CHAPTER 4

This Lost, Unreal Woman
Phia Rilke and the Maternal Figures in *The Notebooks*

I

In April 1904, at the age of twenty-eight, two months after beginning the book that was to become his novel, Rilke wrote a letter to Salomé which more fully and precisely than anything else he left us reveals his adult conceptions of his mother and her effect on him. Phia had come to Rome, where her son was staying, and he was forced to meet her from time to time, though he felt that “every meeting with her [was] a kind of setback.” He found her “lost” and “unreal,” “connected with nothing,” determined to remain young. The sight of her brought back memories (who can say if they were accurate?) of his struggle as a child to escape her. Their meetings intensified his fear that after years of trying to separate himself and distance her he was still deeply identified with her, “fear ... that somewhere inwardly I still make movements that are the other half of her embittered gestures, bits of memories that she carries broken within her.” His sense of still carrying in himself, somewhere hidden, her false, “distraught pieties,” narcissistic religiosity, and pretentious affectations of manner and dress, “all those distorted and perverted things to which she has clung,” horrified him. And he could not help wondering if he shared her ghostly unreality and emptiness. If his “entrance into the world” was like a “wallpaper door” in a “faded wall that doesn’t belong to anything,” that helped to explain why he sometimes felt he had no place and was not at home in the world (*Letters* 1:147).
I have mentioned the letter which Rilke wrote in November 1907 from Prague about Phia's effect on him. For a reading he was giving she had assembled an audience of old women who seemed hungry for him but quickly lost their hunger when they heard him read (Letters 1:325). No doubt, his sense of these women, his mother's friends and contemporaries, his fantasy of their desire to devour him and his feelings about the sudden rejection and indifference which abruptly replaced it were partly transferred from Phia herself. At the same time he wrote to Clara that his mother had little or no understanding of the man her son had become. She saw him almost entirely through her preconceptions. He was unable to make her see any of his real nature or character. Such was the power of this blindness that after being with her he had a strong sense of the hole, the void, her perceptions left in him: "in relation to her nothing remains valid."

Every time he met her, Rilke felt his mother defended herself against taking in the strange, very different man who long ago had been René and transformed him into an embodiment of images and ideas that satisfied her needs and did not arouse her fears, just as she had done in his childhood. Meeting her for the last time in October 1915, in Munich, he wrote a poem which utters its complaint against Phia's blind, self-absorbed destructiveness with naked simplicity. In this poem he compares himself to a small house, which he has built, stone by stone, until it is able to stand on its own. But his mother demolishes him. Looking at her son, she cannot see that he has been building. Blindly, she goes through his stone wall. Dogs recognize him. Only his mother does not know his face, which has been slowly growing. He never feels a warm breath of air coming from Phia and ironically imagines her lying in a lofty compartment of her heart, where Christ comes to wash her daily.

Ach wehe, meine Mutter reisst mich ein.
Da hab ich Stein auf Stein zu mir gelegt,
und stand schon wie kleines Haus, um das sich
sogar allein. [gross der Tag bewegt,
Nun kommt die Mutter, kommt und reisst mich ein.

Sie reisst mich ein, indem sie kommt und schaut.
Sie sieht es nicht, dass einer baut.
Sie geht mir mitten durch die Wand von Stein
Ach wehe, meine Mutter reisst mich ein.
Die Vögel fliegen leichter um mich her.
Die fremden Hunde wissen: das ist der.
Nur einzig meine Mutter kennt es nicht,
mein langsam mehr gewordenes Gesicht.

Von ihr zu mir war nie ein warmer Wind.
Sie lebt nicht dorten, wo die Lüfte sind.
Sie liegt in einem hohen Herz-Verschlag
und Christus kommt und wäscht sie jeden Tag.

(WDB 2:101)

The poem is so clear it needs little explication. Among all creatures only the poet’s mother cannot see the individual her son has made of himself. She has no warmth or life to give him. Her deadness, her blindness to his work of self-creation, her self-absorption in egocentric, narcissistic fantasies of a Savior devoted to her are extremely destructive, despite the strength he has struggled to develop in himself. The poet’s fantasy that he has built himself up stone by stone brings to mind his relationship with Rodin and his tendency to think of artistic work in terms of sculpture. He has developed his sense of himself through the writing of his poems and the mastery of his art. The stone represents the strength and permanence of the self, the life, and the body of work he has created. In telling us that his mother goes through his stone wall, the poem suggests that his unsuccessful defense against her devastating imperviousness was to try to make himself impervious.

Stone is unfeeling; it’s dead. Did he suspect that in protecting himself against Phia, in trying to make himself impervious and indestructible, he had deadened himself? In a 1913 letter to Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe, the poet says that he is not a lover, that no one has ever “shaken” him “utterly,” possibly because he is unable to love his mother (Letters 2:90). Parts of the poem express an opposing, positive sense of self, as creatures of air and earth recognize the poet’s distinctive face and its steady growth and change.

A number of times Rilke retold the story of his childhood in letters to sympathetic women. The earliest of these which has survived was addressed in 1894 to Valerie von David-Rhonfeld, one of his early loves, who wrote novellas and painted porcelain, dressed in red, Empire style gowns, and carried a shepherdess’s crook. To “Vally” he wrote on his nineteenth birthday that his mother had entrusted him to a servant and
that she had loved him only when she could exhibit him to her friends in a little dress (Letters 1:18). Years later, during the troubling spring of 1903, three months before he felt he could appeal to Salomé for help, he described the mother of his childhood in a letter to the Swedish feminist Ellen Key, who had read his *Stories of God* with much excitement. This long self-introduction focused upon memories or fantasies of himself as a child “infinitely forsaken” and “utterly astray in an alien world,” played with by his mother as if he were a doll, treated by her as a girl, and otherwise neglected by that nervous woman who wanted to be called “Fräulein” and “to pass for young, sickly, and unhappy.” Haunted by such memories or fantasies of Phia in his childhood, the poet yearns for “a mother who is greatness, kindness, quietude, and beneficence.” And he imagines that in this reply to Ellen Key’s praise of his stories he may be writing to such a mother (Letters 1:98–104).

In *The Notebooks* and the Third Elegy he developed his conception of such a parent. Yet one cannot help wondering if Malte’s Maman is an unconscious retrieval of Phia from Rilke’s early childhood, a maternal figure that at least partly belies the bitter accusations of early neglect in his letters. Or is Maman largely invention, a fantasy of the benevolent, devoted, empathetic protectress long wished-for by the son who felt he had not had one?

One of the earliest recollections from Malte’s childhood takes us back to Urnekloster, the home of Maman’s father, Count Brahe. At the age of twelve or thirteen Malte is staying there with his father, years after Maman’s death. The motherless boy keenly feels the absence of any sense of “family” in the group of relatives who gather for dinner at his grandfather’s table. Even his relationship with his father is “cool.” Malte is in a “state of annihilation.” The high, dark banquet hall “sucked all images out of you” until you “sat there as if you had disintegrated—totally without will, without consciousness . . . without defense . . . like an empty space” (26).

“Annihilation,” “disintegration,” emptiness, lack of will, and defenselessness are central and recurrent elements of Malte’s experience as a child and as an adult. The child experiences the “vaulted room” as if it were a living thing. Its “darkening height and its never fully illuminated corners” forcibly draw his thoughts and feelings, his will, his consciousness of world and self, all his insides, out of him. The images suggest, ambig-
uously, irresistible vacuums and voracious mouths. Psychoanalytic studies reveal that unconscious infantile fantasies and fears of cannibalism often underlie such thoughts. The infant projects his desire to devour the breast or the mother onto her, and is then terrified of being eaten. In schizoid and schizophrenic illness these fantasies surface again in many forms, often involving displacement from the mother to other objects, as, for example, the dining hall in the home of Maman's father. Malte's fantasy here suggests weakness of ego defenses and boundaries, impairment of integration and differentiation.

If Malte were "a real person" rather than a character in a book, one could say without fear of troubling a commonsensical mind that his mother's illness and early death, his father's remoteness, and the absence in the boy of any sense of family and home after Maman's death must have undermined his fragile sense of personal identity and integrity. And one could see that these factors in Malte's childhood must have encouraged the fears of engulfment and implosion which resurfaced in Paris.

In the childhood scenes at Urnekloster, Malte's mother is associated with two other members of her family—Mathilde, a distant cousin, and Christine, whose ghost walks through the dining hall during dinner. Malte discovers his mother's features in Mathilde's face. The connection between the two women is even more tightly drawn. Malte is unable to remember Maman, but the time spent with Mathilde Brahe brings together in his mind "hundreds and hundreds of details" which "form an image of my dead mother." And from then on this image "accompanies me everywhere I go" (28).

Yet Mathilde Brahe's face differs from Maman's in one important respect. Looking at this cousin, he sees his mother's features "forced apart, distorted, no longer connected to one another, as if a stranger's face had thrust itself among them." The "as if" is curiously out of place. In fact this is a "stranger's" face. Rilke's comments about his own mother make one wonder if Mathilde Brahe obliquely reflects the poet's adult perception that Phia, the mother whom he came to detest as disconnected, lacking coherence, was a grotesquely distorted incarnation of the one he had loved as a young child.

The first time Malte sees Christine Brahe at dinner in Urnekloster he does not realize that she is a ghost. Mathilde has stayed away from the meal. When Malte's grandfather, Count Brahe, explains that she is absent because she does not want to encounter Christine, his uncle, a retired
army major, leaves the room, beckoning Malte and his young cousin, Erik, to follow him. Later, when they have been served dessert, a door which Malte thought was always locked opens, and "a slender woman in a light-colored dress" moves slowly in their direction (33). Malte's father jumps up from the table and starts walking toward her, but the count grabs his arm and drags him back. The woman exit through another door, which Erik closes with a bow. Furious, shouting, Malte's father demands that the count tell him who the visitor was. When the old man, whose face is like a mask, smiling, identifies her as Christine Brahe, a member of the family, Chamberlain Brigge rushes out of the dining hall, leaving his son behind. Long afterward Malte learns the story of Christine's death in childbirth ages ago.

Rilke implicitly associates Christine's ghost with Malte's dead mother when he has Count Brahe speak to the boy's father about Maman as if she were a girl, dressed in white, who might be about to come into the dining hall. Not long after, the dead woman "in a light-colored dress" does enter the room, and the next morning Malte wakes up and his bones freeze when he sees "something white" sitting on his bed (31, 33, 35). The novel strengthens one's sense that Mathilde and Christine represent Maman in Malte's unconscious mind. All three women seem to become confused with one another, if only momentarily, when his horror at the ghostly image on his bed changes as he hears the voice of Mathilde speaking to him and tries to "assemble" his mother's features in the living cousin's face, while asking her about the strange woman who came into the dining hall the night before.

With her "warm, sweetish breath" that touches his face and her voice that immediately calms him, putting an end to his horror in the morning, Mathilde embodies a fantasy of the mother as a comforter and protector. Curiously, she seems to have acquired some distasteful associations with Phia Rilke as well. Apart from the disconnectedness and incoherence of the mother's features in her face, her interest in an Austrian spiritualist recalls Phia's "distraught pieties," which probably influenced her son at an early age, though later he found them repulsive. Perhaps, Mathilde reflects elements of the poet's ambivalence about his mother and his sense that Phia could be seen as a somewhat ridiculous figure. If the poet did, consciously or unconsciously, associate her with Phia, he may have defended himself against this association by making her harmless and only "a distant cousin" (27).
The reactions Christine’s ghost arouses in various members of the family point to an underlying fantasy that contact with the dead is deadly and to the feeling that they can exert a dangerous power over the living. Count Brahe grabs Malte’s father, pulls him back to his chair, and holds him there when he tries to approach Christine.

Later in the novel Malte recalls a story Maman once told about the return of another member of the household, Ingeborg, shortly after her death. Though Ingeborg is invisible, the members of the family realize that she is there because Cavalier, their dog, runs to meet her as he always did during her lifetime, when she came at tea time, bringing the mail. He jumps up “to lick her .... whimpering with joy.” Suddenly he howls, whirls, falls back, and lies “stretched out before us, strange and flat on the ground, not moving a muscle” (90). This story suggests that the touch of ghosts is lethal. Ingeborg’s relationship with Malte’s mother, Maman’s fascination with her behavior during her last illness and her return after death, and the context of this story (Malte’s account of his mother’s last illness) form a web of associations between the two women.

Hence, Maman is associated with two menacing Brahe ghosts, at least one of whom is deadly, though she has been benevolent, comforting, lovely, and beloved during her lifetime. Indirectly, through latent displacement in these stories, *The Notebooks* suggests that the dead mother is a threatening figure, capable of killing if one cannot overcome the power of her magnetism.

Unconscious dread of the mother as a destroyer may begin in infancy as a fear of being swallowed or smothered by her. In clinical work psychologists also find the unconscious fantasy of a mother sucking up all one’s life, energy, and feeling. Such fantasies may be transferred to other figures, as they are in *The Notebooks* and in D. H. Lawrence’s novels *Sons and Lovers* and *Women in Love*. Such fantasies are sometimes lumped together under the psychological term “engulfment.” If a dead or absent mother is a lively ghost in the mind, and if one feels unable to separate oneself from her, one may feel swallowed up in a kind of living death, emotionally dependent on someone who can no longer actively reciprocate, no longer give much nurture or support. Too close an attachment to a dead, absent, or distant mother may sustain a symbiotic relationship which should have ended with early childhood. And this can result in a continuing sense of being trapped among the dead, among ghosts, unable to make vital contact with the living.
Maurice Betz, who worked with Rilke on the French translation of *The Notebooks*, recalls in *Rilke vivant* that, as the poet tried to describe Malte’s mother telling her ghost story, he seemed to confuse her with his own.1 Curiously, in her last illness Malte’s benevolent mother does come to resemble Phia Rilke, as the poet saw her. In his biographical account of the young Rilke, Carl Sieber confirms his father-in-law’s description of Phia as “unreal,” offering details of her appearance and behavior to support this, such as her long black dresses, which had been out of fashion for many years, her extreme thinness, and her diet. She seemed to eat almost nothing but biscuits, and Sieber wondered how she could exist on such fare.4 During the last years of her life, Maman has a strainer to filter what she drinks. Biscuits and bread are her only solid food. She tells her son she is unable to digest anything any more. Her hand is weightless and feels like an ivory crucifix, and she comes alive only when she is absorbed in the story of Ingeborg’s death and her return as a ghost who seems to kill the dog that runs to her in love and joy.

Toward the end Maman “began to die, slowly and hopelessly, over the whole surface of her body” (111). This is to say, her senses die, her connection with the external world and the source of her sense of her separateness from it. At this point she recalls Rilke’s description of Phia, as “lost,” “ghostly,” “connected with nothing” (*Letters* 1:147).

The connection between Rilke’s mother and Malte’s is most obvious in a scene based on Phia’s insistence that René transform himself into a girl during the first several years of his life. Carl Sieber, in his book about the poet’s childhood and youth, confirms that this scene in *The Notebooks* is autobiographical.5 Magda von Hattingberg testifies that Rilke told her Phia had encouraged him, as a child, to play the part of a girl, dressing him as one and making him dust around the house and do other chores ordinarily performed by daughters at that time.6 Rilke’s self-introductory letter of April 1903 to Ellen Key confirms the assertion that he was treated like a girl before going to school (*Letters* 1:99). As Sieber suggests, by drawing little René into this game, Phia provided herself with a substitute for the daughter who had died before René was born.

In the episode of the novel based on this experience, Maman calls Malte “Sophie,” the name of Rilke’s mother and his dead sister. But
Malte’s memory of the time “when Maman wished I had been a little girl and not the boy that I undeniably was” is free from the distaste implicit when Rilke mentions in his letters his transformation into a little girl. Perhaps, in his novel, Rilke is recapturing the pleasure he felt as a small child “in the little girlish house-dress,” in playing this game which gave such pleasure to his mother: “Then, when she asked who was there, I would delightedly answer ‘Sophie,’ making my voice so dainty that it tickled my throat” (99).

This is not just a game. The boy’s sense of himself as a little girl is quite real. “I really was Sophie, not just Maman’s little Sophie . . . whose hair Maman had to braid, so that she wouldn’t be mistaken for that naughty Malte, if he should ever come back.” If this section of the novel emphasizes the intimate rapport between mother and son and the boy’s delight in becoming Sophie for his mother, it also suggests another, very different sense of that early relationship. Increasingly it concentrates on Maman’s rejection of the little boy and her son’s identification with her in this rejection. “[Malte’s return] was not at all desirable; Maman was as pleased at his absence as Sophie was, and their conversations (which Sophie always carried on in the same high-pitched voice) consisted mainly in enumerating Malte’s misdeeds and complaining about him. ‘Oh dear, that Malte,’ Maman would sigh. And Sophie would go on and on about the naughtiness of boys in general” (100).

This sounds like good fun. The tone is humorous, teasing. One might think that, perhaps, the mother is ambivalent. When she chatters about Malte’s naughtiness, one might suspect that Maman finds this rather appealing as well as off-putting. But the pleasure Maman takes in Malte’s absence is the feeling that stands out.

If Rilke’s memory that his mother converted him into a little girl and played with him as if he were a doll was accurate, it seems likely that she was depersonalizing him in order to defend herself against the male in her son and his separate individuality (Letters 1:99). If the poet’s letters and poems about Phia give a true picture of her, her need to do this must have come from a lack of a strong sense of self, of her own distinctive reality.

One can easily see what the consequences of such childhood games might be: doubt and confusion about one’s identity, and in particular one’s sexual identity, confusion about body image, guilt at being male and an inclination to reject one’s masculinity, fear of women, difficulty
in staying with a woman. Above all, the mother’s game would draw her son into a collaboration which would entail at least a partial rejection of himself, of his value and worth and right to exist in harmony with his own nature, character, and sexual identity.

Maman’s choice of Rilke’s mother’s name for her little boy-girl in the game may be memory or invention on Rilke’s part. Sieber says that the girl’s name Phia used for René was Ismene, but Magda von Hattingberg reports that Rilke told her in one of his letters that his mother had called him Sophie as a child. In either case the choice of the name Sophie in *The Notebooks* reflects Rilke’s sense of Phia’s desire to identify her son with herself and not to allow him a separate existence.

Maman’s death in *The Notebooks* may have helped Rilke to defend her in his own imagination from association with the destructiveness, unreality, and emptiness he loathed in his own mother. Often death enables surviving children to purify their parents of negative qualities, to idealize them, and to isolate love from hate, fear, anger, and guilt, repressing negative feelings.

II

In *The Restoration of the Self*, Heinz Kohut defines the harmful effects of a narcissistic mother on her child. When such a mother supports and encourages her child’s displays of his grandiose sense of himself, he understands very well that he must conform to her idealized image of him, shaped by her own narcissistic grandiosity, in order to keep her love. One can see the narcissistic nature of Phia’s love for René in her insistence that he become a daughter, a girl, hence closer to a mirror image of herself; in her playing with him as if he were a doll and exhibiting him to her friends; in her blindness to all that he really was and her tendency to see him through her own preconceptions.

Kohut argues that the sense of the self’s reality, its cohesion and continuity, grows out of adequate early maternal mirroring. This also enables an infant to merge with a parent whom he experiences as omnipotent and secure and thus to internalize her capacity for mastering anxiety. Thus, failures in maternal empathy, resulting from the kind of narcissism that Rilke attributes to Phia, tend to prevent a child from developing an
adequate sense of his coherence and reality and an ability to control his fears. Because of her sense of her own unreality, disconnectedness, and unworthiness, a mother may be unable to give her child the emotional support that fosters self-acceptance and security.

Kohut explores the ramifications of these failures. A child of a narcissistic mother, one who responds selectively out of her own needs and fears, and is often withdrawn, may be vulnerable to fragmentation and is likely to lack self-esteem. As an adult he will probably experience emotional impoverishment and fear of love because it has proven so unstable and manipulative in his childhood. The kind of fragmentation which we have found in *The Notebooks*, and which Kohut traces to the weakness or perversity of maternal mirroring, often gives rise to hypochondria. According to Kohut, fears, such as Malte's, about illness and disease in parts of the body may be a way of attempting to "maintain control of the totality of [the] body by focusing . . . attention on the parts that [are] becoming estranged from [oneself]" as the "body-self" seems to be coming apart. The fantasies that accompany such anxieties may arise from a need to give physical form to a sense of impending mental disintegration, which is all the more terrifying because it is vague, not visible, not tangible, and thus eludes efforts at comprehension, defense, and mastery.¹

Can we say that Rilke's writing of *The Notebooks* had a similar defensive function? Did Rilke use the concrete imagery of *The Notebooks* and Malte's experiences to give tangible form to "the deeper unnameable dread experienced when a person feels that his self is becoming seriously enfeebled or disintegrating . . . the dread of the loss of his self—the fragmentation of and the estrangement from his body and mind . . . and the breakup of the sense of his continuity"?²

In *Collected Papers on Schizophrenia and Related Subjects*, Harold Searles observes that in many cases the mother of a mentally ill patient is unable, because of her own ego-fragmentation, feelings of unreality, and high anxiety, to respond to her child, with the result that the child finds himself "completely shut out of his mother's awareness, out in the cold, with a highly anxious sense of non-existence, of not being really alive."³ Such a mother's perceptions of her child in terms of her own preconceptions, Searles notes, may be experienced as tantamount to annihilation. The dependent mother may be attempting to keep her son tightly bound in the symbiotic relationship which he is trying to escape.
She may project her sense of herself onto him, motivated by her need to see him as part of her.

Rilke's vocation as a poet was inextricably enmeshed with his mother's ideal image of him. Nothing could have been more intolerable to him than the feeling that by following his vocation he was involving himself in the narcissism of the mother he portrays in his early novella Ewald Tragö, the woman who has abandoned her child and has become a homeless traveler, like the young author of the novella. Rilke's fictional surrogate, Ewald, tells a French girl at a family gathering that his mother, who has left her husband and son, is sick. He has not heard from her for quite a while. They have not even written to each other for a year. Nonetheless, he imagines, she likes to mention to other people in her train compartment that her son is a poet.4

Phia fostered her son's desire to be a poet. As the biographers tell us, she recited Schiller's ballads for René's benefit, got him to memorize poems, and encouraged his early efforts to write verse. In 1900 she published, through a vanity press, a book of aphorisms entitled Ephemeriden. It was dedicated to her son.5 If she had any ambitions to prove herself as a writer, this was the closest they came to fulfillment. The poet may have sensed that his own achievements fed his mother's narcissistic grandiosity.

One cannot help wondering if Rilke had to contend with a probably unconscious feeling that, in writing poetry and in achieving recognition and fame, he was displaying his grandiose sense of self exhibitionistically before his self-loving mother, cutting himself to her design to win her love, much as he loathed her. Substitutes, markedly different from her—among them Lou Andreas-Salomé, Clara Rilke, Auguste Rodin, the princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe, and Nanny Wunderly-Volkart—helped him to defend himself against this feeling. They afforded him a more genuine mirroring, which gradually brought healing, strength, and confidence. But one suspects the narcissistic mother was always there with him. She outlived him.

III

Malte's most romantic memory of a loving, enchanting Maman accompanies a recollection of one of his worst bouts of terror as a child. After
he has been "screaming and screaming" while servants try to calm him, his mother arrives at last. We are told that "Maman never came at night," except this one time (96). Two pages later Malte says, "Maman sometimes came for a half hour and read me fairy tales," but "the real readings, the long ones, Sieversen did" (98). Even in this entry where the small boy's romantic image of his mother is the focus, there are intimations of neglect, muted, veiled echoes of Rilke's complaints against his mother and his bitter assertion that he was often left in the care of a servant. In the next entry Malte describes how he allowed himself to be converted into Sophie to please his mother.

Yet on that one night, when Malte "screamed and screamed" in his fever and terror, his mother did come home from "a great ball, at the Crown Prince's." Wearing "her magnificent court gown," she let her "white fur fall behind her and took me in her bare arms."

And I, astonished and enchanted as I had never been before, touched her hair and her little smooth face and the cold jewels in her ears and the silk at the edge of her shoulders, which smelled of flowers. And we stayed like that and cried tenderly and kissed each other, until we felt that Father was there and that we had to separate. . . . "What nonsense to send for us," he said. . . . They had promised to go back if it was nothing serious. And certainly it was nothing serious. But on my blanket I found Maman's dance-card and white camellias, which I had never seen before and which I placed on my eyes when I felt how cool they were. (96–97)

The phrasing—"astonished and enchanted as I had never been before" and "Maman's dance-card and white camellias, which I had never seen before"—reinforces the intimations of distance and absence which frame the passage. Nonetheless, this entry brings into clear focus the tenderness, tinged with erotic feeling, which Malte feels for his mother. This is also one of several parts of The Notebooks which call to mind the essay "Family Romances," in which Freud analyzes the significance of fantasies that we are descended from high-ranking persons, arguing that they reflect the struggle to break free from parents by whom we feel neglected or toward whom we feel hostile. But Freud, at length, concludes that such fantasies "preserve, under a slight disguise, the child's original affection for his parents." Fantasies of aristocratic fathers and mothers, he finds, often reproduce traits of the real ones. The replacement of the
child's real parents by the ones in the fantasy recaptures earlier idealizations of the former.¹

Rilke took over his uncle Jaroslav's myth that the family ancestry was aristocratic. Though neither the uncle nor his nephew could prove their connection with an ancient noble family, the poet never abandoned this belief. Giving his fictional surrogate in *The Notebooks* aristocratic parents obviously involved displacement of this fantasy. Through Malte's noble heritage he can, if only in his imagination, escape the tawdriness of his parent's thoroughly bourgeois life in Prague. Perhaps, also, his creation of such a life for Malte and his parents was, through unconscious transference, a disguised way of rescuing his own parents from the seediness of their lives and giving them the aristocratic status for which they longed.

If we think of Maman on her return from the crown prince's ball in terms of "Family Romances" we can see that this passage may well have arisen from Rilke's desire to recover or invent a mother of early childhood whom he could love and adore.

In *Rainer Maria Rilke: Legende und Mythos*, Erich Simenauer, discussing this entry in *The Notebooks*, cites the opinion of Otto Rank and other psychoanalytic writers that Malte reveals a neurotic fixation in the oedipal stage with its incestuous desire for the mother.² Simenauer argues that in Rilke an unconscious "infantile fixation on the mother held [the writer] in chains during his lifetime and determined the direction of his unconscious longing, which lay at the foundation of his artistic creativity."³ Drawing upon an analysis of Gottfried Keller by E. Hitschmann, Simenauer implies that Rilke's need to distance his mother and his apparent lack of love for her were elements of "a reaction formation," covering up the forbidden yearning.⁴

Simenauer also mentions Rilke's story "Die Letzten" (The Last Ones) as evidence of incestuous feelings in its author. In her biography of Rilke, E. M. Butler calls this story "a Freudian situation played out to the death between a mother and son."⁵ In "Die Letzten" a sick son abandons his girlfriend and his work and gives himself up entirely to his mother. Then, as Leppmann says, "in the feverish imagination of her dying son" the mother becomes "a mysterious girl dressed in white." "The conclusion of this short work," says Leppmann, "is drenched in sultry eroticism and barely manages to skirt incest."⁶

Rilke's passionate affair with Lou Andreas-Salomé, who was fourteen
years older than himself and an acknowledged second mother, also supports the thesis that Rilke’s feelings for Phia were governed by a powerful oedipal attachment and the need to repress it.

In a fascinating and richly insightful chapter, entitled “Mutter und Urphantasien,” Simenauer goes through the voluminous evidence of Rilke’s “fixation.” Although he emphasizes the argument that Rilke’s loathing for his mother can be explained as “a reaction formation,” an attempt to reinforce his repression of the incestuous love which leaks through some passages in his writing, Simenauer acknowledges that the poet’s ambivalent relationship with Phia was determined by a variety of unconscious and conflicting feelings.7

Searles offers another perspective on the relationship between the child’s tenderness and enchantment, so beautifully evoked in The Notebooks, and the poet’s flight from Phia. A child’s love for an emotionally ill mother may give rise to the fear of being sucked into her sickness or to the loathing which results from his awareness that his feelings for her have mired him in an illness from which he cannot escape. Such love, though repressed and denied, may remain very much alive in later years, sustaining his identification with her in her illness.

If we accept the argument that Malte’s love for Maman obliquely reflects Rilke’s early love for his own mother—and, as I shall show, there is much evidence in Rilke’s poems and letters to support this conclusion—and if we accept Rilke’s portrait of Phia, we can see more clearly how the poet’s illness may have begun in his relationship with his mother. Searles argues that a child who “detects in his mother . . . a tragically unintegrated and incomplete person” often reacts with intense “compassion, loyalty, solicitude, and dedication.” These feelings, he observes, keep the child trapped in a “disastrous” “symbiotic” relation with the mother.8

Worse still, the child identifies with his mother, making her “ego-fragmented” existence a part of himself. “He introjects her not primarily out of hatred or anxiety but out of genuine love and solicitude for his mother . . . primarily in an effort to save her by taking her difficulties . . . upon himself.” From long experience as a psychotherapist with the children of such mothers and from observing their transference behavior toward himself as a surrogate mother, Searles notes that usually they deny this disastrous and extremely dangerous and painful love and cover
it up with antagonism, hatred, and loathing, in useless efforts to defend themselves against it. This helps us to reconcile Rilke's portrayal of Malte's love for Maman with the poet's professed aversion to Phia.

Malte's offering of all his strength to the victim of St. Vitus' dance, the dissolution of his ego boundaries, and his near-engulfment by the man's anxiety, struggle, and convulsions bring to mind Searles's analysis of the origins of schizophrenia in a child's loving offer of himself as a sacrifice to help a schizoid or schizophrenic mother hold herself together and the child's absorption by her illness as, out of love and sympathy, he gladly gives himself up to the mutual parasitism encouraged by the mother in her desperate need.

Rilke's descriptions of Phia suggest that as a child, loving and adoring her much as Malte does Maman, he may well have suffered from the sense of her ego-fragmentation. Such a situation, Searles argues, impels the child to identify with his mother out of "genuine love and solicitude" and through his identification to introject her, with "disastrous results," namely, the kind of illness which one finds in Malte and in Rilke's letters about himself.

From the perspective offered us by Searles, Malte's experiences identification with the man suffering from St. Vitus' dance, with the medical student, with the stranger dying in the crêmerie, with the patients in the hospital, and with the outcasts of Paris appear to be the result of unconscious transference in the poet-novelist for whom Malte is a surrogate. In psychoanalytic texts "transference" means "displacement of patterns of feeling and behavior, originally experienced with significant figures of one's childhood, to individuals in one's current relationships." In Rilke's Parisian experiences and in his novel, this would include a redirecting of an inclination to identify with an emotionally ill and crippled mother to other needy persons.

In sum, Rilke's long-lasting flight from his mother, his loathing for her, and his efforts to separate himself from her may be seen as originating in a struggle against the consequences of the child's early love which he evokes in The Notebooks. Although there are good reasons for accepting Simenauer's argument concerning "the reaction formation" against oedipal feelings, this defense may be regarded as a secondary cause, a reinforcement of the poet's more deeply rooted negative feelings toward Phia. "Deeply" here signifies depth in the past, an earlier stage of development in the child's life. Searles's analysis leads to the conclu-
sion that the resolution of the “Oedipus complex” cannot free someone from such an illness, in which oedipal feelings often play a comparatively unimportant role.

IV

Recurrently Rilke suggests Malte’s identification with Maman. At times this has positive consequences: her storytelling and her fascination with lace play a role in shaping his inclination to be a poet, an artist. But other entries bring to mind Searles’s argument concerning the origins of schizoid and schizophrenic illness.

At the end of her life Maman becomes “dominated by her fear of needles”: “‘What a lot of needles there are, Malte; they are lying around everywhere . . . ’ . . . [H]orror shook her at the thought of all the poorly fastened needles, which could fall down anywhere, at any moment” (85). Time and again in The Notebooks one finds echoes of Maman’s fear of needles, direct and indirect, transparent and disguised, in Malte’s anxieties. He describes the recovery of his childhood as the reemergence of “[a]ll the lost fears” (63). Among them are the “fear that a small woolen thread sticking out of the hem of my blanket may be hard, hard and sharp as a steel-needle . . . that this little button on my night shirt may be bigger than my head, bigger and heavier . . . that some number may begin to grow in my brain until there is no more room for it inside me” (63–64).

Such fantasies, like the fantasy of “the Big Thing,” express displacement of feelings about the phallus, which grows hard like a needle and swells like a tumor. As everyone knows, the phallus has a will of its own. In a boy or a man it is a focus of sexual feelings which take over mind and body, until it seems that there is no room for anything else inside oneself. The fear of the phallus is closely related to the apprehension that one’s sexuality may become uncontrollable and overwhelm one.

In part 2 of The Notebooks, where Malte’s meditations on legendary and historical figures indirectly reflect his sense of his body, mind, and self and allow him to externalize and distance it, an entry expressing his fascination with Bosch’s painting Temptation of Saint Anthony, or something very similar, plays with the tendency to find a willful, autonomous
phallus in multifarious objects and with the almost irresistible power of sexual desire over body and mind:

How well I now understand those strange pictures in which Things meant for limited and ordinary uses stretch out and stroke one another, lewd and curious, quivering in the random lechery of distraction. Those kettles that walk around steaming, those pistons that start to think, and the indolent funnel that squeezes into a hole for its pleasure. . . .

And the saint writhes and pulls back into himself. . . . His prayer is already losing its leaves and stands up out of his mouth like a withered shrub. . . . His sex is once again in one place only, and when a woman comes toward him, upright through the huddle, with her naked bosom full of breasts, it points at her like a finger. (184–85)

Malte's fear of needles and "the Big Thing" and the other anxieties described in the passage quoted from pages 63 and 64 of The Notebooks suggest that he is drawn into his mother's fear of male sexuality. But Maman's fears, which become focused in the passage about the needles, obviously infect Malte in a more complex way. Her needle phobia is described in an entry which also tells us that toward the end of her life she did not want to see people and felt she could no longer digest food (84–85). Taken together, these memories of Maman reveal wide-ranging fears of penetration by objects and other persons, by anything outside the self. Such anxieties originate in childhood at a time preceding the focus on the genitals, when the boundaries of the body-self and the security they afford the individual are weak. If this weakness persists into adult years, it may encourage frightening fantasies of impingement and invasion such as the ones we have discovered in The Notebooks (see 73–74).

Searles observes that the mother whose psychic integration is precarious may unwittingly bind her child more closely to her by creating in him the sense that the world around them is a fearful place, full of dangers, so that he will continue to seek safety within the tight nexus of the symbiotic relationship, which the mother needs to preserve as a source of support and nurture for herself. As a result he may become closely identified with her in her anxieties.¹

In René Rilke: Die Jugend Rainer Maria Rilkes, Sieber describes the ways in which both parents filled their small son's existence with their anxieties about the state of his health:
Fear that the youth might catch cold, that he might be exposed to a draft, that his bed was hard, that his glands were swollen, was the constant thought of his dear parents. . . . Although the doctor found nothing, for the sake of prevention René had to gargle salt water three times a day, and when late in the evening, he traveled in a carriage, he was put on the floor of the coach and so tightly bundled up that only his head was exposed. In summer he had to lie on a rug in the garden so that he wouldn’t catch cold.¹

And we are told that Josef Rilke changed his son’s nurses twenty-four times during the first year of René’s life.³

Is it any wonder that the poet was beset by anxiety for much of his life and was particularly prey to fears about his health? In The Restoration of the Self, Kohut says that a mother’s hypochondriacal reactions to a child’s fears at an early stage of his life, when he is still closely identified with her, tend to become part of his mental existence, persisting as he grows older.⁴ In contrast, closeness to a mentally healthier parent eventually permits internalization of his or her capacity for calming one’s fears.

V

Malte’s version of the end of Grishka Otrepyov, the false czar Dmitri, explicitly reveals the fantasy of the mother as a destroyer. It is clear that this episode obliquely refers to Malte and to Rilke. The poet explained to his Polish translator, Witold von Hulewicz, that the historical figures in part 2 of the novel may be seen as “the vocabula of [Malte’s] distress” (Letters 2:371).

In 1606 this false czar, faced with an uprising led by Prince Shuisky and a number of boyars, summoned Maria Nagoi, the real Dmitri’s mother, the seventh wife of the late czar, Ivan the Terrible, from her convent to Moscow. Dmitri had been killed mysteriously in 1591. The pretender wanted her to acknowledge that he, Grishka, was her son. Malte speculates, “[H]e believed in himself so strongly that he actually thought he was summoning his mother” (188–189). Maria Nagoi did what he wished, supporting his claim that he was the rightful successor to the throne. What makes this account of Grishka strangely interesting and revealing is Malte’s fantasy about the czar’s reaction to Maria’s lie:
But the mother’s declaration, even if it was a conscious deception, still had the power to diminish him; it lifted him out of this magnificent self that he had invented; it confined him to a tired imitation; it reduced him to the individual he wasn’t; it made him an imposter. (189)

Malte has already asked himself if Grishka’s uncertainty did not arise from Maria’s confirming that he was her son. He answers his own question with the thought that “the strength of his transformation lay in his no longer being anybody’s son” (189).

In the margin of the notebook he jots down his belief that all young men who have left their families gain their strength from this sense of themselves. This marginal note connects Malte’s conceptions of Grishka and the Prodigal Son. In Malte’s mind, as in Rilke’s, having a mother diminishes an individual, reduces him to someone he is not, “a tired imitation” of her image of him, an inauthentic person who cannot be “the magnificent self” he has in him to create, hence, “an imposter.”

After Grishka jumped from a window, fleeing Shuisky and the boyars, who invaded his palace, Maria Nagoi disavowed him. The effect of this disavowal at the moment of Grishka’s ruin is the main point Malte focuses upon in the conclusion of his brief narrative: “you must be ready to swear that between voice [of the Tsarina Mother disavowing him] and pistol shot [which killed him], infinitely compressed, there was once again inside him the will and the power to be everything” (191). Freed from this mother and all mothers, Grishka felt, if only for a few moments, the freedom, power, and strength of will to avail himself once more of all the gifted creativity which had manifested itself in his remarkable conquest of the Russian throne. Implicitly, Grishka’s realization that he was about to die makes this reawakening all the more remarkable in Malte’s eyes and emphasizes the importance of the freedom from mothers, from parents, which is the main theme of Malte’s interpretation of this moment in history.

One should not forget that Malte is Rilke’s fantasy of a young man who is “no longer ... anybody’s son.” The deaths of his mother and father, as well as his having left home and having no home to return to, are essential elements of this fantasy.