The Beginning of Terror

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CHAPTER 3

A Mask of Him Roams in His Place

Differentiation between Self and Others in The Notebooks and Rilke’s Letters

I

During his first year in Paris, 1902–3, Rilke’s ability to differentiate himself from other people was often impaired. A letter to Salomé describes an experience in which the sense of mental and bodily separateness from others which underlies most adult relationships and contacts gave way to a frightening fantasy of being pulled into close identification, involving a partial merging of bodies and minds. This was his encounter with a man suffering from St. Vitus’ dance: “I was close behind him, will-less, drawn along by his fear, that was no longer distinguishable from mine.” Imagining that this stranger’s “fear had been nourished out of me, and had exhausted me,” he felt “used up” (Letters 1:115). As they became increasingly connected and the stranger seemed to feed on him, he felt that “everything” within him was being consumed. This experience was the source of an entry in The Notebooks.

Malte is drawn to an “emaciated” figure who becomes the focus of attention on the block, an object of laughter. Following the man despite an urge to cross the street to get away from him, he notices that he hops on one leg. When this hopping travels from his legs to his neck and hands, Malte feels “bound to him” (68). As the spasms increase, his anxiety grows with the stranger’s. With pounding heart he gathers his “little strength together” and begs the struggling St. Vitus dancer to take it.
When the fellow finally loses control and the nervous spasms take over his body, exploding into "a horrible dance," Malte is left feeling like "a blank piece of paper" (65–71).

What does the encounter mean to him? Why is he drawn into such close identification with this stranger?

The spectacle of St. Vitus' dance speaks to his fear of going insane, of losing himself to uncontrollable forces which often seem on the verge of overwhelming him. The scene around the St. Vitus dancer awakens in Malte a dread of becoming an object of derision and revulsion. His desire to help the stranger is motivated by compassion, but also by his sense of affinity. If this fellow can overcome the convulsive compulsion of his nerves, his victory might answer Brigge's need to believe that strength of will can win the struggle against his own fears and tensions. But Malte is also curious to see what happens if and when the fellow gives in, because he anticipates that he may soon go through a mental disintegration not unlike the cataclysm against which the other man is struggling. At the end of the episode the victim of St. Vitus' dance is invisible, engulfed by his involuntary spasms and by the crowd that surrounds him.

In a highly illuminating essay, "The Devolution of the Self in The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge," Walter H. Sokel argues that when the St. Vitus dancer "gives in and his will collapses, something incomparably mightier, and truer leaps forth from him." Professor Sokel supports his interpretation with the argument that the "expansive gesture," "the spreading out of his arms, with which the dancer lets go of his cane indicates relief and liberation." Sokel notes that an "elemental force" seems to take over this sick man. The imagery of the scene, according to his essay, suggests the destruction of the conforming bourgeois, the conventional personality, the constricting will, the little ego which Malte both wishes and fears to transcend.

As Sokel's detailed analysis makes clear, the language and imagery of this scene evoke an ambivalent response. But the emphasis at this point in The Notebooks is upon fearful devastation by illness. When Malte remembers that the St. Vitus dancer's "gaze wobbled over sky, houses, and water, without grasping a thing," the scene recalls the dying man in the crèmerie. As the convulsive spasms overwhelm the victim of St. Vitus' dance, he stretches "out his arms as if he were trying to fly." But he does not succeed in flying. And if he does a "dance," it is the "horrible
dance" of a man dragged and bowed and flung like a puppet by his spasms. The end of the scene leaves one in little doubt about its meaning. The crowd swallows the sufferer, and Malte feels annihilated, as his own ego boundaries have almost evaporated and he has been sucked, half helplessly, half willingly, into mergence with this embodiment of devastation and dehumanization.

At the time he was writing The Notebooks Rilke believed that the little ego must be shattered by the exploding titanic forces of the unconscious in order that the aspiring poet may gain access to essential energies. But in the St. Vitus' dance victim Rilke encountered an image of the annihilation that might come from courting and encouraging such a Dionysian shattering of the ego. He did not underestimate the dangers of mental illness. Suffering often in severe neurotic and borderline states of mind, he sometimes felt he was close to complete breakdown.

Malte fears that the world around him or objects in it will invade his body, drive out his insecurely established and feebly defended self, and replace it. In The Divided Self, the English analyst, R. D. Laing, describes a closely related fantasy of "implosion": "This is the strongest word I can find for the extreme form of what Winnicott terms the impingement of reality. Impingement does not convey, however, the full terror of the experience of the world as liable at any moment to crash in and obliterate all identity." In his fear of impingement or invasion Malte reconfirms the contours of his body, the physical boundaries between himself and the world. He draws the outline of his face, and the renewed sense of his differentiation reassures him that most of what is out there in the vast world cannot get into his very limited interior space. But he quickly realizes that he could be wrong. He imagines external reality flooding over the frail border barriers of body and mind, filling him up, through the last branching of his capillaries, pushing out breath, life, and self, increasing until it spatters his insides outside, and nothing is left of the conscious individual within (see 74). In this terrifying fantasy of invasion, the boundaries of body and self are easily breached, the "surface hardness and adaptability" on which he has relied to protect him are no more dependable than the Maginot Line.

Impairment of the ability to differentiate between self and other obviously goes along with a weak sense of identity. These defects may give
rise to fantasies of engulfment in which something or someone else incorporates or swallows a person, takes over his will, smothers him with possessive, pressuring love, fixes him in formulas which he feels he cannot escape, blots out his sense of a separate self, draws him into an identification so complete that there is little or nothing left of him apart from this mergence with the other person. Rilke makes the threat of engulfment a focus of interest in the final section of *The Notebooks*, Malte’s reinterpretation of the Prodigal Son story as “the legend of a man who didn’t want to be loved” (251).

This version of the parable of the Prodigal Son is a vehicle for Rilke’s fear that intimacy opens one to the danger of being effaced and changed through and through into the person or nonperson other people need one to be:

Once you walked into [the] full smell [of the house], most matters were already decided . . . on the whole you were . . . the person they thought you were; the person for whom they had long ago fashioned a life, out of his small past and their own desires; the creature belonging to them all, who stood day and night under the influence of their love, between their hope and their mistrust, before their approval or their blame . . .

Can he stay and conform to this lying life of approximations which they have assigned to him, and come to resemble them all in every feature of his face? (253–54).

The final sections of the novel emphasize the fear of being loved. In the margin of *The Notebooks* manuscript Malte has written, “To be loved means to be consumed. . . . To be loved is to pass away” (250). He imagines that the Prodigal Son often thought of the troubadours as men who feared more than anything else that the woman they longed for might reciprocate their love (255). Malte seems to project onto them his fantasy that any woman who loved him would engulf him. His illness and isolation recall the fate of Dostoevsky’s narrator in *Notes from Underground*, who sends away the prostitute Liza when she comes to his apartment, in the fear that her love will suffocate him, and thus compulsively and helplessly seals himself in his hole, cut off from everyone but a servant, living on daydreams which turn to nothingness, as his precursor, the narrator of Dostoevsky’s earlier novella, *White Nights*, tells us.

*The Notebooks* closes on a curiously negative note of hope. In con-
cluding his version of the story of the Prodigal Son, Malte comes up with a notion of how a prodigal returned might continue to live with his family while defending himself against the threat of engulfment. This defense might work just as well in any human community. The selfish, egocentric nature of the love surrounding the Prodigal Son, which at first seems so menacing, provides a defense against itself. Those who threaten to reshape his face so that it will resemble theirs tend to see him through the colored lenses of their egocentric love, their fears, their hopes, their mistrust, their needs and desires. In brief, they see what they want to see and are blind to what frightens or displeases them.

Their distorted perceptions and their lack of understanding protect him against them. Their denial of what they do not want to see and their tendency to see what they desire mask him. Behind the masks they unconsciously create for him, he will have the freedom to develop inwardly, secretly, in accord with his distinctive needs, desires, and gifts. This part of The Notebooks brings to mind Nietzsche's argument in Beyond Good and Evil that false interpretations of everything a "profound spirit" does and says create a mask around him. Evading communication, he makes certain that "a mask of him roams in his place" in the minds of other people.\(^3\) J. R. von Salis reports in his book on Rilke's years in Switzerland that the poet told him he had never read Nietzsche. But, as Erich Heller has shown in The Disinherited Mind, there are many affinities between the ideas of the two. At least it is likely that Rilke acquired some knowledge of Nietzsche's thought through Lou Andreas-Salomé, whose brief relationship with the philosopher had a major impact on her thinking.\(^4\)

Malte imagines the actress Eleonora Duse using the parts she played on the stage as masks which defended her inwardness against the threat of engulfment by the audience that was "gnawing on" her face. For Duse, he believes, acting became a camouflage so effective in hiding her from the psychological cannibals around her that she could let herself live with unrestrained emotional intensity and vitality behind the roles she performed (234-35). Rilke saw Duse in Ibsen's Rosmersholm in Berlin during November 1906 before writing about her in The Notebooks. She was also the subject of his poem, "Bildnis" (Portrait). After talking with her for the first time in Venice at the beginning of July 1912, he declared
that this meeting had been “almost my greatest wish” for years (Letters 2:64).

II

The Notebooks entry on Duse reflects Malte’s weak ego boundaries, his poor capacity for differentiation, and his insecure sense of self and identity. But the passage points beyond Malte’s illness to the idea that a thoughtful, creative person—philosopher, poet, or actress—feeling threatened by engulfment, might use masks to defend growing inward strength. Duse’s fear of having her face devoured by her audience motivates her to hide behind the play and her role. Hiding, she becomes so powerful that the audience which, she feels, has been “gnawing on” her face, breaks into applause “as if to ward off . . . something that would force them to change their life.” Her fellow actors feel as if they are in a cage with a lioness (235).

Malte imagines her holding up a poem as a mask. Were Rilke’s poems and his fiction masks behind which he defended his strength and singular gifts from being drained away by the people around him? Did these masks become, paradoxically, powerful, if indirect, expressions of the inwardness which they were hiding? A poet expresses himself selectively in his poems. If we compare the more objective New Poems with his contemporaneous novel, which is sometimes autobiographical, and his letters, we can see that many of his poems, which do not seem to tell us anything about their author, were indirectly self-expressive. In writing about Eleanor Duse, who seemed to him to be very much like himself, was Rilke revealing obliquely that his poems, his novel, and Malte himself, as a fictional surrogate, concealed and expressed him at the same time? Here, too, I wonder if Nietzsche influenced the poet’s thinking. In Beyond Good and Evil, he asks if one does not write in order to hide what is within oneself.1 Kierkegaard, who interested Rilke as early as 1904, argued that all genuinely expressive and original writing is elusive and oblique (as figurative language and irony are indirect), concealing as much as or more than it communicates because the individual is and must remain essentially secret, incommunicable. According to the Danish philosopher, whenever “the process of communication is a work of art,” it
is shaped by the underlying sense "that personalities must be held devoutly apart from one another, and not permitted to fuse or coagulate into objectivity." \(^{12}\)

I have mentioned Winnicott’s comment in *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment* that artists often experience both “the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found.” \(^{3}\) Surely this observation fits Duse, as Malte imagines her. But does it describe Rilke?

Rilke’s prose piece entitled “An Experience” tells us that in 1913 he felt he was protected from psychological parasites and cannibals by an invisible barrier which “absorbed any relationship into itself and . . . intervened like a dark, deceptive vapor between himself and others,” giving him “for the first time, a certain freedom” toward others and “a peculiar ease of movement amongst these others, whose hopes were set on one another, who were burdened with cares and bound together in death and life.” His inner life, defended by this “intermediate space,” had “so little reference to human conditions, that [most people] would only have called it ‘emptiness.’” But this would have been a radical misunderstanding. His “freedom” brought the poet not “emptiness” or illness but “joy” and “converse with Nature” (WSR, 37–38).

Recurrently Rilke saw masking as a defense of inner freedom, power, and creativity. Behind the mask the face was free to grow. This was as true for himself as it was for Eleonora Duse and the Prodigal Son. But, as we have noted, often the use of such a defense is compulsive, and the freedom it affords may be quite limited. At least in Rilke’s imagination Duse was compelled to use her role as a mask by her fear that the audience was devouring her face. In the Prodigal Son episode masking becomes a necessary defense against having one’s face and inner self altered through and through under pressures from one’s family. Still worse, a mask can swallow the face it is meant to protect. I have mentioned the *Notebooks* entry in which a mask obliterates the child who tries it on. In January 1912, not long before the first Duino Elegy came to him, describing his involuntary identification with people he met, Rilke says that he could step out of his room in an amorphous state of mind approaching chaos, and, suddenly finding himself an object of another person’s awareness, automatically assume the other’s poise. On such occasions he was amazed to hear himself expressing “well-formed
things.” His assumption of a poise belonging to the person he met and his involuntary compliance with the other’s expectations of social behavior, masking the “lifelessness” and “chaos” he had felt in himself before these encounters, tended to engulf him, if only temporarily (Letters 2:37).

Reading Rilke’s letters and his biographers, one can see how he developed a persona out of the vocation which was central to his innermost sense of self. He played the role of the poet so well that it helped to win him the acclaim and support of many powerful and wealthy people. This is not to say that they were unaffected by his writings, only that the role the poet played among them made them all the more eager to have him with them, often in their homes, and to become his patrons. It was a mask which obviously reflected, to some extent, Rilke’s sense of himself, but also enabled him to veil and protect his inner life from the admirers who, he felt, were constantly draining his limited vitality and energy away, devouring the distinctive features of his face, the singular man and poet he was. In November 1907, for example, he described his mother’s friends in Vienna as eager to eat him up—though once they’d heard him read, they lost their hunger (see Letters 1:325).

The biographer Wolfgang Leppmann suggests that Rilke’s social personality, manners, and clothes were a protective camouflage which the poet developed to defend his inner freedom against impingements. Leppmann quotes Wilhelm Hausenstein’s sketch of Rilke in 1915: “The poet went about in a navy-blue suit and wore light gray spats. His delicate frame was somewhat stooped. . . . His hands moved cautiously, without expansive gestures, in light-colored deerskin gloves. He carried a walking-stick. The presence of a distinguished figure was thus disguised beneath the conventional appearance of a man of the world.”4 Like the role of the poet, this social persona may have functioned in alliance with the “intermediate space,” the “dark deceptive vapor,” which, Rilke felt, defended him from the people around him.

Rilke’s fears of being devoured by those who loved and admired him lead me to wonder if his personas resemble the “false self” which, psychologists tell us, people plagued by such anxieties often develop to conceal and protect their innermost self against such dangers. The question is important because the “false self,” which I shall define more fully, is a self-defeating defense, which ultimately encourages feelings of futility and emptiness and the sense that self and world are insubstantial and
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unreal. Recurrently, at least until 1922, when he completed the Duino Elegies and wrote The Sonnets to Orpheus, Rilke was haunted by such feelings.

Winnicott observes that the false self usually originates in the failure of a mother to adapt herself with sufficient sensitivity and empathy to an infant’s needs. The mother intrudes her own needs and fears into the child’s consciousness long before he is mature enough to cope with them. Distracted, disconnected from the spontaneous flow of his own feelings and “thoughts” by these impingements, he may split himself into an inner core and a personality or personalities preoccupied with giving compliant reactions to his mother’s pressures and, eventually, to pressures from other people. This outwardly directed part of the infant psyche becomes a false self, governed by the need to gratify and placate other people. While appeasing them, it conceals and protects the inner core, the “true self,” which is as completely divorced as possible from the false self’s need to react to external pressures.

Compliance is motivated by fear of engulfment, impingement, and depersonalization if one reveals one’s inner self, one’s true thoughts and feelings. But this defensive front may bleed, squeeze, corrupt, or swallow the inner self it is meant to protect. According to R. D. Laing in The Divided Self, the false self is experienced as being governed by “an alien will” or wills. Initially this is a parent’s will, however much it may be disguised. It may control one’s behavior, one’s body, one’s speech, even one’s thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. The false self may be compulsively impersonating as well as identifying with the person whose expectations exact compliance. This concept recalls Rilke’s unhappiness about his tendency to assume the poise of someone else, when, suddenly, he found himself “expressing well-formed things” which had nothing to do with his inner chaos and which completely concealed it. Were his aristocratic persona and the public role of the poet also examples of the schizoid false self, as Winnicott and Laing define it?

If we can say that Rilke did develop the kind of false self that analysts find in schizoid illness, we can discover its roots in the poet’s relationships with his parents during childhood. Rilke felt that Phia saw him entirely in terms of her preconceptions. He willingly complied when she insisted that her little boy play the role of a girl to replace the daughter who had died before he was born. As an adult he recalled that she had exhibited him to her friends as if he were a doll. While trying to satisfy
her need for a daughter, he encouraged his father’s hope that his little son would grow up to be an army officer and thus fulfill Josef’s frustrated ambitions vicariously. Josef Rilke had been forced out of the army after ten years of service. He had little René doing military exercises and receiving medals. The boy did his best to please him, too.

Phia Rilke wrote verse. She read Schiller’s ballads to her son, persuaded him to memorize and to recite them, and did everything she could to foster in René the desire and the ambition to be a great poet. In *Ewald Trage*, an early autobiographical novella, Ewald, Rilke’s surrogate, thinks of the mother who has left him as a sick woman who wants to be called “Fräulein,” sitting in a train compartment letting her fellow passengers know that her son is a poet. In his letters about his “unreal,” “ghostly” mother, Rilke expressed the fear that he was too closely identified with her, though he had been trying to separate and distance himself from her all his life (Letters 1:147). His devotion to a vocation that conformed to his mother’s wishes and his nearness as a poet to her conception of herself must have troubled him.

Malte’s retelling of the parable of the Prodigal Son reflects Rilke’s sense of the ways in which a false self may engulf one as it develops under pressures from one’s parents. Malte imagines that the mask of the false self which grows in response to the expectations, fears, hopes, and relentless scrutiny of a family threatens to become the son’s face. If that were to happen, all distinction between the outer false self and the inner true one would collapse; the former would replace the latter (251–54). A schizoid person lives in uncertainty and danger as he tries to detach and divorce his hidden “true self” from the false one, which increasingly absorbs it.

If a large part of one’s social experience is pervaded by the sense that what one says and does is controlled and shaped by other people and is false to one’s “true self,” relationships and contacts are likely to encourage feelings of paralysis and formlessness. The false self acts as a barrier protecting the inner self from engulfment, but it also confines the inner self, cutting it off from nurturing contacts with other people. There are a number of intimations in Rilke’s letters that the roles he played among his aristocratic hosts involved him in deception and self-deception, which were painful and debilitating. The letters suggest that his attempts to exist in harmony with his aristocratic friends forced him to live a dispiriting lie, to enact a false self. He longed to escape from them: “The good,
generous asylums, such as Duino was and immediately thereafter Venice ... require so much adaptation each time ... and when at last one has got to the point of belonging to them, the only thing accomplished is the lie that one belongs” (To Lou Andreas-Salomé, December 19, 1912; Letters 2:81).

As for the aristocratic persona, caught in William Hausenstein’s description, it may well have originated in the pretensions of Rilke’s parents and those of his father’s older brother, Jaroslav, a paternalistic uncle, who paid for René’s studies in a commercial high school and then at the University of Munich, and gave his nephew an allowance which lasted until after Jaroslav’s death. This uncle put much time and effort into an attempt to link the family with old nobility. Though he failed to gain legal recognition of any such connection, his nephew, the poet, maintained all his life the myth of noble descent. Phia Rilke, whose father was wealthy and held the title of imperial counselor, no doubt thought she was marrying into a family descended from aristocrats. In her photos she often appears in long black dresses, which give her a rather absurd resemblance to some great lady of an earlier decade, and her striking expression of loftiness fits in with this impression. Josef Rilke was bitterly disappointed when he did not succeed in following the career of a military officer, once the exclusive privilege of the nobility. Later he also failed to obtain a job as the manager of a count’s estate, which would have enabled him and his family to live in the kind of proximity to a noble heritage which his son later found in the castles and palaces of his patrons. Josef’s career as a railway inspector decisively defeated all such hopes.11

Rilke’s need to be a gentleman probably expressed an identification with his parents’ aspirations and a desire to escape from the tawdry reality of their bourgeois life. In this respect he made himself in their image of themselves. He tried to fulfill their hopes for themselves and for him and to give some reality to their illusions, despite his scorn for their self-deceptiveness. His descriptions of his own life during his childhood, so different in its external circumstances from Malte’s, point toward these conclusions: “My childhood home was a cramped rented apartment in Prague; it was very sad. . . . our little household, which was in reality middle class, was supposed to have the appearance of plenty, our clothes were supposed to deceive people, and certain lies passed as a matter of course” (Letter to Ellen Key, April 3, 1903; Letters 1:98).

In René Rilke: Die Jugend Rainer Maria Rilkes (René Rilke: The
Youth of Rainer Maria Rilke), the poet’s son-in-law, Carl Sieber, reports that Rainer’s parents pasted high-sounding labels on bottles containing cheap table wine. Drawing upon Sieber, Leppmann says that when company came, there was so little room that René sometimes had to sleep behind “a black folding screen decorated with gold birds.” Leppmann’s inventory of their belongings gives us the picture: “Together with various lacquered Japanese fans, views of Vesuvius and other Italian motifs, and a vast number of knickknacks, this bamboo screen formed part of the inventory of an apartment that most differed from hundreds of others, if at all, through its sitting room which was done in blue silk.”

Did the aristocratic persona begin as a false self, developed by the child, René, in response to his parents’ aspirations? Did it continue to serve unconsciously as a response to those aspirations, while at the same time complying with the tastes and values of parental surrogates among the aristocratic patrons who offered Rilke their homes, financial support, admiration, and even, in some cases, warm affection? If this was a false self, did the poet experience it, consciously or unconsciously, as a masquerade, hence unreal, hollow, futile, unfulfilling?

Early in The Notebooks Malte, who, unlike Rilke, is descended from high-ranking nobility, becomes anxious about his cleanliness and the appearance of his clothes, because they distinguish him from the poor “outcasts” who seem to feel that he belongs to them:

Even though the jacket I wear every day has begun to get threadbare in certain spots . . . True, my collar is clean, my underwear too, and I could, just as I am, walk into any café I felt like, possibly even on the grands boulevards, and confidently reach out my hand to a plate full of pastries and help myself. No one would find that surprising; no one would shout at me or throw me out, for it is after all a genteel hand, a hand that is washed four or five times a day. There is no dirt under the nails, the index finger isn’t ink-stained, and the wrists especially are irreproachable. (38–39)

What precedes and follows this shows that Malte’s anxiety about his clothes and cleanliness, about his ability to walk into shops without being thrown out, is not normal middle class anxiety concerning respectable appearances. In the homelessness of the Parisian “outcasts” and in their apparent dehumanization, Rilke found what he suspected, with fear and
revulsion, were mirror images of his own existence. He imagined that they were “living on nothing, on dust, on soot” (Letters 1:109). In The Notebooks he elaborates this conception of the “outcasts.” They are “trash, husks of men that fate has spewed out,” “[w]et with the spittle of fate,” stuck to a wall, a lamppost, a billboard, or trickling like dung down a street (40).

One source of Malte’s desire to sustain the look and fastidiousness of the gentleman in the streets of Paris is the fear of being reduced to something like this—less than human, degraded, repulsive, and unselved. This was at least part of the motivation behind the development and duration of the style and manners which Hausenstein found incongruous. Rilke’s portrait of Malte reflects the fact that he was not entirely deceived by this persona. Late in the novel Malte thinks, “I know that if I am destined for the worst, it won’t help me at all to disguise myself in my better clothes” (214).

Malte also comes to recognize the harmful consequences of such disguises. A brief entry in The Notebooks, preceding the passage on Duse by a few pages, acknowledges his despair of ever being able to “rub off the make-up and remove everything that is artificial. . . . we go around, a laughingstock and a half-truth: neither real beings nor actors” (231). Malte’s thoughts here purport to take in all of us. “We” and “our” in this passage refer to human beings in general. But in the context of the novel, if we consider his illness and his anxieties, this entry describes the consequences of developing a false self or selves in an attempt to defend what he calls elsewhere “the hard core of a personality” beneath “the mask,” to defend what a person feels is his true self. Eventually this defense may result in an inability to separate mask from face, false self from true, as parts of the false self or selves get mixed up with the individual’s innermost being, pervading feelings and thoughts, governing gestures, words, and acts, despite his best efforts to liberate himself from them. In schizoid illness the false self or selves seem to take up more and more of the mind’s energy and space. In schizophrenia the true self may disappear in a welter of false selves and fragments.

In The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment, Winnicott distinguishes between “the False Self” in schizoid illness and the healthy use of social adaptability and pliancy to create a “compliant [so- cial] self” that defends the inner self against discovery and intrusion.
Winnicott maintains that in health, as in sickness, we feel the inner self must be defended, not only against pressures to conform, but against being discovered and known. He argues that even in health an individual must keep his innermost self secret, inaccessible to everyone else, and that all of us feel its exposure threatens us with obliteration, with being converted into a usable thing, a danger exemplified in the results of brain-washing and in science fiction about people being reprogrammed or changed into robots.

Winnicott's conclusions, drawn from his work with patients, provide support for Rilke's evolving thoughts about the dangers inherent in human relationships and the need to protect his imaginative and emotional freedom by means of something like a "dark deceptive vapor." Winnicott theorizes that "in health there is a core to the personality that corresponds to the true self of the split personality; . . . this core never communicates to the world of perceived objects, and the individual person knows that it must never be communicated with or influenced by external reality."14

I do not know whether Winnicott read Kierkegaard, but the psychologist's argument that all of us are "permanently unknown" reads like a paraphrase of the Danish philosopher's thinking about the nature of the individual, which almost surely confirmed Rilke's sense of himself and helped him to articulate it. Winnicott's analysis of normal fears of intrusive influence on what he calls "the secret self" would have found ready assent in Rilke at the height of his powers. Nothing can be more frightening and painful than changes in the core of the self as a result of a failure or breakdown in the defenses that protect it against communication.15

Winnicott distinguishes the false self in schizoid illness from the public self in a state of health. The first may be debilitating and destructive, and often leads a person to feel that he is "a collection of reactions to impingement." The second appeases the world by complying with its demands and expectations, hiding and defending the inner life of the "true self," while the latter is able in its strength and health to express itself and to find fulfillment and sources of new energy and vitality.

Surely we can accept Rilke's assertion in "An Experience" that his hidden inner life, defended by a "dark, deceptive vapor," was not empty, despite its "freedom" from ordinary human concerns and relationships, that it was joyful and rich in "converse with Nature." His resurgent
creativity at the time justifies this claim, though we also know that during the years 1911–22 he often lapsed into states of despair, emptiness, and emotional paralysis. It seems likely that his social personas (his aristocratic manners and his public role as a poet among admirers), his fantasy of an “intermediate space,” the “dark, deceptive vapor” around him, and his belief that poems and other writings might serve as masks were rooted in schizoid defenses against fantastical threats and anxieties, such as those I have described, but that he developed sufficient strength of ego and imagination to convert them into something more closely akin to the adaptable, “compliant [social] self” and the artfully shaped masks of behavior which Winnicott sees as the healthy psyche’s means of concealing and protecting its secret inner life, its creative depths, from disturbing scrutiny and pressures.

III

In The Divided Self, Laing says that people suffering from the dread of engulfment often defend their identity by means of isolation. In this respect Malte’s behavior is typical. Unlike the Prodigal Son, he does not return to his home except at the time of his father’s death. Unlike Rilke when he was newly arrived in Paris, Malte does not write long, almost daily letters to a wife and friends he has left behind. None of his encounters with other people in Paris relieve his isolation. He goes to see doctors in a hospital, but this encounter is impersonal. He thinks that some of the Parisian outcasts look at him as if they sensed an affinity, but his notes do not show that he exchanged one word with them.

Rilke’s repeated insistence that solitude was necessary to his creativity must be understood at least partly as an outgrowth of his anxieties about having his inner life and self involuntarily changed, corrupted, taken over, or absorbed by other persons or alien external phenomena. Two pages after describing his fantasy of being invaded, filled up, and driven out of himself by what is “horrible” in the world, Malte meditates on Beethoven’s death mask, thinking of the great composer as “a man whose hearing a god had closed up, so that there might be no sounds but his own; so that he might not be led astray by what is turbid and ephemeral in noises” (73–74 and 76). In 1903, probably near the time he began his work on The Notebooks, Rilke wrote to the young poet Franz Kappus,
saying that anyone who wished to write poetry needed to be alone within himself much of the time. Even among other people this might be possible, if one could look upon their lives “from out of the depth” and “expanse” of “one’s own world,” with the sense of distance and strange-ness a child feels watching adults.

To Baladine Klossowska he wrote in December 1920, arguing that Malte could never “have penetrated so far into the confidence of things” if he had been diverted and distracted by human relationships. He had to be able to devote himself completely to “the things whose essential life” he wanted to express in his work. Rilke must have been thinking about his own New Poems, which were contemporaneous with The Notebooks: “Der Panther,” “Die Gazelle,” “Römische Sarkophage,” “Der Schwan,” “Die Spitze” (The Lace), “Die Treppe der Orangerie” (The Steps of the Orangery), “Das Karussell,” and “Die Rosenschale” (The Bowl of Roses). An earlier letter to Klossowska reveals underlying reasons for Rilke’s need to get away from other persons, including Baladine herself. He did not like to have people looking at him, guessing what was troubling him, forcing him to be aware of them, inhibiting his freedom to shape his own life.

Reading the parts of The Notebooks concerned with Malte’s lonely boyhood and passages in Rilke’s diaries and letters, one can see how difficult and painful solitude was for him. It often brought severe anxiety, frightening fantasies, and even delusions. Recurrently from 1911 to 1914 Rilke felt so barren and impotent in his comparatively solitary life that he longed for a companion. But this yearning dismayed him. It seemed a reflection of a diminished capacity for creative work. The following is from a letter to Salomé written on December 28, 1911, little more than two weeks before the First Elegy came to him:

Dear Lou, I am in a bad way when I wait for people, need people, look around for people. . . . So it is a bad sign that since Malte I have often hoped for someone who would be there for me, how does that happen? I had a ceaseless longing to bring my solitude under shelter with someone, to put it in someone’s protection; you can imagine that in those conditions nothing made any progress. . . . How is it possible that now, prepared and schooled for expression, I am left in fact without a vocation, superfluous? (Letters 2:34)

The companion he imagined would have to be his perfect complement and utterly unintrusive. She must make no demands, expect nothing from
him. She must in no way confront him with a distinctive, independent, self-assertive personality or with needs of her own, as he says in a letter to Salomé written on January 10, 1912, two days before the First Elegy came to him (Letters 2:38–39).

In December 1913, not long after completing the Third Elegy, writing to his maternal patron and friend, the princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis, in whose castle at Duino he had penned the First and Second Elegies, he expressed his longing for a place in the country with a housekeeper, who either would feel no love or would show an extraordinary love that made no demands, while protecting the poet in his vulnerable openness to “the invisible” (Letters 2:102). Rilke’s fantasy of a perfectly empathetic, selflessly responsive, undemanding woman was a dream of the impossible. Reading an earlier version of this chapter, some colleagues were distressed to find such weakness in a poet whose writings often express deeply felt admiration and genuine understanding of the strengths shown by many women in history and literature. The fantasy of the perfect companion makes him seem antipathetic, a man possessed by ideas and attitudes which have often led to the oppression of women. Only a mother attuned to her infant, completely identified with him, expecting nothing for herself, an ideal parent created by a narcissistic mind, could fulfill such needs.

We can find other dimensions of the maternal figure that almost certainly underlies his longings for a woman whose love would protect him “at the border of the invisible” in The Notebooks. One entry praises and celebrates the incomparable power of the mother who can calm the terror of a child lost among the phantoms he himself has created in a dark room when he is left alone at night. Lighting a match, she becomes in her child’s mind the source of all the real or imagined noises that have been frightening him, as she urges him to feel no fear now that she is with him. At the sound of something moving in the wall or creaking in the floor, her smile reassures him, as if she “knew the secret of every half-sound, and everything were agreed and understood between you.” The passage ends with the question, “Does any power equal your power among the lords of the earth?” (75).

The companion who could do this for the poet would shelter his solitude and free it from the anxieties which often grew unbearably intense when he was alone. His fantasy of a housekeeper who would not expect anything from him reflects his dread at the prospect of having his
internal freedom and his sense of a separate, distinctive self overwhelmed by intimacy with an assertive friend or lover. This fear was rooted in his relationship with his mother. If the unconscious fantasy underlying his longing for a “perfect” woman was the yearning for the kind of parent imagined in the passage quoted above from The Notebooks, this desire was strengthened by the poet’s feeling that his emotional illness had originated in Phia’s blind, smothering narcissism. To protect himself against a repetition of his childhood relationship with Phia, he must have her extreme opposite as his companion. Ironically, he seems to have longed for the freedom to be as blindly narcissistic as Phia in his relationship with the woman who would care for him. Nothing caused him more distress than his awareness that he had taken on some of his mother’s worst qualities.

In an essay entitled “The Fantasy of the Perfect Mother,” Nancy Chodorow and Susan Contratto analyze this widespread fantasy and its adult derivatives. They are particularly interested in the closely related assumption in many cultures that mothers have incomparable power to shape their children’s lives and the consequences of the fantasy and this assumption: the tendency to blame mothers for all the ills that befall their children and the ubiquitous idealization of mothers which often reinforces, not only exaggerated expectations, but also negative ideas and feelings about maternal failure and destructiveness. Chodorow and Contratto conclude that infantile fantasies of maternal perfection and omnipotence and the ideas of maternal responsibility resulting from them in a number of cultures have encouraged the oppression of mothers and much of the anger felt toward women.

Chodorow and Contratto trace current ideas about mothering to the evolution of parental roles in the nineteenth century. They argue that as men among the bourgeoisie became increasingly absorbed in urban commerce and industry, responsibility for, and control over, the rearing of children was assumed to be almost entirely in the mother’s hands. These conditions and assumptions fostered the isolation of mother and child. They also encouraged conceptions of the ideal mothering which would produce the best possible children and thus the best of all possible worlds. The notion that the mother and the child are isolated in a protected sphere, which is reflected in Rilke’s fantasy about a life apart with a protective, nurturing, selfless woman, becomes, as Chodorow and Contratto show, one focus of recent feminist writings. A number of feminists
whose works they discuss have explored the ways in which the fantasy or the reality of mothers’ aloneness with their children exacerbates their sense of oppression, their rage, and their fears that their separate identities will be obliterated. Children often react with fear, anger, and aggression to these feelings in their mothers, all the more so because of their fantasies of maternal omnipotence. Such reactions continue, later in life, to have an unconscious influence on adults’ feelings and ideas about mothers. They fuel men’s antagonism toward women, as well as the doubts and tensions in women’s attitudes toward themselves.

This essay helps to place Rilke’s ideas and feelings about his mother and other women against a larger cultural and social background. It also indicates the tendency of psychological theorists in recent times to share the cultural assumptions which have grown out of the fantasy of the perfect mother, as they have moved away from the triangular oedipal paradigm to focus upon the power of the mother to shape the child.1

Later I shall examine Rilke’s brief relationship with Magda von Hattingberg during the early months of 1914, when he thought he had at last found the companion he had described in his letters to the princess Marie and Lou Andreas-Salomé. This relationship, falling dismally short of the fantastical hopes which filled the poet’s letters to von Hattingberg in the month before they met (she started the correspondence by writing to him after coming across his Stories of God), ended all too swiftly, leaving Rilke in anguish. Shortly afterward, in June 1914, he wrote to Salomé a letter revealing that this failure had brought him to painfully clear self-understanding. “For I no longer doubt that I am sick, and my sickness has gained a lot of ground and is also lodged in that which heretofore I called my work, so that for the present there is no refuge there” (Letters 2:113–14).

But relationships with other women, who had not been sent by heaven to play the part of the angelic housekeeper, were essential to Rilke’s emotional strength and vitality. In chapters five and six I consider the poet’s love affair and long friendship with Lou Andreas-Salomé and his marriage and friendship with Clara Westhoff, two women who, for many years, helped to allay his fears and fostered his creativity, often from a distance, through letters.

The seclusion which Rilke sought sometimes intensified his illness. But no student of his life is likely to disagree with his belief that it nurtured his genius. In an essay on Rilke, Robert Hass notes the poet’s
loathing for the superficiality and falseness which he saw in the everyday social life of most human beings and observes that his evocative power seems to have come from a lonely inner depth. His poems can awaken in us a corresponding depth of inwardness and a responsiveness that creates something like the perspective of the child’s distance evoked in the letter to Franz Kappus mentioned above. Hass argues that Rilke’s greatest poetry strips away many layers of apparent richness and complexity within us, enabling us to discover a solitary self in all its strangeness, a dimension of the psyche which Hass associates with “the huge nakedness and poverty of human longing.”