suffused with Winckelmann’s calm stillness, but instead is fluid and unstable:

Rödin wußte, daß es zunächst auf eine unfehlbare Kenntnis des menschlichen Körpers ankam. Langsam, forschend war er bis zu seiner Oberfläche vorgeschritten. . . . Sie bestand aus unendlich vielen Begegnungen des Lichtes mit dem Dinge, und es zeigte sich, daß jede dieser Begengnungen anders war und jede merkwürdig. An dieser Stelle schienen sie einander aufzunehmen, an jener sich zögernd zu begrüßen, an einer dritten fremd an einander vorbeizugehen; und es gab Stellen ohne Ende und keine, auf der nicht etwas geschah. (5:149)

Rodin knew that, first of all, sculpture depended upon an infallible knowledge of the human body. Slowly, searchingly, he had approached the surface of this body. . . . It consisted of infinitely many movements. The play of light upon these surfaces made manifest that each of these movements was different and each significant. At this point they seemed to flow into one another; at that, to greet each other hesitatingly; at a third, to pass by each other without recognition, like strangers. There were undulations without end. There was no point at which there was not life and movement. (9–10)

Inscribed with the relentless motion of modernity, the human body becomes itself a pullulating, infinitely active surface, which Rodin recognizes and represents.7 To underscore this unceasing flow the text is saturated with tropes of liquidity: Rilke tells us that Rodin’s sculptures appear as though they were held in “die Wirbel eines waschenden, nagenden Wassers” (5:156; “the whirlpool of a washing, gnawing torrent,” 17); that a face created by Rodin was “voll von Bewegung . . ., voll von Unruhe und Wellenschlag” (5:157; “as full of motion, as full of unrest as the dashing of waves,” 18); and that the sculptor’s work in general is like “a sea” (“ein Meer”) that is “nur Weite . . ., Bewegung und Tiefe” (5:141; “but distance, movement, depth,” 1). All sense of fixity is lost in the relentless language of aqueous dissolution.

Further, not only is the stability of the subject imperiled by its constant motion, but its wholeness is also compromised by a profound fragmentation. This is no longer the body of nineteenth-century neoclassical fantasies—single, indivisible, and coherent—but one that is shattered into pieces, where “jede Stelle war ein Mund, der es sagte, in seiner Art” (5:160; “every part was a mouth that spoke a language of its own,” 21). Certain passages in the text recall descriptions in The Notebooks of dismembered bodily parts: “Es giebt im Werke Rodins Hände, deren fünf gesträubte Finger zu bellen scheinen wie die fünf Hälse eines Höllemhundes. Hände, die gehen, schlafende Hände, und Hände, welche erwachen; verbrecheri-

7 In her fascinating chapter on Rodin in Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France, Debora Silverman provides an interpretation of the sculptor’s work that may serve as a useful supplement to Rilke’s more abstract reading. Silverman argues that Rodin’s understanding of the body and subjectivity was greatly influenced by Charcot’s theories regarding the corporal expression of nervous over-stimulation due to the excessive sensory barrage of the modern city (229–70). The parallels and connections to Rilke are obvious and extremely suggestive.
sche, erblich belastete Hände und solche, die müde sind, die nichts mehr wollen, die sich niedergelegt haben in irgend einen Winkel, wie kranke Tiere, welche wissen, daß ihnen niemand helfen kann" (5:164; “There are among the works of Rodin hands, single, small hands which, without belonging to a body, are alive. Hands that rise irritated and in wrath; hands whose five bristling fingers seem to bark like the five jaws of a dog of Hell. Hands that walk, sleeping hands, and hands that are awakening; criminal hands, tainted with hereditary disease; and hands that are tired and will do no more, and have lain down in some corner like sick animals that know no one can help them,” 24–25). The connection between this passage and Malte’s fantasy of the detachable hand is unmistakable. Rilke also comments that “eine Hand, die sich auf eines anderen Schulter oder Schenkel legt, gehört nicht mehr ganz zu dem Körper, von dem sie kam: aus ihr und dem Gegenstand, den sie beherrscht oder packt, entsteht ein neues Ding, das seine bestimmten Grenzen hat, handelt es sich nun” (5:165; “a hand laid on another’s shoulder or thigh does not any more belong to the body from which it came,—from this body and from the object which it touches or seizes something new originates, a new thing that has no name and belongs to no one,” 25). Clearly, we are on the same terrain as The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge, facing an uncanny body with porous boundaries and ill-defined limits.

However, whereas this fragmented and aqueous world caused Malte indescribable anxiety, Rodin remains absolutely calm. According to Rilke, Rodin does not see this disintegration as a fall or a blemish, but as a type of perfection: “So ist es auch bei den armlosen Bildsäulen Rodins; es fehlt nichts Notwendiges. Man steht vor ihnen als vor etwas Ganzem, Vollendetem, das keine Ergänzung zuläßt. Nicht aus dem einfachen Schauen kommt das Gefühl des Unfertigen, sondern aus der umständlichen Überlegung, aus der kleinlichen Pedanterie, welche sagt, daß zu einem Körper Arme gehören und daß ein Körper ohne Arme nicht ganz sein könne” (5:163; “The same completeness is conveyed in all the armless statues of Rodin: nothing necessary is lacking. One stands before them as before something whole. The feeling of incompleteness does not rise from the mere aspect of a thing, but from the assumption of a narrow-minded pedantry, which says that arms are a necessary part of the body and that a body without arms cannot be perfect,” 24). Fragmentation is not debased or imperfect, but only seems so when viewed through the lens of an ideology that insists on a pristine (and phantasmatic) wholeness. In this flux and disarticulation Rodin finds a “balance and equilibrium” of its very own (17) (“die Empfindung des Gleichgewichts, des Ausgleichs” [5:157]). Fragmentation, then, is not modernity’s affliction, something to be endured, but its form, and, as such, it should be celebrated in its own right.

Although this transvaluation is a radical move, Rilke trumps himself by taking it a step further. For according to the poet, Rodin’s celebration of the splintered modern body is not a subversive rejection of the ideals of Antiquity, but their apotheosis. At a time when many saw Rodin’s contorted figures as a rejection of the idealizing and holistic vision of ancient sculpture, Rilke presents his own dissident reading of classicism: “Es gab nur Bewegung in der Natur; und eine Kunst, die eine gewissenhafte und gläubige Auslegung des Lebens geben wollte, durfte nicht jene Ruhe, die es nirgends gab, zu ihrem Ideale machen. In Wirklichkeit hat auch die Antike nichts von einem solchen Ideal gewußt. Man mußte nur an die Nike
denken. Diese Skulptur hat uns nicht nur die Bewegung eines schönen Mädchens überliefert, das seinem Geliebten entgegengeht, sie ist zugleich ein ewiges Bildnis griechischen Windes, seiner Weite und Herrlichkeit. Und sogar die Steine älterer Kulturen waren nicht ruhig” (5:157–58; “Nature is all motion, and an art that wished to give a faithful and conscientious interpretation of life could not make rest, that did not exist, its ideal. In reality the Antique did not hold such an ideal. One has only to think of the Nike. This piece of sculpture has not only brought down to us the movement of a beautiful maiden who goes to meet her lover, but it is at the same time an eternal picture of Hellenic wind in all its sweep and splendour. There was no quiet even in the stones of still older civilizations,” 18). Because classical sculpture was always already an art of motion, a vortex of energy, Rodin is not a revolutionary who seeks to smash the classical inheritance, but its liberator, an artist who has rescued classicism from the hands of desiccated captors, the Winckelmannians, who for centuries had falsely associated it with stillness and repose. Thus, Rodin’s small figures are “ähnlich wie manche von den kleinen Tierfiguren der Antike” (“like some animal figures of the Antique”), and other sculptures are “griechische Arbeit” (5:173; “Greek work,” 33). For, Rilke argues, during a crucial phase of Rodin’s development “neue Beziehungen verbanden ihn fester mit der Vergangenheit seiner Kun. Diese Vergangenheit und ihre Größe, an der so viele wie an einer Last getragen hatten, ihm wurde sie der Flügel, der ihn trug. Denn wenn er in jener Zeit je eine Zustimmung empfangen hat, eine Bestärkung dessen, was er wollte und suchte, so kam sie von den Dingen der Antike und aus dem faltigen Dunkel der Kathedralen” (159; “new relations connected him more closely with the past of the art of sculpture, and the greatness of this past, which has been a restriction to so many, to him had become the wing that carried him. For if he received during that time an encouragement and confirmation of that which he wished and sought, it came to him from the art of the antique world and from the dim mystery of the cathedrals,” 20). Far from being the point of rupture, Rodin in fact reestablishes the link to the glories of classicism. And by embracing fragmentation this new classicism seems to provide a solution for Rilke’s anxieties about modern subjectivity.

IV.

In the late poem cycle The Sonnets to Orpheus, Rilke finally manages to integrate the Baudelairean insights of Rodin into his own poetic practice. In this strange and liminal work, he blurs the boundaries between classicism and contemporaneity, coherence and fragmentation, in order to articulate a radical vision of modern subjectivity. In sonnet XII of the second part, Rilke instructs us to “Wolle die Wandlung” (“Will transformation”) and warns us that “Was sich ins Bleiben verschließt, schon ist das Erstarrte” (Sonnets 82; “What shackles itself in survival already is rigidity,” 83). In the final sonnet of the suite, the poet urges us to “Geh in der Verwandlung aus und ein” (Selected Poems 254); “Move through transformation, out and in,” 255). “The ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent” are no longer the uncanny symptoms of a disordered modernity; they are the signifiers of a new form of selfhood, one that accepts lack as the condition of possibility for a constant reinvention of the I—something, in other words, very like a postmodern celebration of the
oceanic dispersion of the boundaries of the self. The overarching symbol of this ethos is Orpheus himself. According to Greek myth, the archetypal poet was torn to pieces by the maenads, and this literal fragmentation, this dis-integration, is dramatized by Rilke in sonnet XXVI:

> Du aber, Göttlicher, du, bis zuletzt noch Ertöner,
> da ihn der Schwarm der verschmähten Mänaden befiel,
> hast ihr Geschrei übertönt mit Ordnung, du Schöner,
> aus den Zerstörenden stieg dein erbauendes Spiel. (Sonnets 56)

But you, divine one, intoning to the very end,
When swarmed by the horde of spurned maenads
You drowned their cries with order, sublime one,
up from the mayhem rose your transforming song. (57)

Written at precisely the historical moment when, terrified by the uncanny city and its deleterious effects, increasing numbers of Europeans fled into a phantasmatic classicism that helped them to produce what Lacan calls the “armour of an alienating identity,” Rilke’s paean to a transvalued castration resonates with an almost unbearable loss.

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