

# Karin Wawrzynek

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## Rainer Maria Rilke and His Mystical Russia. A Portrait of the Sense of Home of an Eternal Pilgrim

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**Karin Wawrzynek**  
(Katowice)

**RAINER MARIA RILKE AND HIS MYSTICAL RUSSIA.  
A PORTRAIT OF THE SENSE OF HOME OF AN ETERNAL  
PILGRIM**

**Abstract**

This article concerns the problem of searching for the true home(land) by one of the greatest poets and writers of the German Modernism, Rainer Maria Rilke and its reflection in his earliest and most famous works: “The Sacrifice of the Lares” (1895), “The Book of Hours” (1899) and “The stories of God” (1900). It shows the long way of an eternal pilgrim, who tries to find his true home. After leaving Prague, together with his great love Lou-Andreas Salomé he undertakes two extensive trips to Russia in 1899 and 1900, impressed by the deep and mystical relationship between the ordinary people and their land as well as God. He is convinced that he has finally found his true home in the untouched nature of Russia.

**Key words**

Rainer Maria Rilke, poetry, German modernism, Prague, homeland, Lou Andreas-Salomé, Russia, mysticism

Initially, the word “home” seems to be a simple notion, because home means simultaneously being at home and the feeling of security. But it is not enough for many, especially sensitive people, who are between two cultures. Such people are eternal seekers, pilgrims searching for recognition, for their true identity, for their true home, and the home of human soul. Rainer (René) Maria Rilke, born in 1875 in Prague, the most famous and most productive German speaking writer of Modernism is also one of such people. The search for his true home was particularly important to him, mostly because he grew up in two different cultural circles, Slavic and German, and was strongly influenced by this fact.

### THE PRAGUE CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH

German minority rarely had a chance to assert itself through historical circumstances because in German society, if there was no aristocratic background or a military career, the only thing left was its self-satisfied sense of nationality, which was demonstratively shown<sup>1</sup>. The same attitude was represented in Rilke’s parental home, especially his mother Sophie “Phia” Rilke had a special skill of flaunting national pride, thus fulfilling her desire for a higher status in the society. Consequently, she isolated René from the Czech environment, which she considered inferior. However, Rilke himself resisted those drastic views and the exclusive cultivation of his mother’s native French. After his parents’ divorce, Rilke was sent to the military school of St. Pölten at the age of ten, becoming completely free from the invidious motherly influence. From now on, the formative process of the sensitive poet began exceeding all new impressions and experiences. Now, he was also allowed to conceive sympathy for his Czech surroundings and to improve his Slavic empathy. These two features are for one thing a consequence of the milieu in which he lived and for the other, a form of protest against the bondage, which came from the parental home<sup>2</sup>. In his youth, Rilke’s most important person of reference was a Bohemian girl, Vally David-Rhonfeld. She was not only his first great love, but also

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. G.K. Epp, *Rilke und Russland*, Europäische Hochschulschriften — Reihe 1, Deutsche Sprache und Literatur 726, Frankfurt am Main–Bern–New York 1984, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 14. When Rilke was finally free, he could leave behind the trauma of having to wear dresses until his the age of 6, since his mother could not get over the death of his elder sister.

a shelter which protected him from people in his environment who constantly demanded something from him. Besides, she acted as a link between her uncle, an Alsace-born Czech poet, Julius Zeyer, whose favorite niece she was, Rilke and the Czech folk. Moreover, it was Julius Zeyer who sowed the grain of longing for Russia in the soul of the young poet. Zeyer himself had been to Russia four times and told Rilke about it. He told Rilke about the Old Russian “Tale of Igor’s Campaign”<sup>3</sup> and Russian “Life of Virgin Mary”, which functioned as an incentive for his own “Marien-Leben” (1912). So Zeyer’s person had probably enormous influence on the preparation of Rilke’s later Russia-experience<sup>4</sup>. It is due to Julius Zeyer, that Rilke became acquainted with Czech literature. In this way, he learnt to know and to understand the world of thought, the longings and hopes of this Slavic folk. Rilke began to assimilate himself. That should be particularly attributed to his extraordinary sensibility. Among his closest friends were also German-Bohemian painters Emil Orlik and Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic. He was the leading advocate of Czech decadence. Consequently, Rilke had an opportunity to meet powerful, culturally formative personalities of his alleged Czech homeland in person.

#### CITY PRAGUE — THE BEGINNING OF THE MYSTICAL WAY IN “LARES’ SACRIFICE” (LARENOPFER)

The very title of the poem series from 1895, which was dedicated to the city of Prague, makes reference to the subject matter of home in connection with the mystical experience, because Lares were protective spirits of the family, the household and sacred places, according to the Greek mythology. In this context, Rilke refers indirectly to the picture of his broken home and what was left of it, the city of Prague, which he felt connected to, in which he felt safe and embarked on a quest of finding his identity and himself. The more so as the spirits of protection slipped one’s time and the natural tang of man is to strive constantly to swim against the stream of time, with the aim of returning to the source of all being, to the light:

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<sup>3</sup>The rest of the 12<sup>th</sup> century fragments of the medieval Russian epic, was later translated by Rilke himself into German again after his two extensive Russia trips.

<sup>4</sup>Ibidem, p. 15.

## Im alten Hause

Im alten Hause; vor mir frei  
seh ich ganz Prag in weiter Runde;  
tief unten geht die Dämmerstunde  
mit lautlos leisem Schritt vorbei.

Die Stadt verschwimmt wie hinter Glas.  
Nur hoch, wie ein behelmter Hüne,  
ragt klar vor mir die grüspangrüne  
Turmkuppel von Sankt Nikolaus.

Schon blinzelt da und dort ein Licht  
fern auf im schwülen Stadtgebrause.  
Mir ist, daß in dem alten Hause  
jetzt eine Stimme "Amen" spricht<sup>5</sup>.

It is Rilke's aspiration to be open to the whole world, to open oneself to all, even to the foreign lands. Because the past and the present appeal to him simultaneously, he is aware of the unity between the immanence and the transcendence, in this sense also the foreign becomes home, the foreign is no longer foreign to him, but becomes familiar. His eyes and his emotional life, enveloped by a secret, became one and the same mirror of the conception of the world, which encloses him. So the impressions of the poem may be only kept together by the undergoing speaker. That is an assumption that the feeling of mystery, of the invisible past and present draws the external eye of the contemplator with its insight. Still, there is nevertheless the danger, that the emotional sphere gains the upper hand. Precisely the ability to create this soft, melancholic yearning for security and hope, with the twinkling of lights in the still, old house breathing through the spirit of the past time, in which a voice says "Amen"<sup>6</sup>. This "so be it", deepens the intelligible, invisible and spiritual message of the poem. With this a further step inwards is made, the searching for home, mystically-tinted creative opus of the poet in all its facets may completely cast a spell over it in future. In the search for the true home, for the light of his own 'me', Rilke goes

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<sup>5</sup>R.M. Rilke, *Die Gedichte*, Frankfurt am Main–Leipzig 2006, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 19.

on the mystical way from the outside into the inside, from the sensual, which offers the witnesses of stone from the past, into the light of dreams and death:

**Bei St. Veit**

Gern steh ich vor dem alten Dom;  
wie Moder weht es dort wie Fäule,  
und jedes Fenster, jede Säule  
spricht noch ihr eigenes Idiom.

Da hockt ein reichgeschnörkelt Haus  
und lächelt Rokoko-Erotik,  
und hart daneben streckt die Gotik  
die dürren Hände betend aus

Jetzt wird mir klar der casus rei;  
ein Gleichnis ists aus alten Zeiten:  
der Herr Abbè hier — ihm zuseiten  
die Dame des roi soleil<sup>7</sup>.

Rilke tries to comprehend the true being through the exact way of looking at a cathedral, dilapidating from outwards. He excogitates admittedly about what he sees, that squiggled hedonic-oriented rococo-house, which indeed represents the joyful, but not everlasting perpetuity, earthly life, the eroticism, the immanence-relatedness. The cathedral in the Gothic architectural style, from the theocentric past of the Middle Ages, proves to be like a bridge between the past and the present, because the place of praying has in no way declined in importance and its impact continues: it reaches the steadily persisting in faith, “the lean hands praying” (“die dürren Hände betend”) in the direction of heaven, because heaven is its home. It is finally obvious that this can be conceived as a simile: the richly squiggled house (“das reichgeschnörkelte Haus”) epitomizes mister Abbé, who is a human being. He enjoys his life in Freedom and peace to the fullest, and the Gothic fane is like the mother (“the Dame”) of the Sun King (Christ) the “roi soleil”. The rococo-house is opposed to by the light which enters through the Gothic circular rose windows and is changed into virtual light by the structure of

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<sup>7</sup>Ibidem, p. 20.

the rib vault of the cathedral, which cloisters itself from the earthly one. Human beings experience this light sensually as transcendent light of the Divine in the protective mothers' womb, the wholeness, the eternity and the mystical<sup>8</sup>.

Rilke's connection with his Slavic hometown and the special mystical feelings arising within church walls become even more conspicuous and are brought out in the poem entitled "Im Dome":

Wie von Steinen rings, von Erzen  
weit der Wände Wölbung funkelt,  
eine Heilige, braungedunkelt,  
dämmert hinter trüben Kerzen.

Von der Decke, rundgemauert,  
schwebt ob eines Engels Kopfe  
hell ein weißer Silbertropfe,  
drin ein ewig Lichtlein kauert.

Und im Eck, wo Goldgeglaste  
niederhängt in staubigen Klumpen,  
steht in Schmutz gehüllt und Lumpen  
still ein Kind der Bettlerkaste.

Von dem ganzen Glanze floß ihm  
in die Brust kein Fünkchen Segen...  
Zitternd, matt, streckts mir entgegen  
seine Hand mit leisem: "Prosim!"<sup>9</sup>

The sight of the infant Jesus described by Rilke in this poem seems to be the same as in every culture, regardless of whether it is Germanic or Slavic. It is eve-

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<sup>8</sup>Cf. W. Schöne, *Über das Licht in der Malerei*, p. 37–42, also the chapter *Leuchtende Wände*, [in:] J. Reisner, *Kunst des Mittelalters in Streiflichtern*, München 1975, p. 134. Nothing emphasises the difference between the Romanic and Gothic style more distinctly than the substitution of heavy stone walls with gleaming walls of the coloured windows of a gem-like nature. The fact that the church interior is illuminated by the outside light is not decisive. The Gothic interior is gleaming in itself, the believer beholds on the walls a vision of heaven, from which luminousness divine and saint figures come towards to him.

<sup>9</sup>R.M. Rilke, *Die Gedichte*, p. 21.

rywhere at home, in every church, whether now in a gloomy cathedral dating back to the Middle Ages, where everything seems to be austere and dark, so that the shiver of awe gains currency in the vault of the walls and closes the beholder in itself. Only the light of dim candles and that one of the eternally crouching little light create an atmosphere of safeness, so that the fear of the dark inner room evaporates; what is now to see, is an silent child wrapped in rags, who is holding its wavering hands towards to the lyrical subject and is saying softly in Czech “Prosim!” begging the lyrical subject to love and to protect it, because it is basically alone and helpless. It shows Rilke’s love and the search for home, for homeland, which does not know any borders, since it is in the heart of every human being, who opens their heart to another human being.

With the Czech word “prosim” (please), Rilke expresses his sympathy for the Bohemian folk.

A very special sort of Rilke’s love for this Slavic folk appears in the poem which is dedicated to the folk hero Josef Kajetán Tyl, who wrote a song entitled “Kde domov můj” (Where is my homeland) in 1834, which later became the national anthem of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918<sup>10</sup>:

### Kajetan Tyl

Da also hat der arme Tyl  
sein Lied “Kde domov můj” geschrieben.  
In Wahrheit: Wen die Musen lieben,  
dem gibt das Leben nicht zu viel.

Ein Stübchen — nicht zu klein dem Flug  
des Geistes; nicht zu groß zur Ruhe. —  
Ein Stuhl, als Schreibtisch eine Truhe,  
ein Bett, ein Holzkreuz und ein Krug.

Doch wär er nicht für tausend Louis  
von Böhmen fort. Mit jeder Fiber  
hing er daran. — “Ich bleibe lieber”  
hätt er gesagt: “kde domov můj”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Cf. W. Leppmann, Rilke. Sein Leben, seine Welt, sein Werk, München 1981, p. 63.

<sup>11</sup>R.M. Rilke, Die Gedichte, p. 39.



After a viewing of the reconstructed room belonging to the hero at a Bohemian ethnographical exhibition, Rilke describes here his Spartan conditions of living. He left Bohemia as a soldier for “thousand Louis”, and is asking now about his home(land). Besides, Rilke develops a fondness for Slavic folk songs. This finds an expression especially in the poems “Volksweise” and “Das Heimatlied”:

### Volksweise

Mich rührt so sehr  
böhmischen Volkes Weise,  
schleicht sie ins Herz sich leise,  
macht sie es schwer.

Wenn ein Kind sacht  
singt beim Kartoffeljäten,  
klingt dir sein Lied im späten  
Traum noch der Nacht.

Magst du auch sein  
weit über Land gefahren,  
fällt es dir doch nach Jahren  
stets wieder ein<sup>12</sup>.

Rilke conveys here the phenomenon of nostalgia, when a man is far away from his homeland. The feeling of home, present e.g. in a child's singing, sidles silently and gently, entirely inadvertent in his heart and makes it weep heavily. But it is the first thing, which comes to the mind of a man, who left his home (land) years before. Especially, if the sounds of this song have taken deep root in the inside of the human being, in his innermost heart and his soul and are only waiting for awakening to sound anew. But memories could also evoke a bitter-sweet sorrow like in the poem “Das Heimatlied” in which the Czech girl (das Tschechenmädchen) from the field, sings the lyrical subject the song of home (land). She drops the sickle down and sits down on the edge of the field to sing for a few copper kreutzers. She sings the song of Kajetán Tyl “Kde domov můj”,

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<sup>12</sup>Ibidem, p. 39.

“Where is my home” and while singing, she bursts silently into tears because the human being is nothing without their home(land). They are lost and unsettled. The man is alone through the loss of security, of identity and of love.

Vom Feld klingt ernste Weise;  
weiß nicht, wie mir geschieht...  
“Komm her du Tschechenmädchen,  
sing mir ein Heimatlied.“

Das Mädchen läßt die Sichel,  
ist hier mit Husch und Hui, —  
setzt nieder sich am Felddrain  
und singt: “Kde domov můj“...

Jetzt schweigt sie still von Tränen  
das Aug mir zugewandt, —  
nimmt meine Kupferkreuzer  
und küsst mir stumm die Hand<sup>13</sup>.

“The Slavic melody accompanied Rilke through his whole life. It touched his sentimental mind”<sup>14</sup>. This reached such an extent that he also devoted himself later to the Russian folk poetry and its representatives. Therefore, this is without any doubt the basic background of Rilke’s later experiences in Russia, his specific mystical experience and self-discovery<sup>15</sup>.

## PROVIDENTIAL ENCOUNTERS

The fact that Rilke grew up in Slavic environment and, according to his friend, Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic, he spoke quite good Czech for a German<sup>16</sup>, could

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<sup>13</sup>R.M. Rilke, *Larenopfer*, *Gesammelte Werke* 1, Leipzig 1930, p. 102.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. G.K. Epp, *Rilke und Russland*, p. 19. “Die slawische Melodie begleitete Rilke durch sein ganzes Leben. Sie berührte sein empfindsames Gemüt”.

<sup>15</sup>G.K. Epp, *Rilke und Russland*, p. 19.

<sup>16</sup>See *ibidem*, p. 22 and also C. Magr, *Sprach Rilke tschechisch?*, [in:] *Der Bibliophile*, Köln 1957, p. 15.

have been only one of the reasons for his love of Russia. Another reason was the encounter with Lou Andreas Salomé. It was she who opened for him the gates to Russia and to its circle of intellectuals. The young Rilke already left his hometown Prague in 1897, never to return, and went to Munich. There, Lou Andreas Salomé entered his life and from now on changed it fundamentally.

Louise von Salomé was born in St. Petersburg in 1861, her family on the paternal side descended from French Huguenots and moved to Russia in 1810. When Lou became acquainted with Rainer Maria Rilke, she had been married for ten years to an orientalist, Friedrich Carl Andreas, fifteen years her senior. She became acquainted with Rilke in Berlin in 1886. The fact of being married did not discourage her from a passionate affair with Rainer Maria Rilke, fourteen years her junior, as well as sharing with him the experience of Russia. She was very interested in Russian literature herself and personally knew a few literati of Petersburg<sup>17</sup>. And so the story between these two souls took its course.

In his Munich times, Rilke studied philosophy and aesthetics and passed the time writing poetry and reviews. At this time he not only began friendship with a Berlin poet and his fellow student Wilhelm von Scholz, as well as the followers of the 'George Circle' (George-Kreis) Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Rudolf Kassner, but he also became acquainted with the young Richard Strauss, the writer Ludwig Ganghofer, Richard Dehmel and the baron-poet Detlev von Liliencorn, whom Dehmel later introduced. This circle of highly talented poets and writers left an enormous mark on his writing artistry, because he could grow with them. Those encounters and friendships also helped him in Russia. This circle encouraged Rilke to travel and to create the so called "poems of travel" ("Reisegedichte"). Moreover, it was the writer Jakob Wassermann, who introduced Rilke to the works of Russian literati, such as Dostoyevsky and Turgenev. Rilke became acquainted with and learned to love his mystical Russia in Wassermann's residence, where he also met Lou Andreas-Salomé at the beginning of May in 1897<sup>18</sup>.

Rainer Maria Rilke traveled with Lou Andreas-Salomé and her husband to Russia twice, in 1899 and in 1900, the events which left its imprints on his soul forever. His first trip to Russia, lasting from April 25<sup>th</sup> to June 18<sup>th</sup> led him at

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<sup>17</sup>See: K. Asadowski, *Rilke und Rußland. Briefe, Erinnerungen, Gedichte*, Berlin-Weimar 1986, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup>See: W. Leppmann, *Rilke*, p. 89.

first to Moscow and then to St. Petersburg. He mastered only very little Russian on the first trip<sup>19</sup>. So, in conversations with the numerous acquaintances which were made during trip, he depended on the translation of Lou Andreas-Salomé. In Russia, he not only became acquainted with the writer Leonid Pasternak and the painter Ilja Repin, but also with Lew Tolstoy, whom he called the “sempiternal Russian” (den ewige[n] Russe[n])<sup>20</sup>. Additionally, Rilke experienced something there which became deeply rooted in his memory. It was the Russian Easter, which he spent in Moscow and it seemed to him like an illumination.

“Mir war ein einziges Mal Ostern; das war damals in jener langen, ungewöhnlichen, ungemainen erregten Nacht, da alles Volk sich drängte, und als der Ивана Великого (Iwan Welikij)<sup>21</sup> mich schlug in der Dunkelheit Schlag für Schlag. Das war mein Ostern, und ich glaube es reicht für ganzes Leben; die Botschaft ist mir in jener Moskauer Nacht seltsam groß geworden, ist mir ins Blut gegeben worden und ins Herz. Ich weiß es jetzt: Христосъ воскресъ! (Christus ist auferstanden!)”<sup>22</sup>.

During his first Russia trip with Lou Andreas-Salomé, Rilke concentrated on the study of the Russian language, the history of art and the literature. This, among other things, was a form of preparation for the already planned second trip, which took place from the 7<sup>th</sup> of May to the 24<sup>th</sup> of August in 1900, but this time only as a couple. Also on this trip a number of new and influential acquaintances were made and the already existing friendships deepened<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup>“Die russische Sprache beherrschte auf der ersten Reise nur bruchstückhaft”. Cf. K. Seifert, *Untersuchung zu kulturellen Fremdheitserfahrungen mit Rußland: R.M. Rilke, Oskar Maria Graf und Wolfgang Koeppen*, Magisterarbeit im Fach Deutsch als Fremdsprache, Bayreuth 1997, p. 52.

<sup>20</sup>A letter to Hugo Salus cit. after Sophie Brutzer, *Rilkes russische Reisen*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1989, (Reprint of the dissertation, Königsberg 1934), p. 50. See also K. Seifert, *Untersuchung*, p. 53.

<sup>21</sup>K. Asadowski, *Rilke und Rußland*, p. 22.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibidem*. Rilke wrote this on the last day of March in 1904, [in:] Rilke/Andreas — Salomé, *Briefwechsel*, p. 139f. “Иванъ Великій”: Ivan the Great Bell Tower in the Moscow Kremlin with 18 bells; “Христосъ воскресъ”: “Christ is risen!”. A Russian Easter greeting to which the greeted one replies: “He is truly risen!”. See: K. Asadowski, *Rilke und Rußland*, p. 505.

<sup>23</sup>Cf. K. Seifert, *Untersuchung*, p. 53.

Most importantly, Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé became fully-valued members of the Russian intelligence and bohemian milieu<sup>24</sup>.

Rilke's extraordinary regard was, however, for the common Russian folk, because it radiated a special form of religious piety and relatedness to home. The second Russian trip began with a three-week stay in Moscow. This time, spent on visits to various monasteries, churches and museums as well as other sites worth seeing, which drew the eye of the beholder. Afterwards, before going to the Ukraine, Rilke paid an amicable visit to Lev Nikolayevich count Tolstoy. Tolstoy was connected with the country life in his residence "Jasnaja Poljana"<sup>25</sup> nearby Tula. This time, Rilke spoke Russian well enough, so he not only could read Tolstoy's original works but he also conversed with him in his mother tongue. In Kiev, where the travel route led them next, the sacred buildings, the spring festival celebrated there and the deeply felt piety of pilgrims made such a lasting impression on Rilke<sup>26</sup>, that he even took part in the procession, although he was at this point in time rather less concerned with religion. Perhaps the decisive factor was the fact that Christianity in Russia originated in this city. The travel with Lou Andreas-Salomé continued from Kiev over Kharkiv and Voronezh to Saratov and then further north by ship on the Volga river. Nature was the focus of Rilke's spiritual world and his feeling of home during this five-day travel to Yaroslavl<sup>27</sup>:

"Auf der Wolga, diesem ruhig rollenden Meer, Tage zu sein und Nächte, viele Tage und viele Nächte; ein breit — breiter Strom, hoher, hoher Wald an dem einen Ufer, an der anderen Seite tiefes Heideland, darin auch große Städte nur wie Hütten und Zelte stehen. Man lernt alle Dimensionen um sich herum. Man erfährt: Land ist groß, Wasser ist etwas Großes, und groß vor allem ist der Himmel. Was ich bisher sah, war nur ein Bild von Land und Fluß und Welt. Hier aber ist alles selbst. — Mir ist, als hätte ich der Schöpfung zugesehen..."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Ibidem, p. 53.

<sup>25</sup>This is the name of Tolstoy's only estate, which he allowed to be occupied his wife and his sons, after his bestowals to the Russian folk to which it also belonged. "Only now... here — deep in the Russian spring, amid the birch trees and the bean bushes of the park of Jasnaja Poljana Rilke received the strongest and the most influential impression of the great poet". See: M. Betz, Rilke in Paris, Zürich 1948, p. 105.

<sup>26</sup>G.K. Epp, Rilke und Russland, p. 31. See also K. Seifert, Untersuchung, p. 53.

<sup>27</sup>Cf. K. Seifert, Untersuchung, p. 54.

<sup>28</sup>R.M. Rilke, Tagebücher aus der Frühzeit, pub. by R. Sieber-Rilke, C. Sieber, Frankfurt am Main 1973, p. 195f.

On the basis of this description in his diary, Rilke, through the observation of the landscape from the perspective of a travel by ship, animadverted the Almighty God and the true greatness of a creative act from all possible sides. It is the so called experience of nature mysticism, where everything initially strange suddenly seems to be familiar and natural as “self”. This fullness of the impressions, induced in him by the Russian landscape, leave their mark on its mystical description in the “Geschichten vom lieben Gott” (“Stories of God”), but above all in the “Book of Hours” (“Stundenbuch”). First and foremost, these impressions of the unspoiled and original nature, conveys to him a new sense of time and space, which is distinct from the western understanding of these terms<sup>29</sup>. Rilke is so fascinated with the ordinary but deep relationship of the common people and their land, that he and Lou Andreas-Salomé spent the last three days of their second Russia trip in a village among Russian farmers. They were ordinary, God-fearing, patient people, strongly rooted in their land, and Rilke was taken with them in a special way. In this elementariness, he felt a spiritual connection with this still unspoiled, silent land. After the visit to the farmer poet Drožin and the coastal town Novgorod, Rilke, now back in Moscow and St. Petersburg, turned in particular to Russian history of art, folk poetry as well as the circle of Russian artists and intelligentsia. Rilke always declared himself completely fascinated and taken with this big and far country; he even thought about a third trip, consider emigrating to Russia, but finally a reunion with the homeland of his soul was denied to him.

Nevertheless, it did not keep him away from reviving and immortalizing this homeland it in his following works again and again. Inasmuch as the light of the human soul is eternal, so Russia was the eternal light of the unspoiled being in his heart.

#### THE IMAGE OF GOD OF RUSSIA IN “THE BOOK OF MONASTIC” LIFE, THE FIRST PART OF “THE BOOK OF HOURS”

The land, which spreads vastly like a sea under a huge sky becomes a home for the homeless pilgrim. Easter of 1899 forces him to relinquish the traditional

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<sup>29</sup>See: K. Seifert, *Untersuchung*, p. 54.

and perpetual keeping of distance<sup>30</sup>. The fraternity and the patient piety of the Russian folk then, which arose from the original and natural feeling shared by everyone, makes him step out of his isolation, to develop the affinity and contact with the human neighborhood<sup>31</sup>.

Here, the deciding factor for Rilke is the experience of mysticism, the experience of God, the theophany, the darkness of God. Furthermore, if we want to understand the impact which the experiences in Russia had on Rilke, we have first to recall that young Rilke was strongly influenced by Neo-romanticism and its tendencies, which had its golden age at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>32</sup>. An initial focal point of these literary tendencies is the negation of the traditional *Imago Dei*, the image of God, and the search for a new religion, which is actually associated with origin, purity and chastity. These values were what Rilke found was particularly missing in the western culture, far more than in the one of the East. So in Russia, after a period of hopelessness, Rilke suddenly discovers an unexpected possibility to find the way to a community, in which God became a neighbor, who lived behind a narrow wall<sup>33</sup>. Rilke tried again to gain credence of the tendencies of his time, which helped the lost “originality” and “naturalness” in a now pragmatically-oriented world. Rilke’s affection in this time was that of the specifically known religious components<sup>34</sup>. So it was his special desire to create a new conception of God, because he believed that “to be an atheist [...] means to be a barbarian”<sup>35</sup>. Rilke was convinced about the absence of God in his life at this time:

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<sup>30</sup>L. Brösig, Rainer Maria Rilke. Eine Einführung, Vortrag an einer Volkshochschule 1935, p. 11.

<sup>31</sup>Cf. W. Leppmann, Rilke, p. 128–142.

<sup>32</sup>Cf. K. Seifert, Untersuchung, p. 56.

<sup>33</sup>Cf. L. Brösig, Rainer Maria Rilke, p. 11–12.

<sup>34</sup>Cf. R. Görner, Rainer Maria Rilke. Im Herzwerk der Sprache. Eine Biographie, Wien 2004, p. 69. See also H.-Ch. Graf von Nayhauss, Rilke in Russland und anderswo. Zu Rilkes Wahrnehmung fremdkultureller Wirklichkeiten und deren Niederschlag in seinem Werk, [in:] M. Cluet, Divergente Kulturräume in der Literatur. Akten des XI. Internationalen Germanistenkongresses Paris 2005, Germanistik im Konflikt der Kulturen 9, Bern–Berlin–Bruxelles–Frankfurt am Main–New York–Oxford–Wien 2005, p. 76.

<sup>35</sup>R.M. Rilke, Tagebücher aus der Frühzeit — Das Florenzer Tagebuch, pub. by R. Sieber-Rilke, C. Sieber, Frankfurt am Main 1942, p. 38.

“wie man den Gott den Menschen wiedergeben könne. Potentiell existiere Gott überall, in jedem beliebigen Ding, er sei der irrationale Kern der Dinge, ihre «Seele», er sei veränderlich und unfassbar, er offenbare sich niemals vollends. Der einzige, der ihn in den Dingen «entdeckten» und sichtbar machen kann, sei der Künstler. Nach Rilkes Überzeugung «baut» der Künstler im schöpferischen Akt «an diesem Gott»<sup>36</sup>.

Rilke created this new aesthetic conception of God not in his theoretical works, which concerned God and art, but the creation of new God became primarily the key element of his poetic opus, in the speech-form of prayer and legend<sup>37</sup>. For Rilke “God [is] the oldest masterpiece”, because all people of the world formed “God from yearning”<sup>38</sup>. This is a duty of a human being as an artist, “to form God in his own inside, to approach and to build this ‘becoming God’ in hard work and in recognizing attempt”<sup>39</sup>. The artist in the person of the monk is circling and permanently searching for God in the dark depths to find him there. He pilgrims throughout his whole life. The human search for God was described in this way by Rilke in “The Book of Hours”, in “The Book of Monastic Life”, which was being printed from the 20<sup>th</sup> of September to the 14<sup>th</sup> of October in 1899 and is considered the effect of the impressions after the first Russia trip.

Ich kreise um Gott, den uralten Turm,  
und ich kreise jahrtausendlang;  
und ich weiß noch nicht: bin ich ein Falke, ein Sturm  
oder ein großer Gesang

Ich habe viele Brüder in Sutanen  
im Süden, wo in Klöstern Lorbeer steht.  
Ich weiß, wie menschlich sie Madonnen planen,  
und träume oft von jungen Tizianen,  
durch die der Gott in Gluten geht.

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<sup>36</sup>K. Asadowski, Rilke und Rußland, p. 16f. See also H.-Ch. Graf von Nayhauss, Rilke in Russland, p. 76.

<sup>37</sup>See: R. Gröner, Rainer Maria Rilke, p. 69.

<sup>38</sup>R.M.Rilke, Tagebücher aus der Frühzeit — Das Florenzer Tagebuch, p. 47. See also H.-Ch. Graf von Nayhauss, Rilke in Russland, p. 76.

<sup>39</sup>H.-Ch. Graf von Nayhauss, Rilke in Russland, p. 76.



Doch wie ich mich auch in mich selber neige:  
 Mein Gott ist dunkel wie ein Gewebe  
 von hundert Wurzeln, welche schweigsam trinken.  
 [...] <sup>40</sup>

By circling like “around an ancient tower” (wie, um einen uralten Turm) Rilke tries to capture the person of the monk in a poetic manner<sup>41</sup>, by using the magic of word God despite his human rationality, inconceivability and darkness<sup>42</sup>. He tries to be close to God, to understand the completion of the significance of his existence. It is in the human nature that the finite is assured in the infinite. He believes only that which he can immanently explain and conceive. So like a tree which safely and reliantly puts down its roots in the dark earth to grow, so Rilke, who complains of his providential homelessness in the form of the elusiveness of God, wishes for [...] a spiritual and sentimental grounding, which he believes to have found in Russia<sup>43</sup>. The multinational poet thinks that he has found home and God in Russia, connected with the pristine landscape of this country, to which common people seem to be directly related. Moreover, they are in close communication with heaven and earth, with nature and with God<sup>44</sup>. For Rilke, a farmer was the carrier of the divine and his work was considered a manifestation of becoming God<sup>45</sup> while the Russian steppe was something “inexhaustible”. In his book entitled “Worpswede”, he describes it in the following way:

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<sup>40</sup>R.M. Rilke, *Das Stunden-Buch. Vom mönchischen Leben* (1899), [in:] idem, *Die Gedichte*, p. 201.

<sup>41</sup>The solitary supplicant is not only a monk, but actually in first line a poet; he prays to any deity, but he finds he understands the fundamentals of his poetic existence and his source of inspiration and concentrates on the search for a justification of his way of living, which he understands as a priestly-consecrated service topoetry. “[...] Ohne solche kosmische Poesie wäre die Arbeit des Dichters eine leere Illusion; ohne den Dichter würde die Poesie der Welt nie sichtbar werden”. See: A. Nivelle, *Rilke, Russland und “Das Buch vom Mönchischen Leben”*, [in:] *Dreizehn Aufsätze zur Komparatistik*, Sulzbach 2004, p. 226–227.

<sup>42</sup>Cf. S. Löwenstein, *Rainer Maria Rilke “Stunden-Buch. Theologie und Ästhetik”*, Berlin 2005, p. 50.

<sup>43</sup>Ibidem, p. 127.

<sup>44</sup>Cf. Ibidem, p. 220.

<sup>45</sup>Cf. J. Lehmann, *Russland* [in:] M. Engel (ed.), *Rilke — Handbuch. Leben–Werk–Wirkung*, Stuttgart–Weimar 2004, p. 41. See also T. Braun, *Symptome der Säkularisierung in Rilkes Stundenbuch* on [http://www.der-schattensucher.de/tl\\_files/schattensucher](http://www.der-schattensucher.de/tl_files/schattensucher), 2010, p. 16.

“Die Ebene ist das Gefühl, an welchem wir wachsen. Wir begreifen sie und sie hat etwas Vorbildliches für uns;

da ist uns alles bedeutsam: der große Kreis des Horizontes und die wenigen Dinge, die einfach und wichtig vor dem Himmel stehen...: Ihrer Unerschöpflichkeit und Größe danken sie (die Künstler), dass sie immer werden”<sup>46</sup>.

As a consequence of the deep rootedness of Russian folk in its land, Rilke believed to see that they are still in the process of becoming in their rustic landscape. In the plain, in the Ukraine and on the Volga, Rilke felt touched and flushed by the mighty masses of God<sup>47</sup> like by a stream. In this sense God is in a contradictory way hidden from human beings and their senses, yet still completely material.

In “the Book of Monastic Life” and according to the imagination of becoming, Rilke begins to search for God in the person of the monk:

Du, Nachbar Gott, wenn ich dich manchesmal  
in langer Nacht mit hartem Klopfen störe, —  
so ists, weil ich dich selten atmen höre  
und weiß: Du bist allein im Saal.  
Und wenn du etwas brauchst, ist keiner da,  
um deinem Tasten einen Trank zu reichen:  
Ich horche immer. Gib ein kleines Zeichen.  
Ich bin ganz nah.

Nur eine schmale Wand ist zwischen uns,  
durch Zufall; denn es könnte sein:  
ein Rufen deines oder meines Munds —  
und sie bricht ein  
ganz ohne Lärm und Laut<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup>R.M. Rilke, Worpswede, Bremen 1952, p. 21. See also G.K. Epp, Rilke und Russland, p. 48.

<sup>47</sup>“Rilke fühlte sich von den gewaltigen Massen Gottes wie von einem Strom berührt und durchflutet”. G.K. Epp, Rilke und Russland, p. 48.

<sup>48</sup>R.M. Rilke, Die Gedichte, p. 202.

Like the idiosyncratic and unbending personality, Rilke grasped the independent image of God of the Russian folk, so the monk reflects it in “the Book of Hours” too.

Whilst he addresses God as “You, neighbour God” (“Du, Nachbar Gott”) he identifies himself as equal with God and puts himself on the same level where the almighty Maker of all beings already is. This impression is justified by the fact that the monk is convinced that there is only “a narrow wall” between them, which could collapse at a barely perceptible calling without any sound. Insofar, the distance between man and God given by nature would implode like the “narrow wall”.

From this assumption follows the conclusion that the monk is not only searching for God, but he is at once of the opinion that God himself requires him<sup>49</sup>. This can be observed especially in the following lines:

[...]  
 Du siehst, dass ich ein Sucher bin.  
 Einer, der hinter seinen Händen  
 verborgen geht und wie ein Hirt;  
 (mögst du den Blick der ihn beirrt,  
 den Blick der Fremden von ihm wenden.)  
 Einer der träumt, dich zu vollenden  
 und: dass er sich vollenden wird<sup>50</sup>.

God is here a becoming God, whom the monk dreams of accomplishing, in order to complete and realize himself this way.

This passage from “the Book of the Monastic Life” also reflects Rilke’s own search for God in art. This observation is further supported by the choice of words, with which he wrote to Ellen Keys in 1904:

[...]  
 Er wird sein, und die welche einsam sind und  
 sich der Zeit entziehen, bauen ihn, bauen ihn  
 mit dem Herzen, dem Hirne und den Händen,

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<sup>49</sup>Cf. G.K. Epp, Rilke und Russland, p. 59.

<sup>50</sup>R.M. Rilke, Die Gedichte, p. 227.

die welche einsame Schaffende sind, und Kunstwerke (d. h. künftige Dinge) machen, bauen ihn, fangen ihn an<sup>51</sup>.

As early as the Middle Ages, the artistic and creative activity (*ars*) of human beings in Christian philosophy had a special rank. So in his 29 “*Questiones disputate de veritate*”, the great scholastic Thomas of Aquino asserted, among other things that the *signum* of the artist and the light of the human mind are the reflected splendor of divinity<sup>52</sup>. Whereby the artist is setting to one side of God’s lore, because of being able to give the matter a shape, so it can be finally identified as a masterpiece. According to this theory, Rilke tried to satisfy his appetite for the emotional and the religious through these various described pictures and formulations, which he recorded in the “*Book of Hours*” and especially in the “*Book of Monastic Life*.” But after Rilke increasingly began to search for God in art, he grew to believe that it would take away the religion he acquired<sup>53</sup>.

Therefore, Rilke saw God in his imagination merely only as a “becoming masterpiece”<sup>54</sup> and not as a higher authority, which he would owe his inspiration to. This image of God as an artistically created work was now the only motivation, which fulfills his requirement of sense. His interest in religion pertained neither to ethics nor faith, but entirely to the aesthetic, the beautiful and the pleasant outgrowth for the human eye and heart: “Rilke is pious, humble, certainly only in relation to the poetry”<sup>55</sup>.

Rilke represented the mystical search for God, hence the person of the Russian monk sees God in all “things” of the world, in the works of the poet, in the pictures of the artists and in the encounters in the solitude. The things and men

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<sup>51</sup>A copy of that letter is provided in: E.C. Mason, *Zur Entstehung und Deutung von Rilkes Stunden-Buch. Exzentrische Bahnen. Studien zum Dichterbewusstsein der Neuzeit*, Göttingen 1963, p. 181–204, see also T. Braun, *Symptome*, p. 17 and: E. Stein, *Hedwig Conrad-Martius* (übers.) *Alexandre Koyré: Descartes und die Scholastik*, ESGA 25, p. 133f. Cf. also B. Urban, *Edith Stein und die Literatur. Lektüren, Rezeptionen, Wirkungen*, [in:] J.S. de Murillo and M. Thurner (ed.), *Ursprünge des Philosophierens* 19, Stuttgart 2010, p. 31.

<sup>52</sup>B. Urban, *Edith Stein*, p. 32.

<sup>53</sup>See: E.C. Mason, *Zur Entstehung*, p. 185.

<sup>54</sup>Cf. T. Braun, *Symptome*, p. 17.

<sup>55</sup>“Rilke ist fromm, demütig, allerdings nur im Verhältnis zur Dichtung”. K. Brunkhorst, *Bibel*, [in:] M. Engel (ed.), *Rilke — Handbuch*, p. 39.

are in God and God is in them. In this way the monk manifests his pantheistic conception of the world. Moreover, Rilke's man can be without God, but God cannot exist without the man. Consequently, self-discovery and recognition become expressed this way<sup>56</sup>. They can be sought in the darkness but, in Rilke's view, can never be found.

This is also a reason, why Rilke prefers the art nouveau (Jugendstil) as an instrument of the visibility of God and his deification. This kind of attitude is confirmed in Russian icons painted on the gold background:

Selten ist die Sonne im Sobór.  
Die Wände wachsen aus Gestalten,  
und durch die Jungfrau und die Alten  
drängt sich, wie Flügel im Entfalten,  
das goldene, das Kaiser-Tor.

An seinem Säulenrand verlor  
die Wand sich hinter den Ikonen;  
[...]

Die Kuppel ist voll deines Sohns  
Und bindet rund den Bau.

Da trat ich als Pilger ein  
[...]<sup>57</sup>

Through the reflections and descriptions of the monk, Rilke gets to know how fascinated the monk was with the interior decoration of the Uspenski Sobór of the Moscow Kremlin, simply the Russian Dormition Cathedral, in light imbued. It was for the monk, who left the songs of the past, to go with the wind and into the light. See that all-sounding means to return<sup>58</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup>Cf. R. Bernhardt, Erläuterungen zu Rainer Maria Rilke. Das lyrische Schaffen, Hollfeld 2009, p. 75.

<sup>57</sup>R.M. Rilke, Die Gedichte, p. 227–228.

<sup>58</sup>“Da alles Klingen Wiederkehr bedeutet”. See: G.K. Epp, Rilke und Russland, p. 60.

By means of the mystical experience, which guarantees the monk's sensory impressions of the mysticism of light, the eternal pilgrim finds finally his true home, his spiritual home(land).

He enters the eternal site of God as a pilgrim and leaves it with a pleasant feeling of recognition and of self-discovery. So, in connection with the "Book of the Monastic Life", Rilke immediately writes "The stories of God" ("Die Geschichten vom lieben Gott") in November 1899, in which he eternally commemorated an intense study of Russia, Russian history, art and poetry. Furthermore, in three Russian tales Rilke reveals an extraordinary empathy regarding the Slavic world, unlike anyone before him.

Concluding, Rilke really loved Russia as a home(land). In the final years of his life he often declared: "It formed me into what I am today, it is from there that I innerly come from, all my home(land) of my instinct, all my inner origin is there"<sup>59</sup>. Rilke praised Russia as the land, which adheres to God and its people as true artistic natures (Künstler-Naturen). "That Russia is my home(land), it belongs to those huge and mysterious certainties on which I live"<sup>60</sup>.

To sum up, Prague was never a home(land) for Rilke, in Munich he was searching for a home, to put down his roots, but it was finally Lou Andreas-Salomé, who made the vast and mystical Russia accessible to him, so he did not find a true home(land) until 1899, his sight was facing East<sup>61</sup>. Only there did the eternal pilgrim ultimately found his ease of mind, his true home, even though he never again walked on Russian soil after the second Russian trip in 1900.

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<sup>59</sup>"Es hat mich zu dem gemacht, was ich heute bin, von dort ging ich innerlich aus, alle Heimat meines Instinkts, all mein innerer Ursprung ist dort". See on [http://www.studiumgenerale.uni-freiburg.de/archiv/ws\\_2008-2009/lesung-und\\_rezitation/rilke-und\\_russland](http://www.studiumgenerale.uni-freiburg.de/archiv/ws_2008-2009/lesung-und_rezitation/rilke-und_russland), p. 1. This is what Rilke wrote to Leopold Schlözer on January 21<sup>st</sup>, 1920, see: G.K. Epp, *Rilke und Russland*, p. 5. Also in: R.M. Rilke, *Gesammelte Briefe (CW) IV*, Leipzig 1936–1939, p. 290.

<sup>60</sup>"Dass Russland meine Heimat ist, gehört zu jenen großen und geheimnisvollen Sicherheiten aus denen ich lebe". *Ibidem*, p. 1.

<sup>61</sup>"Da sein Blick nach Osten gerichtet war". Cf. G.K. Epp, *Rilke und Russland*, p. 49.

Karin Wawrzynek

## RAINER MARIA RILKE I JEGO MISTYCZNA ROSJA. OBRAZ DOMU WIECZNEGO PIELGRZYMA

### Streszczenie

Rainer Maria Rilke to jeden z najwybitniejszych poetów i prozaików modernizmu niemieckiego. Urodzony w 1875 w Pradze, artystycznie uzdolniony, uduchowiony, obdarzony niesłychaną wrażliwością oraz wnikliwością. Młody poeta od najmłodszych lat jest rozdarty między matką z jej niemiecką dumą narodową a ojcem mającym ambicje wojskowe; między kulturą germańską a słowiańską. Obie przeciwstawne sobie kultury w znacznej mierze wpłynęły nie tylko na panteistycznie i romantyczno-mistycznie zabarwiony obraz świata poety, ale również znajdują odzwierciedlenie w jego wczesnej twórczości. W poszukiwaniu prawdziwej ojczyzny, domu, poczucia bezpieczeństwa, ciepła i własnego siebie, młody Rilke opuszcza rodzimą Pragę, udając się najpierw do Monachium. Tam przez krótki czas studiuje filozofię i estetykę, dołącza też do grona literatów niemieckich skupionych wokół Stefana George („George Kreis”). W 1897 roku poznaje o czternaście lat starszą Lou Andreas-Salomé, z którą wyrusza dwukrotnie, w 1899 i w 1900 roku, w długą i wyczerpującą, a zarazem pełną niesamowitych wrażeń podróż do Rosji. Będąc podczas pierwszej podróży uczestnikiem prawosławnej Wielkanocy celebrowanej w Moskwie, Rilke doznaje czegoś w rodzaju teofanii. Zafascynowany prostotą życia i czystą, bezpośrednią, wręcz mistyczną wiarą w Boga rosyjskich chłopów oraz ich pełnym szacunku stosunkiem do ziemi, uważa, że w Rosji znalazł kraj wiecznego Boga, prawdziwą ojczyznę, dom oraz samego siebie. Rosja staje się dlań na zawsze duchową ojczyzną, choć nie udaje mu się już do niej ponownie dotrzeć. Zapis mistycznych poszukiwań zawierają najsłynniejsze dzieła poetyckie i prozatorskie Rilkego. Z wczesnego okresu twórczości literackiej pochodzą „Ofiary dla Larów” (1895), które stanowią pierwsze kroki na drodze poszukiwania prawdziwej ojczyzny i samego siebie. Świadectwem drogi wiary, mistycznej podróży w głąb siebie są w szczególności „Księga godzin”, „Księga o życiu monastycznym” (1899) oraz prozą napisane „Historie o miłującym Panu Bogu” (1900).

Rainer Maria Rilke znalazł w Rosji nie tylko swą prawdziwą, duchową ojczyznę, ale dzięki obcowaniu z dziewiczą przyrodą oraz obserwacji stosunku prostych ludzi do ziemi, do bliźniego oraz do Boga, młody, zagubiony poeta odnalazł także samego siebie w swej nieskazitelnej duszy pełnej światła.