

RILKE
IN
PARIS

RAINER MARIA RILKE
& MAURICE BETZ

*Edited, Translated and with
an Introduction by Will Stone*

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Rilke in Paris

by Maurice Betz

Ah, The achievement of a small moon!

Days where around us all is clear, barely an outline in the luminous air and yet distinct. Even the nearest things have a distant tone, shrink back, show only from a distance, are not exposed; and all that draws on this expanse of distance – the river, the bridges, the long roads and the squares which expend themselves – hold that distance within them, and are painted there as if on silk. Who can say what a bright green motorcar on Pont Neuf might be, or this vivid red rushing forth, or even simply that poster, on the wall adjoining a cluster of pearl-grey buildings. All is simplified, restored to a few planes, sharp and clear, as a face in a portrait by Manet. Nothing is insignificant or without relevance. The *bouquinistes* on the *quais* open their boxes, and the yellow freshness or weariness of the books, the brown violet of the bindings, the more sovereign green of an album, all harmonise, count, take part in the whole and converge in consummate perfection...

From *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910)

The 'French Component' In Rilke's Work

The case of Rainer Maria Rilke is rather extraordinary: a Germanic poet in the deepest sense, who represents, in both its most intense and subtle form, a singular branch of German romanticism, at the point where he encounters the final ripening of the Slavic spiritual universe and discovers his own true identity through his relationship with a French city.

In Paris, this German poet discovered not only a temporary home and more or less enduring friendships, but also an inner inspiration, which guided him towards the secret configuration of his entire being. For some twelve years he returned almost year on year, both contented and disappointed to encounter there ever renewed ecstasies and anxieties, and a virtually eternal landscape. This city lent him the framework and themes of a work through which he felt able to express himself to the very limits of the inexpressible, to the threshold of reflecting on and accepting death with a calm heart, following *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, in which he was conscious of having marshalled the entire resolve of his existence. He gave himself so utterly to this work that after its completion he remained for many years stricken by sterility. For Rilke, Paris had been much more than Venice for Byron, or Toledo for Barrès: a revelation of the most profound possibilities, the 'dividing line of his inward waters' and the touchstone of his art. He declared on several occasions, with distinct emotion, what a debt he owed to this 'incomparable city which represents a world in my development and memory' and whose 'immense and generous hospitality' allowed him to bring into the light those feelings and thoughts which were tentatively seeking their form.

However important the 'French component' in Rilke's work, it did not manage to govern alone the deeper reaches of his being. This inveterate traveller criss-crossing the very soul and landscape of Europe, nourished himself on the nectar of all

latitudes, without his fundamental architecture being altered. From one country to the next, he ploughed his unique furrow, scoring deep, sometimes losing himself in the most unfathomable subterranean labyrinths, but everywhere searching only that he might ultimately emerge into authentic existence.

In these scenic variations for the poet, one observes certain cycles. Some are of major significance: principally the Russian and French ones. The Danish and Spanish cycles allowed Rilke, on the one hand, access to the fantastic and the intimate acquaintanceship of ghosts, and, on the other, to that wide expanse of sky inhabited by Greco's supernatural angels, which haunt the *Elegies* and sustain the disembodied poetry. The Italian and Valaisan cycles frame these primary experiences: Florence and Venice are places of residence for the youthful poet who harmonises the first variegations of his impressionist palette, while towards the close of his life, the Valais afforded, following the deliverance which was the achievement of the *Duino Elegies*, the relaxation and relief enjoyed by a genial rustic poet.

In terms of foreign experiences, Rilke's discovery of Paris follows directly on from his encounter with the Slavic world, a religious and mystical phase which found expression in *The Book of Hours* written between 1899 and 1903. France presented Rilke with a 'human landscape', which was mirrored at the same time in the works of her painters, in the lessons and example of her poets, and by that life so naturally expressive which is reflected in the faces of the Parisian street. 'It is ever more difficult for the writer to find in action the exterior equivalent to the soul's movements' he wrote with Ibsen in mind. The landscape of Paris offered one of those equivalents. For Rilke, that revelation would only deepen, until it spread throughout his entire *oeuvre*.



7. The Pont des Arts