

RILKE AND HIS INFLUENCE ON SIX AMERICAN POETS

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The author of this article tried to demonstrate that Rilke had an important influence on six American Post-Modernist poets: Roethke, Schwartz, Jarrell, Berryman, Sexton and Plath who were particularly drawn to Rilke. Influences relate to American poets' use of Rilkean technique of writing, choice of subject matter (thematic similarities) and gesture. The aim of the article was to raise questions and offer possibilities for further research.

Mutter we all must as we can.
 He mutter spiffy. He make wonder Henry's
 wits, though, with an odd
 ... something ... something ... not there in his
 flourishing art.
 - John Berryman, "So Long? Stevens"
 (1968)

The "something" that was "not there" in the poetry of Wallace Stevens -- or any other twentieth century poetic model of comparable stature -- could be found, the premise of this study maintains, in the poetry of Rilke. What exactly this was is not easy to define. However it can be located somewhere in the gap between Stevens's and Rilke's ontologies. Stevens wrote from the position that Gods were dead, and that poetry should take their place; Rilke from the position that the gods exist somewhere, in some form, and that the purpose of poetry was to praise the world to them. Accordingly, Stevens's poetry presents a surface of "exquisite particulars"¹ in constant, non-repetitive flux, while Rilke's poetry is dominated by inner movement or gesture, and verbal surface is purposely made as inconspicuous and simple as possible. Stevens sees the past as irrevocable, while Rilke's expressions of nostalgia suggest: that to him it is. Ironically both poets tried to reproduce what Stevens called "not ideas about the thing but the thing itself." Yet for Stevens metaphor and reality remained forever separate, while Rilke hoped to do away with "the distance, the tension between subject and object"² by making the object itself sensate and by reifying the subject.

Rilke's ability to do this is perhaps untransferable, but, as it shall be shown here, his example remains a continuing challenge. W.D. Snodgrass has written relating to this:

"... I had studied with Rendall Jarrell in a writers conference at Boulder, Colorado (in 1951). Almost the only thing that he had liked of my work was some translation of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*. Also, in an effort to get me quit writing the kind of heavily symbolic, rhetorical poetry I had been doing under the influence of Robert Lowell, he had talked with me about Rilke's marvelous 'Orpheus, Euridicie, Hermes' with its incredible climax where Euridice says the most shocking and horrible thing possible--the one word 'who?' He went

¹ J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth Century Writers* (Cambridge, Mass.; Harvard University Press, 1965), str. 222.

² Hans Egon Holthusen, *Rainer Maria Rilke: A Study of His Later Poetry*, trans., J.P. Stern (Cambridge Bowes & Bowes, 1952), str. 11.

on to ask me, what can you do with any kind of fancy language or verbal fireworks that is going to match that pure tension?"³

Ten years after W.D. Snodgrass heard Jarrel teach it, Rilke's "marvelous" poem was, interestingly enough, the subject of one of Lowell's "Imitations". The relevant stanzas Rilke's "Orpheus, Euridike, Hermes" follow below:

Sie war schon nicht mehr diese schöne Frau,
die in des Dichters Liedern manchmal anklang,
nicht mehr des breiten Bettes Duft und Eiland
und jenes Mannes Eigentum nicht mehr.
Sie war schon aufgelöst wie langes Haar
und hingegeben wie gefallner Regen
und susgeteilt wie hunderfacher Vorrat.

Sie war schon Wurzel.
Und als plötzlich jäh
der Gottsie anhielt und mit Schmerz im Ausruf
die Worte sprach: Er hat sich ungewendet --,
begriff sie nichts und saget leise: Wer?⁴

In English these stanzas read:

She was not any longer this blond woman
who in the poet's songs would sometime echo,
not any more the broad bed's *seent* and island,
and the possession of this man no more.
She was already loosed as flowing hair
and long relinquished as the falling rain
and meted out as hundredfold provisions.
She was become a root.
And when with sudden force
the god stopped her and with pain in his cry
pronounced the words: he has turned back --
she comprehended nothing and said softly: Who?⁵

³ Carol Becker, "Interview With William Snodgrass" *Hudson Review* XVII, No. 4 (Winter 1965-66), str. 96.

⁴ "Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes," Rilke Werke I (*Werke in drei Bänden*. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1966) str. 303-301.

⁵ "Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes," trans. Walter Kaufman, *Twenty-Five German Poets* (New York, 1975), str. 229-231.

One should note that in the first stanza of the German quoted, the phrase "nicht mehr" occurs three times, although Kaufman has, mistakenly, it is my opinion, chosen to vary this to "not any longer", "not any more", and "no more", thereby losing the effect of the exact repetition. The significance of this point will be given below. Here it is important to note that this section of this poem is a famous and prototypical example of Rilke's ability to achieve the effect of transcendence of the human, earthbound condition through poetry. Eurydice's divine or uncanny indifference as expressed in that famous "Wer?" is a sign of her having achieved a stance other than Orpheus's (or the reader's) from which to view Orpheus quest. Before she demonstrated this stance, we would never have guessed it. After she does so, we are convinced it is the only one she could have taken. This is indeed, "pure invention". Comparable moments may be found in a number of other Rilke's great poems. The point is, that all the poets in this study (six of them), I maintain, made repeated attempts to imitate them.

For example, Delmore Schwartz, the first of the poets in this study to achieve a reputation as a poet,⁶ and a commentator on Rilke,⁷ echoed the above quoted section of "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes." in "Poem VIII" from the "The Repetitive Heart" (included in his first published volume of prose and poetry, *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*. Following is the relevant text of "Poem VIII":

Abraham and Orpheus, be with me now:
 You saw your love's face abstract, the weak-imeed stilts,
 You saw and knew, and knew how near "no more",
 (As one who scrutinizes mystery, the air,
 Has poised on nothing, weighted on the air,
 The touched seen substance, the substance of care:
 Surround me, be round me, be with me like the air,
 Abraham and Orpheus, be with me now.

Love love exhausts and time goes round and round,
 Time circles in its idiot defeat,
 And that which circles falls, falls endlessly,
 Falls endlessly, no music shapes the air
 Which did, can, shall restore the end of care,
 For love exhausts itself and time goes round,

⁶ "When *In Dreams* appeared, Robert Lowell, John Berryman and Randall Jarrell had not yet published a line." in James A t l a s, *Delmore Schwartz: The Life of an American Poet*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977, str. 57.

⁷ Cf. Schwartz's "A Great Poem. In English" (review essay of the Leishman/Spender translation of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*), *Partizan Review* (Summer, 1939) : 119-121. in which Schwarz praises Spender's translation of Rilke's "Orpheus. Eurydice Hermes" in particular.

I shudder in the traffic, buildings stand,
 Will fall and night will fall, the electric light be snapped
 To spread its yellow genius on the floor,
 And you knew too who knew and knew "no more"
 That love exhausts itself and falls and time goes round.

Abraham and Orpheus, be with me now:
 No loner the grandstand, nor the balcony,
 Nor the formal window gives me cool perspective:
 Love sucked me to the moving street bellow,
 I see the price of care, *turning* to keep,
 I am a price, I *turn* to keep, I care,
 But time which circles dissipates all care,
 As you knew too, who lifted up the knife,
 And you, musician in the after-life,
 Drowning in the shadow all love always bears,
 As every solid thing must shadow in the light:
 I ask you learned presence, I care and fear,
 Abraham and Orpheus, be near, be near.

I have italicized the phrase "no more", which occurs once in each of the first two stanzas of this poem--in quotes in the original also (an exhibition of unattributed erudition in the true, Pound/Eliot tradition)--, and I have italicized "turning" and "turn" in the third stanza, because I believe they belong to an important phrase in the Rilke poem, "Er hat sich umgewendet--" ("He has turned back--"). Schwarze's use of "no more" in connection with Orpheus is self-explanatory, once we know he is quoting Rilke. The "turning" has to do with Schwarze's fear, as expressed in this poem, that he will "turn", that he will lose "the cool perspective", be "sucked" by "love" "to the moving street below". To guard against this, he three times invokes his chosen mentors, "Abraham and Orpheus", the father of all Jews and the first poet, both of whom had to endure the finality of "no more", and for a reason beyond their comprehension.

This youthfully intense poem, with its unusual linking of Abraham and Orpheus, was not specifically mentioned in any of the original reviews of *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities* that I could find. George O'Donell, Babbette Deutsche, Louise Bogan and Duddley Fitts all, after giving unreserved praise to the title story, contended themselves with noting a general indebtiness in Schwarze's poems to Auden, Yeats, Eliot, and Hart Crane. Rilke went completely unnoticed, and so did Joyce, whose prayer in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "Old

father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead",⁸ sounds to me like the prototype for the first line of Schwartz's poem. It is obvious that Schwarz's idea of the artist is the Joycean one: "The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, pairing his fingernails",⁹ but as "Poem VIII" suggests, his idea of poetic force seems to derive from Rilke.

Similarly, it has not so far to my knowledge been remarked that another of Rilke's best known and strongest poems, "Der Panther", can be shown to have exerted an influence upon an early poem by Roethke. That Roethke read the poem cannot be doubted, since he is on record as having referred (with typically expansive disregard for detail) to "Rilke gazing at his tiger for eight hours ..."¹⁰ Assuming, since Rilke never wrote a poem about a tiger, that "Der Panther" was what Roethke had in mind, so let us examine the poem, the complete text of which follows:

Der Panther

Im Jardin des Plantes, Paris

Sein Blick ist vom Vorübergehen der Stäbe
so müd geworden, dass er nicht mehr halt.
Ihm ist, als ob es tausend Stäbe gäbe
und hinter tausend Stäben keine Welt.

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

Nur manchmal schiebt der Vorhang der Pupille
sich lautlos auf--. Dann geht ein Bild hinein,

⁸ James A t l a s, *Delmore Schwartz: The Life of an American Poet*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977, str. 40. "For the rest of Schwartz's life, Joyce was to be his literary hero, *Finnegan's Wake* a work he read and annotated with such intensity that his Copies would fall apart: he went through several in his lifetime."

⁹ James J o y c e, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, The Portable James Joyce*, ed. Harry Levin (New York, 1946) str. 481-482.

¹⁰ Theodore R o e t h k e, "On Identity", *On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke*, ed. Ralph Mills, Jr. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1965, str. 25.

geht durch der Glieder angespannte Stille--
und hört im Herzen auf zu sein."¹¹

The Panther

His vision from the passing of the bars
is grown so weary that it holds no more.
To him it seems there are a thousand bars
And behind a thousand bars no world.

The padding gait of flexibly strong strides,
that in the very small circles turns,
is like a dance of strength-around a center
in which stupefied a great will stands.

Only sometimes the curtain of the pupil
soundlessly parts--. Then an image enters,
goes through the tensioned stillness of the limbs--
and in the heart ceases to be.

It seems to me that this poem works to dissolve the barriers between this world and the next in the same that "Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes" did. To the caged panther in stanza one there are "tausend Stäben" but "keine Welt", In the second stanza "betäubt" is the key word, reminiscent of Rilke's description of Eurydike: "begriffst sie nichts". This panther exists beyond all that is happening to him, beyond anything that can be done to him. The form of the poem, like the Shakespearean sonnet minus the closing couplet, contributes its literal "open-endedness" after stricture to the effect of unease and a we which the poem visits upon its reader.

Here is Roetke's "The Heron" from his first collection of poems, *Open House*, published in 1941:

The heron stands in water where the swamp
has deepened to the blackness of the pool,
or balances with one leg on a hump
Of marsh grass heaped above a musk-rat hole.

He walks the shallow with an antic grace.
The great feet break the ridges of the sand,

¹¹ Rilke Werke I, str. 261 (Rainer Maria Rilke, *Werke in drei Bänden*, Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1966)

The great eye notes the minnow's hiding place.
His beak is quicker than a human hand.

He jerks a frog against his bony lip,
Then points his heavy bill above the wood.
The wide wings flap but once to lift him up.
A single ripple starts from where he stood.¹²

It is easy to note that "Der Panther" like "The Heron" is in three, four-line stanzas of alternately rhyming pentameter, heavily end-stopped. (That is, a truncated "Shakespearean sonnet"). As in the Rilke poem, stanza one points the picture of the subject as if in a "stil" photograph. In stanza two both panther and heron go into characteristic motion, seen by Rilke as "ein Tanz von Kraft" and by Roethke as "antic grace". In stanza three of each poem the subject transcends its surroundings: the panther by internalizing the whole problem, as it were; the heron by flying away and leaving only "a single ripple" as testimony it was ever there.

Critic Karl Malkoff finds in this poem "the association of sexuality of particularly aggressive kind, the sense of godlike, somewhat amoral power, and the feeling of death and transitory reality ... all present without recourse to external reference".¹³ Malkoff says this in support of his overall hypothesis that the quiding presences in *Open House* were Freud and Auden.¹⁴ I would submit, that all but the first phrase of the description quoted above applies equally well to Rilke's, and that Roethke's model was Rilke's poem. In "Open Letter", an introductory essay to a selection of his early poems, including the "The Heron", Roethke invents a correspondent who urges him to elaborate on his methods of composition, saying, "Remember, some noble spirits in the past--Blake, Yeats, Rilke, and others--have been willing to hold forth on their own work..." To which Roethke, in his role of poet, disarmingly replies, "you will have no trouble if you approach these poems as the child would...",¹⁵ after which disclaimer he proceeds to give a very closely reasoned description of the means he employed to attain the results he desired. Although he does not mention Rilke in his essay (again), it is significant that he mentions here *at all*, and then omits specific discussion of the one poem in the collection, "The Heron", which is most clearly Rilkean. In support of my

¹² Theodore Roethke, *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975, str. 25.

¹³ Karl Malkoff, *Theodore Roethke: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York and London, 1966) str. 27-28.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, str. 24.

¹⁵ As quoted in footnote 10., str. 37.

hypothesis I would also note that "The Heron" is the only one of all Roethe's "animal poems"--including "The Snake", "The Slug", "The Siskins", and so forth, where the "I" of the poet does not enter. If I am correct, the "I" is, uncharacteristically for Roethe, left out because he was attempting the Rilkean "Dinggedicht", a kind of poem which Roethe described quite adequately without identifying it in the penultimate paragraph of "Open Letter": "(The poet's) language must be compelling and immediate: he must create an actuality. He must be able to telescope an image and symbol, if necessary, without relying on the obvious connectives: to speak in a kind of psychic shorthand when his protagonist is under great stress."¹⁶ (Ergo, a "thing poem.")

Jarell's interest in Rilke's poetry has already been suggested here in Snodgrass's letter, quoted above. It would be rather interesting to turn again to the text of Rilke's "Der Panther" to compare it with Jarell's early (1945) poem "The Snow-Leopard", the complete text of which follows:

His pads furring the scrap's rime,
 Weightless in greys and ecru, gliding
 Invisibly, incuriously
 As the crystals of the cirri wandering
 A mile below his absent eyes,
 The leopard gazes at the caravan.
 The yaks groaning with tea, the burlaps
 Lapping and lapping each stunned universe
 That gaps like a kettle for its thinning life
 Are pools in the interminable abyss
 That ranges up through ice, through air, to night.
 Raiders of the unminding element,
 The last cold capillaries of their kind,
 They move so slowly they are motionless
 To any eye less stubborn than a man's ...
 From the implacable jumble of the blocks
 The grains dance icily, a scouring plume,
 Into the breadth, sustaining, unsustainable,
 They trade to that last stillness for their death.
 They sense with misunderstanding horror, with desire,
 Behind the world their blood sets up in mist
 The brute of geometrical necessity:
 The leopard waving with a grating purr
 His six-foot tall; the leopard, who looks sleepily--

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, str. 42.

Cold, fugitive, secure--at all that he knows,
At all that he is: the heart of heartlessness,¹⁷

In her critical work on Jarell, Susan Ferguson writes "The Snow-Leopard" is no more a poem about a cat than is (Blake's) "The Tiger". If anything, there is less attention given to the animal itself. Its appearance is sketched in two lines and the only other physical details alluded to are the 'the grating purr' and the waving six-foot tail".¹⁸ (Miss Ferguson sees "The Snow-Leopard" as asking "Blake's question... in a new idiom "'Did he who made the lamb make thee?'"¹⁹) On the other hand her too literal assesment of the number of lines of Jarell's poem where he gives attention "to the animal itself" (I count the last six plus the last four), indicates to me that she might have missed some other subtleties as well.

Surely on of these is the way Jarell describes his snowleopard with true Rilkean objectivity. In fact this is a prerequisite for the poem's being able to make its point in Rilkean fashion, without outside comment. In the penultimate line Jarell is careful to say the poem's world is "all that (the snow-leopard) knows". He *is* his world; his world and he define each other, just as Rilke's panther makes his own world within his cage, and "kills" in his heart any encroachment from the outside world that is every day killing him.

On a less abstract level it is easy to observe that Jarell has in many ways used imagery similar to Rilke's. Of course some of this would be bound to be the same in poems picturing animals as similar as panther and leopard. (The snow-leopard stands on "pads"; the panther's gait is "weiche"). But the concentration in both poems on what Jarell calls the "absent eyes" and what Rilke describes as the panther's "müd" "Blick" seems more than a coincidence of the "animal poem" genre, as does the fact that both poems end with an image of some sort of death in the heart.

Clearly Jarell made no attempt to imitate the form of "Der Panther". That would have been inappropriate in a poem whose central section--fifteen out of the twenty-six lines is concerned with describing the "caravan" which the snow-leopard sees. But the import of this central section still holds to the Rilkean thought pattern.²⁰ That is, Rilke's panther sees "hinter tausend Stäben keine Welt", while Jarell's snow-leopard, so far away from the caravan that it would seem "motionless/To any eye less stubborn than a man's", can see nothing of the wordly

¹⁷ Randall J a r r e l l, *The Complete Poems*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969, str. 115.

¹⁸ Suzanne F e r g u s o n, *The Poetry of Randall Jarrell*, Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1971, str. 51.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, str. 57.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, str. 58.

detail suggested by “the yaks groaning with tea, the burlaps”, and so forth. The snow-leopard too sees “no world”—only the “bars” set up by “all that he is”. But he sees it from the great “height” of a twenty six line, one stanza poem, rather than from the confines of a sonnet “cage”, even a Rilkean one without the “lock” of a closing couplet.

In a conversation with an interviewer in 1965 about influences on his work, John Berryman referred to Rilke as being among his “passions of those remote days (the 1930’s)”.²¹ Berryman’s first book publication was in 1940 in *Five Young American Poets*,²² which also included Jarrell. But Berryman did not “realy begin writing well”,²³ as he put it, until about 1948 with the publication of *The Dispossessed*, by which time in his writing life he claimed “there was no Yeats around and no Auden. Some influence from Rilke...”²⁴

The “influence” from Rilke is not hard to find. In Rilke’s *Das Buch der Bilder* (Zweiten Buches, Zweiter Teil) are a series of “Lieder” with titles such as “Das Lied des Bettlers”, “Das Lied des Blinden” and so forth. Rilke explains in a “Titelblatt” the reason he lets these pathetic cases sing: because “Gott selber kommt und bleibt lang./- wenn ihn diese Beschnittenen stören”. Berryman in *The Dispossessed* includes a series of “Nervous Songs” with titles “The Song of a Demented Priest”, “Song of the Man Forsaken and Obsessed”, and “The Song of the Tortured Girl”. Certainly another collection of the “Beschnittennen”. These songs like the Rilke Lieder, composed of three six-line pentameter stanzas, with some variations to include four or seven-line stanzas. The “Nervous Songs” employ slant rhyme or no rhyme, where the Rilke Lieder display couplets, sometime triplets in every stanza. But at least some of the disparity between the two poets: use of end rhyme is no daubt owing to the grater number of rhyme possibilities offered by the German language.

But not only has Berryman made good use of Rilke’s technical example and choice of subject matter; he has also managed to reproduce the Rilkean effect of a pathos which has dignity. Following, as an example, is a complete text of Berryman’s “The Song of the Tortured Girl”:

²¹ John B e r r y m a n, “One Answer to a Question”, *Shenandoah* XVII (Autumn, 1965) str. 65.

²² *Five Young American Poets: Mary Barnard, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman, W.R. Moses, George Marion O’Donell*, Norfolk, Conn.,: New Directions, 1940, str. 37-85.

²³ John B e r r y m a n, “The Art of Poetry XVI”, *Paris Review* XIV (Winter, 1972) str. 184.

²⁴ As quoted in Footnote 11, Rilke Werke I, str. 204.

After a little I could not have told--
 But no one asked me this -- why I was there.
 I asked. The ceiling of that place was high
 And there were sudden noises, which I made.
 I must have stayed there a long time today:
 My cup of soup was gone when they brought me back.

Oftentimes, 'Nothing worse now can come to us'
 I thought, the winter the young men stayed away,
 My uncle died and mother cracked her crutch.
 And then the strange room where the brightest light
 Does not shine on the strange men: shines on me.
 I feel them stretch my youth and throw a switch.

Through leafless branches the sweet wind blows
 Making mild sound softer than a moan;
 High in a pass once where we put our tent,
 Minutes I lay awake to hear my joy.
 --I no longer remember what they want.--
 Minutes I lay awake to hear my joy.²⁵

And here is the complete text of Rilke's "Das Lied des Idioten":

Sie hindern mich nicht. Sie lassen mich gehn.
 Sie sagen es könne nicht geschehen.
 Wie gut.
 Es kann nichts geschehen. Alles kommt und kreist
 immerfort um den heiligen Geist,
 um den gewissen Geist (du weißt)--,
 Wie Gut.

Nein man muss nicht wirklich meinen es sei
 irgend eine Gefahr dabei.
 Da ist freilich das Blut.
 Das Blut ist das schwerste. Das Blut ist schwer.
 Manchmal glaub ich, ich kann nicht mehr--
 (Wie Gut)

Ach was ist das für ein schöner Ball;
 rot und rund wie ein überall.

²⁵ John B e r r y m a n. *77 Dream Songs*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux/The Noonday Press, 1959, str. 81.

Gut das ich ihn erschuft.
Ob der wohl kommt wenn man ruft?

Wie sich das alle seltsam benimmt,
ineinandertreibt, auseinanderschwimmt:
freundlich, ein wenig unbestimmt.
Wie Gut.²⁶

Following is M.D. Herter Norton Translation:

“The Song of the Idiot”

They do not hinder me. They let me go.
They say that nothing can happen.
How good.
Nothing can happen. All things come and circle
constantly around the Holy Ghost,
round the certain spirit (you know)--,
how good.

No, one must really not think that there is
danger in it of any sort.
Of course there's the blood.
The blood is the heaviest. The blood is heavy.
Sometimes I think I cannot go on--.
(How good),

Ah, what a beautiful ball that is;
red and round as an everywhere.
Good that you created it.
Wonder if it comes when one calls?

How oddly all that behaves,
running together, swimming apart:
friendly, a little indefinite;
How good.

²⁶ Rilke Werke I, str. 208-209. (T. 11 and 24)

Berryman's "tortured girl" would appear to be a native of a mountainous country who has been captured, presumably during World War II. Her captors are not specified, nor is her nationality.²⁷ The girl has obviously been tortured into such a state that she can make no more out of the reality that surrounds her than to register its particulars -- as does Rilke's idiot. Apparently what Berryman is attempting here to do is to depict an imbodiment of pure "joy" and the bitter implication of the poem is that this can come only from mindlessness. And it may be that Berryman saw in the Rilke poem, as I do, the outlines of an untold narrative of torture: the "Sie" in the first line of that poem then is a group of rowdy children who would not be above molesting an idiot. In the second stanza, the "es" becomes an ambush of the sorts which these children have set for the idiot. (Perhaps they have encircled him). In the third stanza the "Schöner Ball" is one which they are about to throw at the idiot. And in the last stanza "alles" is "ineinandertreibt, auseinanderschwimmt" because he has suffered a slight concussion from being hit with the ball. Of course this poem can be read, as Walter Kaufman does, as simply "the poet projec(ing) into the mind of an idiot and relat(ing) an irrational stream of consciousness".²⁸ My hypothesis about Berryman's reading of this poem must remain just that. But in any case, it seems clear to me that the "tortured girl's" "joy" and the "Wie Gut" of Rilke's idiot come from the same store of transcendent innocence.

As an early example of the influence of Rilke upon Sylvia Plath's work, I have chosen "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor", first published in *The New Yorker*, August 9, 1958, and then included in Plath's first book, *The Colossus* with "They ... quite privately, bore me".²⁹ "Rock Harbor, Cape Cod" was the subject of one of the three, stark pen-drawings by Plath included in Charles Newman's *The Art of Sylvia Plath*.³⁰ In this drawing are three beached fishing boats (or "smacks" as she calls them in the poem), all leaning at different angles. The two windows in the cabin of the boat in the foreground look like the eye-sockets in a skull. The mood, as in the other two drawings, could best be described as bleak. Yet Rock Harbor was a place of happy memories for Plath. She had spent the summer of 1957 there with her husband of a year, Ted Hughes, and with her brother Warren. In 1958 she wrote a letter to their brother in which she described a sort of artistic credo which

²⁷ William H e y e n, "John Berryman: A Memoir and an Interview", *The Ohio Review* (Winter, 1974) str. 54.

²⁸ Walter K a u f m a n n, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*, Boston, Mass., 1959. str. 202.

²⁹ Peter O r r, *The Poet Speaks*, London, 1966, str. 170.

³⁰ Charles N e w m a n, *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press; Midland Book Edition, 1971, str. 280-282.

she and her poet-husband planned to follow: they would produce books on "folklore, fiddler crabs and meteorites", she wrote. "This is what the imagination thrives on. The horror of the academic writer is that he lives on air and other people's second hand accounts of other people's writing ..."³¹

The "fiddler crab" is the central image of "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor", appears at the end of the poem as "death mask" or "skull(s)" and, as I hope to demonstrate, offers an early example of Plath's use of Rilkean technique.

Plath could have been well acquainted with Rilke's poetry even before studying it at Smith's college. Plath's mother, Aurelia Plath, in chronicling her own student years at Boston University, mentions that while working in the summer of 1927 for an M.I.T. professor who was "a genius in both the arts and the sciences", she was introduced by him to "the poems of Rainer Maria Rilke".³² Then later in this introductory essay to a collection of her daughter's letters she says "Sylvia read almost all the books I collected while I was in college, used them as her own, underlining passages that held particular significance for her".³³ From Smith College in a letter of December 12, 1954, Plath writes to her mother: "For our German Unit tonight we had to translate and explicate a poem apiece by Rainer Maria Rilke, a really stimulating assignment because a bit beyond our complete grasp. I got so interested in mine, 'Ein Prophet', that I made a stab at translating verse with rhyme scheme and rhythm exactly like Rilke, and except for a few places I have to rework, it came out rather well, if I do say so!"³⁴ The "prophet" in Rilke's poem is a volcano, with fiery eyes looking out from under thick brows--an image whose ominous inscrutability would have particularly appealed to Plath as a sort of death mask.

"Ein Prophet" is from Rilke's *Neue Gedichte, Anderer Teil*. Peter Davison, whom Plath was dating in 1955, recalls that Plath brought him her poem to see. He says "she wrote of herself as a panther, as an acrobat..."³⁵ Perhaps Rilke's "Der Panther", the most famous poem from *Neue Gedichte, Erster Teil*, lurked in the background here. Perhaps the unearthly saltimbagues of Rilke's Fifth Duino Elegy. But there need be no conjecture about the continuing importance of Rilke to Plath if we read the following passage from her letter to her mother dated May 26, 1956 (somewhat before her marriage to Ted Hughes): "Our minds are just enraptured with words, ideas, languages. I took out my Rilke's poems and my dear

³¹ Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home: Selected and with Commentary by Aurelia Schober Plath*, Toronto/New York/London: Bantam Book, 1977, str. 394.

³² *Ibid.*, str. 7.

³³ *Ibid.*, str. 28.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, str. 161.

³⁵ Peter Davison, *Half-Remembered*, New York, 1973, str. 170.

Märchen der Brüder Grimm to read aloud my favourite German pieces to him (he doesn't know German) and translated on the spot, getting very excited. I've definitely decided to take German next year, concentrating on Rilke and Kafka, and some Thomas Mann".³⁶

Plath enclosed a copy of "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor" in the above-quoted letter to her brother of June 11, 1958, and said of it: "Here is a poem I made about the fiddler crabs we found at Rock Harbor when we went to get mussels last summer for fish bait If you find anything inaccurate about the crabs, do tell me about it. Read it aloud for the sounds of it. This is written in What's known as 'syllabic verse', measuring lines not by heavy and light stresses, but by the number of syllables, which here is 7. I find this form satisfactorily strict (a pattern of varying the number of syllables in each line can be set up, as M. Moore does it) and yet it has a speaking illusion of freedom (which the measured stress doesn't have) as stresses vary freely".³⁷

The text of "Mussel Hunter at Rock harbor" follows:

I came before the water-
 Colorists came to get the
 Good of the Cape light that scours
 Sand grit to sided crystal
 And bluffs and sleeks the blunt hulls
 Of the three fishing smacks beached
 On the bank of the river's

Backtracking tail. I'd come for
 Free fish-bait: the blue mussels
 Clumped like bulbs at the grass-root
 Margin of the tidal pools.
 Dawn tide stood dead low. I smelt
 Mud stench, shell guts, gull's leavings;
 Hard a queer crusty scrabble

Cease, and I neared the silenced
 Edge of a cratered pool-bed.
 The mussels hung dull blue and
 Conspicuous, yet it seemed
 A sly world's hinges had swung

³⁶ As quoted in f. 31. (*Letters Home: Selected and with Commentary* by Aurelia Schober Plath), str. 290.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, str. 476 ("... the American poet I admire next to Robert Lowell .. Ted (for Theodore) Roethke ... he is my influence)

Shut against me. All held still.
Though I counted scant seconds,

Enough ages lapsed to win
Confidence of self conduct
In the wary otherworld
Eying me. grass put forth claws;
Small mud knobs, nudged from under,
Displaced their domes as tiny
Knights might doff their casques. The crabs

Mussels. From what the crabs saw,
If they could see, I was one
Two-legged mussel-picker.
High on the airy thatching
Of the dence grass I found
The husk of a fiddler-crab,
The crab-face, etched and set there,

Grimaced as skulls grimace: it
Had an Oriental Look
A samurai death mask done
On a tiger tooth, less for art's sake
Than God's. Far from sea--
Where red-freckled crab-backs, claws
And whole crabs, dead, their soggy

Bellies pallid and upturned,
Perform their, shambling waltzes
On the waves'dissolving turn
And return, losing themselves
Bit by bit to their friendly
Element-- this relic saved
Face, to face the bald- faced sun.

In addition to the influence of Marianne Moore's technique of syllabics on this poem as noted by Plath herself, it seems clear that the imagery of the first three-and-a-half stanzas is closely patterned on that of Theodore Roethke in *The Lost Son and Other Poems*, Roethke's influence on the poems in *The Colossus* in general was noted by more than one reviewer.³⁸ But no one seems to have noticed the clear thematic similarities between the last nine-and-a-half stanzas of

³⁸ Bernard Baragonzi, "The Ransom Note", *Manchester Guardian*, November 25, 1960, str. 9.

“Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor” and themes in Rilke’s First *Duino Elegy*. Considering Plath’s enthusiasm for Rilke’s poetry as demonstrated above. I would suggest that these thematic similarities repay examination. Following are relevant sections from “Die Erste Elegie”, each accompanied by a translation from the edition Plath would most likely have consulted:³⁹

Wer, wenn ich schrie, hörte mich denn aus der Engel
Ordnungen? und gesetzt selbst, es nähme
einer mich plötzlich aus Herz: ich verginge von seinem
stärkeren Dasein. Denn das schöne ist nichts
als des Schrecklichen Anfang, den wir noch grade ertragen,
und wir bewundern es so, weil es glassen verschmäh,
uns zu zerstören. Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich.
Und so verhalt ich mich denn und verschlucke den Lockruf
dunkelen Schluchzens. Ach, wen vermögen
wir denn zu brauchen? Engel nicht, Menschen nicht,
und die findigen Tiere merken es schon,
das wir nicht sehr verlässlich zu Haus sind
in der gedeuteten Welt. Es bleibt uns vielleicht
irgend ein Baum an dem Abhang, das wir Ihn täglich
wiedersähen; es bleibt uns die Strasse von gestern
und das verzogene Treusein einer Gewohnheit,
der es bei uns gefiel, und so blieb sie und ging nicht...

Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic
orders? And even if one of them suddenly
pressed me suddenly against his heart, I should fade in
the strength of his
stronger existence. For Beauty’s nothing
but beginning of Terror we’re still just able to bear,
and why we adore it so is because it srenely
disdains to destroy us. Each single Angel is terrible.
And so I keep down my heart, and swallow the call-note
of depth-dark sobbing. Alas, who is there
we can make use of? Not angels, not men;
and already the knowing brutes are aware
that we don’t feel very securely at home.
within our interpreted world. There remains, perhaps,
some tree on a slope, to be looked at day after day,

³⁹ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, The German text with an English translation, introduction and commentary by J.B. Leishman and Stephen Spender (New York, 1939) str. 8-89.

there remains for us yesterday's walk and the cupboard-
 love loyalty
 of a habit that liked us and stayed and never gave notice-
 and full of retrieving before one begins to espy
 a trace of eternity.--Yes, but all of the living
 make the mistake of drawing too sharp distinctions.
 Angels, (they say) are often unable to tell
 whether they move among living or dead....

Aber wir, die so grosse
 Geheimnisse brauchen, denen aus Trauer so oft
 seliger Fortschritt entspringt--: könnten wir sein ohne sie?
 Ist die sage umsonst, das einst in der Kalge um Linos
 wagende erste Musik dürre Erstarrung durchdrang,
 dass erst im erschrockenen Raum, dem ein beinah göttlicher
 Jüngling
 plötzlich für immer enttrat, das Leere in jene
 Schwingung geriet, die uns jetzt hinreisst und tröstet
 und hilft.

But we, that have need of
 such mighty secrets, we, for whom sorrow's so often
 source of blessedest progress, could we exist without them?
 Is the story in vain, how once, in the mourning for Linos,
 venturing earliest music pierced barren numbness, and how,
 in the horrified space an almost deified youth
 suddenly quitted for ever, emptiness first
 felt the vibration that now charms us and comfort and helps?

The last quoted portion concludes the elegy. In my view the quoted portions concern, respectively: 1) man's undefined place between "the angelic orders" and "the knowing brutes"; 2) the praiseworthiness of "the Hero", for whom a "fall" was only a "pretext" for an "ultimate birth"; 3) advice that one shouldn't make too "sharp distinctions" between the "living" and the "dead"; and 4) the suggestion that "sorrow" is necessary because it generates in us the need to create a musical "mourning", and that this "mourning" makes some sort of an impact on "space", at the same time that is also (as "music") "charms us and comforts and helps". Insofar as a summation of this fragmented poem is possible, I believe Rilke is saying that, appearances of human helplessness to the contrary, there is a connection, through death, between man and the angels, and that this is most easily made by the hero, who risks all and dies, thereby joining the gods. If the hero is a musician, as was "Linos", then the connection can automatically be made

between him and Orpheus, the archetypal musician and poet whose creative powers almost enabled him to triumph over death.

"Mussel Hunter at Rock harbor" is also about a hero, the fiddler crab, who has "strayed above"/His world of mud" and died "saving/Face, to face the bald-faced sun". In stanza 5 Plath suggests by negation ("no fiddler's arm) that the implications of musicianship in the crab's name are part of her awareness of it as symbol. In the last sentence of stanza 7 and in stanza 8 she deals with her perception of the crabs as an "Absolutely alien//Order" and wonders "Could they feel mud/Pleasurable under claws/As I could between bare toes?" Following these references we hear next of "Halley's/Comet" and the speaker's "Orbit", and must be aware that the poet is making some sort of cosmic statement. She keeps changing reference points, in Rilkean fashion, between herself as seen by the crabs, and the crabs as seen and not understood by her (grown grimly, and grimly/ Borne, for a use beyond my/ Guessing of it); and then in stanza 10 the Rilkean process of blending fiddler crab and speaker is completed when she says (with a careful, Frostian wryness of tone): "From what the crabs saw,/ If they could see, I was one/ Two-legged mussel-picker".

With that statement the ontological hierarchy has been stood on its head, and Plath has now prepared the way for her final Rilkean statement about suicide, art, God, and the hero. The "husk" she finds is the husk of a "headstrong Columbus crab", a hero whose "death mask" seems a religious offering, although also an artistic one. The element of music is introduced again in stanza 13, where the "soggy" bodies of the ordinary fiddler crabs "Perform their shambling waltzes/ on the waves' dissolving turn/ And return, losing themselves / Bit by bit to their friendly / Element ...". These are the same fiddler crabs who in stanzas 4 through 7 were described as "knights" in "mottled mail" and in stanza 9 as going about their "business, which / Wasn't fiddling". These ironically misnamed warriors die ignominiously, "Waltzing" in spite of themselves to oblivion. The speaker, as described above, has by a radical shift of stance equated herself with these musician-warriors. As a result of this identification, three sentient orders exist in the world of this poem: the fiddler-crabs (of whom the speaker is one), the "Columbus crab" (whom the speaker clearly would be like if she could), and "God", here represented by "the bald-faced sun". I submit that Plath's "otherworld" of fiddler crabs was, if not suggested then at least formalized as a concept by Rilke's "Engel Ordnungen", whose members, like herself, "Wüsten oft nicht, ob sie unter / Lebenden gehn oder Toten". She has in "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor" successfully blurred the "zu stark unterscheiden" against which Rilke warned, and she has created a true Rilkean hero, who "saved / Face" in the face of "the bald-faced-sun", thereby gaining for himself "his ultimate birth".

Anne Sexton's access to Rilke was more remote than any of the other poets in this group, since she "surely didn't read German".⁴⁰ Having had no education beyond the "finishing school"⁴¹ which she attended until her elopement at the age of twenty, she began her serious commitment to poetry nine years later, when she enrolled in a course at the Boston Education Center with poet John Holmes. In the summer of 1958 she attended the Antioch Writers' Conference, where she studied with W.D. Snodgrass, "then her favorite".⁴² His recollection about Anne Sexton's interest in and/or acquaintance with Rilke was: "I did indeed teach Anne at the Antioch's Writers' Conference one summer. The most I can say is that I think it is entirely likely that I did talk some with her, or with the whole group perhaps, about Rilke".⁴³ But since Sexton knew no German, it is important here to note that at the Antioch Conference Snodgrass also talked about Randall Jarrell.⁴⁴ On February 12, 1962, Sexton wrote to fellow poet "Brother Dennis Farrell":⁴⁵ ... I find myself believing the poet's poems that I love. Do you ever read Rilke ... I don't need a letter from him to know him and to love him. Do you ever read his book letters to A Young Poet (Norton publishes it) I am very fond of that book and read it often, going to it when I am thirsty or lonely ... Listen to this ... It's a poem by Rilke (Lament) translated by Randall Jarrell ... Oh, how I wish I'd written that poem. It is so simple, so direct, so just right".⁴⁶

Following is the complete text of the Jarrell translation of Rilke's "Klage", (from *Das Buch der Bilder*, des Ersten Buches Zweiter Teil):

"Lament"

All is far
 And long gone by,
 I believe the star
 That shines up there
 Has been dead for a thousand years.
 I believe in the car

⁴⁰ Patricia Marx, "Interview with Anne Sexton", *Hudson Review* XVIII No. 3 (Autumn, 1965-66) str. 78.

⁴¹ Anne Sexton, *A Self Portrait in Letters*, ed. by Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames, Boston; Houghton Mifflin Co., 1967, str. 12.

⁴² *Ibid.*, str. 33.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, str. 37.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, str. 49.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, str. 51 ("Brother Dennis Farrell" is the fictitious name, editors supplied the name)

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, str. 137-138.

I heard go by,
 Somethin terrible was said.
 In the house a clock
 Is striking...
 In what house?
 I would like to walk
 Out of my heart, under the great sky.
 I would like to pray.
 And surely, of all the stars,
 One still must be.
 I belive I know
 Which one endures;
 Which one, at the end of its beam in the sky,
 Stands like a white city."

Aside from changing "Boot" (boat) in the original to "car" in his translation, Jarrell has, image for image, kept very close to the Rilke poem, and for this reason presents a minimal barrier between Rilke and the English-speaking reader. Sexton not only wished she'd written this poem, but she wrote a poem "The Starry Night" (first published in *The Nation* September 2, 1961)-- in which she tried to create something equally "simple", "direct", and "right". The complete text of Sexton's poem follows:

"The Starry Night"

That does not keep me from
 having a terrible need of--shall
 I say the word--religion. Then
 I go out at night to paint the stars.
 Vincent Van Gogh in a letter to his brother
 The town does not exist
 Except where one black-haired tree slips
 up like a drowned woman into the hot sky.
 The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars,
 Oh starry starry night! This is how
 I want to die.

It moves. They are all alive.
 Even the moon bulges in its orange irons

⁴⁷ Randall J a r r e l l, *The Complete Poems*, New York, Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1977, str. 244.

to push children, like a god, from its eye.
 The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars.
 Oh starry starry night! This is how
 I want to die.

into that rushing beat of the night,
 sucked up by that great dragon, to split
 from my life with no flag,
 no belly,
 no cry.

Except for the two-line refrain at the end of the first two stanzas and the last three lines of the last stanza, this poem accurately describes the essentials of Van Gogh's painting, "La Nuit Etoileé". The reference to the "Town", to "one black-haired tree", have their counterparts in the painting. To these Sexton has made additions in the form of simile ("like the drowned woman into the hot sky") hyperbole ("the night boils"), and exostulation ("Oh starry starry night!"). But the poem, I think, gains its power from the control she has learned from the Rilke/Jarrell "Lament".

In the first five lines of "Lament" Rilke/Jarrell speaks of the death of "the star" -- a lament on the order of Stevens' "Phoebus is dead". In the next six lines details from urban life--"the car", "the house", "a clock" present the world that is, in comparison with "the star", insignificant. In lines 12 through 14 the speaker expresses the wish to "walk/Out of my heart", and says "I would like to pray". This movement "out of my heart" is a movement beyond the limitations of mortal vision to a condition where prayer is possible. (It does not necessarily mean, as I think Sexton took it to mean when she imitated its diction in the last stanza of her poem, "I would like to die") Then in lines 15 through 20 there is an affirmation of faith: "...of all the stars./ One still must be". And the final merging of the images of the "dead" "star" of faith in the first section, the "dead" town in the middle section, and the star that "endures" in the final section as the "white city", an anthropomorphized "heaven" to which one can still pray, is a prime example of a Rilkean, quasi religious credo.

Sexton, for her part, has succeeded in "The Starry Night" in setting the elements of Van Gogh's painting in motion but not in making them rise to any heaven of her or Van Gogh's making. Yet it would appear from the epigraph that this was her intention, and that her method would be the identification of "religion" with "the stars". So it is interesting to note that the epigraph in this poem comes from a letter of Van Gogh's to his brother *not* about "La Nuit Etoileé", but about a different painting, "Le Rhone. Nuit Etoileé." The complete sentence Sexton quoted in part (and cut off without points of ellipse) reads. "Then I go out at night to

paint the stars, and I am always dreaming of a picture like this with a group of living figures of comrades".⁴⁸ Here it seems to me that Sexton has foisted upon Rilke and Van Gogh her own confusion about the relation between death and religion. The Van Gogh's painting by itself portray's only turmpil, without any suggestion of the life after death in which Sexton needs to believe.⁴⁹ Close as she felt to this painting and to Van Gogh,⁵⁰ I see in her poem about it evidence that she tried to talk about it with Rilke's "Lament" in mind, so when she speaks of being "sucked up" into Van Gogh's sky, she expects to find there a "white city" that "endures". It does not seem to have ocured to her that Rilke planned to "get there" alive.

The purpose of the prededing discussion has been to raise question whether an important influence on these six Post modernist poets has not up to now been overlooked.

Sonja Valčić: RILKE I NJEGOV UTJECAJ NA ŠEST AMERIČKIH PJESNIKA

S a ž e t a k

Autor ovog članka otvara raspravu o utjecaju Rainera maria Rilkea na šestoricu američkih pjesnika (postmodernista) Roethkea, Schwartz, Jarrella, Berrymana, Sextonovu i Plath. Utjecaji se prvenstveno odnose na korištenje šestorice američkih pjesnika Rilkeovom tehnikom pisanja, tematikom i figurama ("poetry of gesture"). Ovaj članak želi potaći neka pitanja oko utjecaja i otvoriti mogućnost za daljnja istraživanja.

⁴⁸ Sven L o e v g r e n, *The Genesis of Modernism: Seurat, Gauguin, van Gogh and French Symbolism in the 1880's*, Bloomington and London, 1971, str. 179-180.

⁴⁹ Anne S e x t o n, *A Self Portrait in Letters* ed. by Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1977, str. 285-86.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 291.