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CHAPTER 5

Take Me, Give Me Form, Finish Me
Lou Andreas-Salomé

I

“Now there is still time—” he writes, “now I am still soft, and I can be like wax in your hands. Take me, give me a form, finish me . . .”

It is a cry for motherliness.¹

This is from the early autobiographical novella Ewald Tragy. Ewald is a transparent self-portrait of Rilke during 1896 and 1897, both before he left his family and native city, Prague, and after he settled in Munich and began to lead an independent life as an artist. If scholars are correct in their dating of the novella, Rilke began writing Ewald Tragy more than a year after he had attached himself to a woman who had generously responded to the need for mothering, forming, and finishing expressed in Ewald’s “cry.”² On May 12, 1897 in Munich he met Lou Andreas-Salomé, author of books on Nietzsche and Ibsen as well as several novels. The daughter of a Russian general and his German wife, Salomé was fourteen years older than the poet. She was married to Friedrich Carl Andreas, professor of Persian at the Berlin Institute for Oriental Languages, but had kept the marriage sexless.

Fifteen years before Rilke met her, in her early twenties, Lou had received a marriage proposal from Friedrich Nietzsche, who had thought her “sharp as an eagle and brave as a lion, yet a very girlish child.” Nietzsche also called her “the most intelligent of all women,” and told
his friend Overbeck, "Our mentalities and tastes are most deeply akin—and yet there are so many contrasts too that we are for each other the most instructive of subjects. . . . I should like to know whether there has ever before been such philosophical openness as between the two of us." Trying to reassure Lou that he was not interested in using her as a secretary, he wrote to her that he was looking for "heirs," "the finest, most fertile soil" for that "something" "I carry . . . around with me absolutely not to be read in my books." Fiercely jealous and prudishly offended by Salomé, the philosopher's sister, Elizabeth, did everything she could to turn him against her. At the end of 1882, Lou went off to Berlin with their mutual friend Paul Ree, and Nietzsche realized that he had lost her. Deeply hurt and angry, influenced by his sister's vilifications of the girl, he wrote in response to letters from Lou, that she was "giving free rein to everything contemptible" in her nature, transforming her own "sacred self-seeking" into "the predatory pleasure-lust of a cat." He described her as "that scraggy, dirty, smelly she-monkey with her false breasts." But he came to regret his denunciations. In 1884 he wrote from Nice, expressing his hope that Ree and Salomé would visit him and the wish "to make amends for some of the evil things my sister did." Later he said he thought Lou was "by far the smartest person I ever knew." This echoes the extraordinary assessment of the twenty-two year old Salomé offered in a September 1882 letter from Nietzsche to Overbeck, at a time when all was going well with her: "I have never known anyone who could draw from their experiences so many objective insights, or anyone who knew how to derive so much from everything they'd learnt."

By the time she met Rilke, Salomé's studies of Ibsen and Nietzsche and her extraordinary intelligence as an essayist and conversationalist had earned her a widespread reputation among European intellectuals and artists. She was to become, in 1912, a friend and disciple of Freud, who wrote to her after reading her essay "Anal and Sexual," "Your incredible subtlety of understanding as well as the greatness of your bent for synthesizing what has come apart through investigation find beautiful expression in it." The father of psychoanalysis also called her "My dear inexhaustible friend," praised her for her "authenticity and harmony" and her "modesty and discretion," and expressed gratitude for her comments on his essays and books ("You always give more than you receive").

Salomé's study of Rilke, written just after his death, makes idiosyn-
ocratic use of psychoanalytic ideas, mixing them with intuitions which are sometimes shrewd. She is now remembered primarily for her friendships with Nietzsche, Rilke, and Freud. But the publication of several biographies reflects continuing interest in her thinking and writing. In his portrait of Salomé, Kurt Wolff measured her stature in terms which may be suspected of male condescension but which, nonetheless, clearly place her among the Olympians in the German world of letters: "No woman has radiated a stronger or more direct influence in German-speaking lands in the last 150 years." As for her importance to Rilke, it can be summed up in his own words, addressed to the princess Marie in 1924: "my entire development without the influence of this exceptional woman ... could never have been on the lines that have led to so many achievements."  

Having recently left his family and native city for Munich, Rilke, at twenty-one, was rapturous over this meeting with "the famous writer," as he wrote to his mother. He had read Salomé's essay "Jesus the Jew" and been excited by its affinities of thought and feeling with his own poems Visions of Christ. He told her so in a letter sent after their first meeting, at the home of the novelist Jakob Wasserman, that evening in May 1897 which was to bring such a change in his life. Within less than a month they were lovers. In her posthumously published memoir, A Look Back at Life (Lebensrückblick), she recalled her relationship with Rilke at this time as a unique experience in her long life. "If I belonged to you for some years it was because you represented absolute reality for me for the first time, body and person indistinguishably one and the same, an unquestionable element of life itself." In retrospect she saw the young poet and herself at the time of their lovemaking as closer than husband and wife, "like brother and sister, but from primeval times before incest became sacrilege."  

From the beginning of their relationship Salomé offered a creative response to the young poet's appeal for a mother who would give him a form. Her maternal, shaping influence in those early days was reflected in the fact that she persuaded him to change his name from René to Rainer. Biographers have pointed to the noticeable change in his penmanship in the summer of 1897, from a careless, often almost illegible hand to the clear, elegant, graceful script he used for the rest of his life, as evidence of Salomé's influence. Leppmann notes the similarity between this script and Lou's.
sponsible for significant changes in the style of his work and was the source of many of his ideas. 15

In saying that Lou Andreas-Salomé was a mother to Rilke, I am subscribing to their explicit, shared conception of the relationship. Obviously the difference of fourteen years between them shaped this conception. In the Florentine diary which he kept for her in 1898, at her suggestion, he wrote, “Once I came to you so very destitute, almost like a child did I come to you, the bountiful lady. And you took my soul in your arms and cradled it.” 16 In a letter written during January 1904, after they had lived apart for years, Rilke calls himself “your somehow lost son” (Letters 1:140).

After Rilke’s decision, in February 1901, to marry the sculptor Clara Westhoff, having decided to break off all contact with him, at least until some future time when he would be in dire need of her help, Salomé wrote to the poet, saying, “[A] final duty devolves on me out of the memory still dear to both of us that in Wolftrathausen I came to you as a mother. So let me tell you like a mother of the pledge I made to Zemek [her friend and lover Heinrich Pineles, a physician and a student of psychoanalysis] some years ago after a long talk.” “Zemek” had predicted that Rilke, caught in the snares of emotional illness, might be inclined to commit suicide. In her sense of her “duty” as a mother, Salomé promised the poet, “[T]here is always refuge for you with us for the worst hour Pineles spoke of.” 17 He was to turn to her for maternal succor and advice a number of times in the years that followed, from 1903, when he first took advantage of this promise, until the end of 1926, when he was dying.

A poem written about Salomé after their last talk in February 1901 describes her as “the most motherly of women.” The poet calls her “the tenderest” person he has met and “the cruelest” one with whom he has struggled. She was “the height that blessed” him and “the chasm that devoured” him. The poem also expresses Rilke’s fantasy that Salomé “clung” to him, as “the hand with the creator’s power” clings to the clay which it shapes, and then, having grown weary, let him drop and smash to pieces:

II

Du schmiegtest Dich an mich, doch nicht zum Hohn,
nur so, wie die formende Hand sich schmiegt an den Ton,
Die hand mit des Schöpfers Gewalt.

.................................
da wurde sie müde, da liess sie nach,
da liess sie mich fallen, und ich zerbrach.

III
Warst mir die mütterlichste der Frauen

.................................
Du warst das Zarteste, das mir begegnet,
das Harteste warst Du, damit ich rang.
Du warst das Hohe, das mich gesegnet—
und wurdest der Abgrund, der mich verschlang.18

These lines bring us full cycle from the appeal for a mother who would take him, form him, and complete him, which we found in Ewald’s letter. The fantasy that the powerful creator clung to the clay may reflect an accurate perception of ambivalence in Lou. But it also seems to express Rainer’s clinging, unconsciously projected onto her, at a time when she was happy to see him go. The poem shows that Rilke’s childlike sense of dependence on Salomé was closely connected with infantile fantasies of a mother that could destroy and devour her child. The fantasy of the mother who had the Creator’s power to give form as well as a desire to cling to her creation, but who then, like a chasm, devoured him, surely did not originate in the relationship with Lou. The devouring chasm calls to mind the dining hall at Urnekloster, which threatens to suck Malte’s mind and self out of him not long before the slim figure of a woman in a light dress, implicitly associated with Malte’s dead Maman, terrifies the family at dinner.

Rilke did not publish the poems which he wrote for Salomé from May 1897 through May 1898, though he thought of them as having the collective title “Dir zur Feier” (A Festival for You).19 They provide us with rich impressions of the young poet’s feelings about her at this time. In one of these poems, asking Salomé to give him direction, Rilke says that after much suffering, he is now following her lead with blind steps:

Ich habe viel gelitten,
vieles starb and brach,—
jetzt geh ich mit blinden Schritten
deinem Leben nach.

(Sämtliche Werke 3:173)
I have suffered a great deal
died and broken often,—
now with blind steps
I follow your life.

In another poem, written for Salomé at this time, the phrase "Ich geh dir nach" ("I follow you") echoes time and again. Out of his gloomy cell he follows her with outstretched hands, in deep confidence, as out of the horrors of fever frightened children go to bright women, who soothe them and understand their fear. He does not ask where her heart may be leading him:

Ich geh dir nach, wie aus der dumpfen Zelle
Ich geh dir nach in tiefem Dirvertrauen.
Ich weiss deine Gestalt durch diese Auen
vor meinen ausgestreckten Händen gehn.
Ich geh dir nach, wie aus der Fiebers Grauen
erschreckte Kinder gehn zu lichten Frauen,
die sie besänftigen und Furcht verstehn.

Ich geh dir nach. Wohin dein Herz mich führe
frag ich nicht nach. . . .
(Sämtliche Werke 3:176)

In a third poem Rilke reflects that before meeting Salomé his blind goal was to get away from the many people who play at life, while now he knows that he was moving on a thousand paths toward her. He calls her his deliverance, his salvation, saying that in feverish anxiety he cried out to her and that in grateful recognition of her help his ripest thoughts sank like children to their knees:

Nur fort von allen vielen,
welche das Leben spielen:
Das war mein blindes Zielen,
war ohne Sinn und Saum.
Jetzt weiss ich: Dir entgegen
trieb ich auf tausend Wegen
am Tage und im Traum.

Und du bist das Erlösen,
nach welchem ich in bösen,
bangen Fiebern schrie;
im Dichterkennen sanken
meine reisigen reifsten Gedanken
wie Kinder in die Knie.
(Sämtliche Werke 3:185)

Late in June 1903, after a breach of more than two years, Rilke wrote to Salomé from Paris, saying that he was going to spend some time in Germany and wanted to see her. She replied, suggesting that they first resume contact by correspondence. Rilke’s answer was the long letter largely devoted to descriptions of his severe anxieties in Paris.

Imploring Salomé for help, Rilke wrote, “[Y]ou alone know who I am. You can help me, and I feel already in your first letter the power which your calm words have over me. You can clarify for me what I don’t understand, you can tell me what shall do; you know what I must fear and what I need not fear—: must I be afraid?... every word from you means a great deal to me and vibrates and lives a long time for me.” In this response to Lou’s offer to correspond with him, he seems to have sunk back into infantile dependence on this highly idealized mother figure. But important advances from the old relationship soon became apparent: Salomé recognized not only the familiar signs of anguish, illness, and infantile dependence which had caused her to try to detach and distance herself from Rilke in 1900 and 1901 but also the maturing strength of a gifted writer. She realized that she could play an active part, from a distance, in encouraging and shaping his work.

In 1903 and 1904, at times when he was deeply troubled and full of self-doubt, Salomé encouraged his self-confidence with repeated affirmations of his gifts as a writer and a thinker. He trusted her judgment completely. Her effect on Rilke at this time can be seen by comparing two successive letters which the poet sent her in August 1903. In the first, written on August 8, he laments, “[T]here is nothing real about me; and I divide again and again and flow apart.” In his next letter, written two days later, after he had received Salomé’s response to his book on Rodin, he says, “Nothing could fill me so with certainty and with hope as this yea-saying of yours to the most full-grown of my works. Now for the first time it stands for me, now for the first time it is completed, acknowledged by reality, upright and good” (Letters 1:122-23).

Read together, the two letters suggest that Salomé’s enthusiasm about
his Rodin book, her assurance that it “[meant] much” to her, gave him a sense of his own “reality” and value. Her response to the new work glowed with loving praise. She called it “great in a thousand respects” and told him that it was “the dearest of all your published books.”

On July 22 of the same year Salomé had sent the poet her reaction to his accounts of the frightening experiences he had endured in Paris, telling him that he had misunderstood himself in thinking that he had been helpless in the grip of his anxieties. It seemed to her that he had given these things a new existence in his prose, through a “higher” mental process of artistic transformation. That was very different from mere passive suffering. Now that she had read his portrayals of his “fears,” they existed in her mind as well and had an independent living reality, like all fine works of art.

She sensed that he had become capable of going through such experiences without being alienated from himself. As the younger man she remembered all too well, he would have described someone suffering from St. Vitus’ dance in a soulful, densely metaphoric, conventional language, defensively distancing himself from the victim. His portrait of the St. Vitus dancer in the July letter had an authenticity that was new in his writing. Although he had felt identified with the other man in his agony, his portrait revealed a fine artist’s clarity of insight. His ability to empathize with the human subjects of his art and, at the same time, to observe them sharply, had made it possible for the artist in him to resurrect the misérables who suffered helplessly and without much comprehension. This was the gist of her argument against his belief that he was in danger of losing himself, as it seemed many of the Parisians he encountered had done.

Salomé tried to put to rest his belief that that there was “nothing real about” him and the fantasy that he had “been pressed out of the world in which all is familiar and near and meaningful, into another uncertain, nameless, fearful environment,” as if he were completely alien, “like one who has died in strange lands, alone, superfluous, a fragment of another unity.” He felt he was lost there in the other world, unable to approach anybody in this one. Suspended in fear over an abyss of nothingness, he found nothing to hold fast to. As he looked around for something solid to grasp, everything grew distant, gave him up, moved away. In danger of losing all contact with the reality of this world, he thought that he might be lost forever, in unreality, in madness.
In November 1903 he wrote to Salomé about closely related fantasies and feelings, saying that he could not become real ("wirklichwerden"), that there were always things and events which, having more actuality and presence than he did, went right through him as if he did not exist. The house which he had built in Westerwede and his little family had not made him more tangibly present to himself, as he had hoped they would. That house and everything in it had seemed alien to him. Even having a daughter (who lived far away from him most of the time) did not help him now to attain to the vital feeling of his own existence ("Wirklichkeitsgefühl") which he longed for, the sense of being someone real in a real world ("Wirklicher unter Wirklichem zu sein").

Turning this self-assessment on its head, Salomé argued that his fears and the frightening experiences in Paris had become part of the most genuine reality ("Wirklichste") now growing within him as germinating seeds of his genius, of his future work. She drew this conclusion from the strength of his recent writing. The extraordinary nature of his gifts as an artist had become apparent in the Rodin book and in the letters about the experiences in Paris. Despite his doubts about his mental condition, in her view he had never before been so close to mental health as he was now.

Her praise of the Rodin book and her response to Rilke’s account of his near-madness in Paris almost surely helped to give him the strength to resist his fears and the confidence to work. We have noticed how his mood changed when he received the letter she sent him after reading his study of the sculptor. No doubt, Salomé’s encouragement provided impetus the following February, when Rilke started working on The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge without knowing what it would turn out to be. At the beginning of August 1903 Salomé promised the poet that henceforth he could rely upon her.

II

The letters Salomé sent Rilke in the summer of 1903 show that she fulfilled for him something like the mirroring function which a benevolent mother performs for a young child. Kohut defines one type of psychotherapeutic transference as a “reinstatement” of a phase of the self’s development “in which the gleam in the mother’s eye, which mirrors the
child’s exhibitionistic display,” confirms “the child’s self-esteem.” By mirroring (in this sense of the metaphor) Rilke’s “exhibitionistic display” in the Rodin book and in his powerfully evocative accounts of his Paris experiences, Salomé enabled him to satisfy the childlike “need to confirm the reality of the self” which he revealed in his letters. Rilke had sought this kind of mirroring from Salomé with his gifts of poems and the diary which he had kept for her in Italy in the spring of 1898.

The poet’s reaction to Salomé’s empathetic responsiveness resembles the reactions of Kohut’s patients when he attempted to give them the maternal mirroring whose absence or dearth in infancy and early childhood had crippled them emotionally and made them ill. The illness which he describes closely resembles the illness which Rilke portrays in his letters to Salomé and in The Notebooks.

Kohut observes that at first a good mother ardently mirrors her infant’s narcissistic grandiosity. Then, gradually and sensitively, she frustrates his demand for this response and thus slowly tames his grandiosity, directing the energies fostered by self-esteem and self-love toward more realistic goals and achievements. But he notes that in highly talented men and women the survival of primitive grandiosity may provide the high octane of motivating energy necessary for achievements commensurate with their gifts. By strongly encouraging a heightening of self-esteem in Rilke, Salomé’s empathetic responses to the poet’s need for a mirroring mother helped to liberate the energy and to nurture the ambition which made possible his major works, beginning with The Book of Hours. These poems were dedicated to her with the words “Placed in the Hands of Lou” (“Gelegt in die Hände von Lou”).

Naked expressions of primitive grandiosity appear in Rilke’s early diaries. In an entry written at Zoppot on the Baltic in July 1898, Rilke sees artists as precursors of a godlike, all-powerful, solitary Creator who will understand that all things which have appeared to be outside him “have been merely symbols of those realities which he finds in himself. Everything has flowed together in him, and all powers, which, formerly scattered, opposed one another, tremble under his will... He no longer prays. He is. And when he makes a gesture, he will create... many millions of worlds.” The young poet who wrote this identified the all-powerful solitary whom he envisioned in the future with himself, though he may not have been clearly conscious of this identification.

Reading the diary written in Italy at Zoppot, Lou failed to show the
admiration Rilke had been expecting. She received his display of intelligence and style with indulgence, forbearance, and condescending generosity. Her too obvious endeavor to give him courage had the opposite effect. His reaction was shame and anger. Then, in his need to rebuild his shattered grandiosity, he developed the argument that artists of his own time were “ancestors” and foreshadowings of the divine, solitary Creator in the future, possibly modeled on Nietzsche’s Übermensch. One of his letters to a young poet would echo the central theme of this passage, but that letter, written six years later, would emphasize the distance between the divine Creator toward whom creative artists were developing and the artists themselves: “Why do you not think of him as the coming one, imminent from all eternity, the future one, the final fruit of a tree whose leaves we are? ... As the bees bring in the honey, so do we fetch the sweetest out of everything and build Him.”

Some of the poems in The Book of Hours also reveal the young Rilke’s grandiose sense of self. In the following lines, addressed to the Deity, the poet imagines himself as God’s dream and His will. He claims mastery of “all grandeur,” picturing himself curving “like a starry stillness/over the strange city of time.”

Wenn du der Traumer bist, bin ich dein Traum.
Doch wenn du wachen willst, bin ich dein Wille
und werde mächtig aller Herrlichkeit
und ründe mich wie eine Sternenstille
über der wunderlichen Stadt der Zeit.
(WDB 1:20)

A number of Rilke’s letters to Salomé reveal in fairly precise terms what her maternal mirroring meant to him when their relationship resumed in the summer of 1903, after a breach of more than two years. Although Salomé had revolted against his infantile demands, his dependence, his bouts of neurotic anxiety in earlier years, the poet was effusive in his praise of her unique capacity for empathetic responsiveness. Despite his growth as a person and as a poet, in 1903–4 he still felt deeply dependent on her willingness to function as a maternal mirror for him. In January 1904 he wrote to say that “every path” he took could become meaningful through his return to a woman who “knows how to hear everything.”

Even if he cannot speak to her in person, the thought that in his letters she can hear him gives him the feeling that he exists, that he is alive. In
the same letter he expresses his belief that only her highly intelligent and empathetic "listening" to his accounts of his life in these letters can give him the sense that his existence has vital significance and vibrancy. "If my life is insignificant . . . it will be only when I can tell it to you." Her hearing him and her responsiveness will shape its meaning. It "will be as you hear it!" he concludes (Letters 1:140).

As he writes her about his daily life in his letters, just the fact that he is telling her about it and the belief that she is listening, with all her intelligence and her knowledge and understanding of him, bring order and meaning into the noise and confusion of which he has not been able to make sense. Obviously her recent letters allowed him the fantasy of her maternal presence. This must substitute for the maternal face in which the child finds confirmation of his existence and worthiness and then often finds, as well, silent intimations of who and what he is, intimations of the meaning and value of what he is doing, uttering, and experiencing. In the mother's absence the child, of course, comes to rely on memory images of her. But Salomé was speaking to her "lost son" through her letters. No doubt, despite her long absence, he could hear her voice creating a refuge from the chaotic noise around him.

Rilke's fantasy of his potential power as a writer involved an image of Salomé's receptive listening. He saw his mouth "become a great river" flowing "into your hearing and into the stillness of your opened depths" (Letters 1:140). The "displacement upward" is rather obvious. The fantasy fuses creative utterance with a sexual act. For Rilke, several years after their love affair had ended, writing prose and poetry was associated with making love to Lou. The displacement suggests a desire to return to their love-making and an awareness that it could be retrieved only in a sublimated form.

In this passage he does not see himself merely as the needy child (dependent on her listening), but also as powerful, aggressive, giving. In the Zoppot diary entry, he recalls that he had come to Salomé "[a]lmost as a child . . . to a rich woman. And you took my soul in your arms and cradled it." He adds, "Then you kissed me on the forehead, and you had to bend low." But since then, he says, he has grown, so that there is a shorter distance from her eyes to his. He asks her if she understands that, and says that he wants to bend down to her lips, as her soul once bent to his brow. He wants her to be able to lean on him, if she is weary. He
no longer wants to feel her comforting him; instead, he needs to be confident of the power that he would have in himself to comfort her, if she needed to be comforted. In bringing her his Florentine diary he had wanted to be the rich one, the one who gave, the master, and he had hoped that she would be guided by his care and love and would indulge herself in his “hospitality.”

Returning to her from his sojourn in Italy, he had assumed that he had traveled a great distance and, with his diaries, had risen “to the peak” of imaginative perception and thought. But at Zoppot she flew over his insights with ease and was far above and ahead of him intellectually. He imagined her waiting in clarity and “radiance” beyond his still cloudy altitude.

Her indulgence and forbearance, her condescending kindness, and her flights of intellect made him feel like a beggar on the outermost peripheries of her existence, deeply humiliated. He felt that he had become ridiculous in his “masquerade”; “the dark wish awakened in me to creep away into a deep nowhere. . . . Every reunion made me feel ashamed. I was always saying to myself: ‘I can give nothing to you, nothing at all.’”

Paradoxically, the Zoppot entry reveals the poet’s need to have this mother affirm his independent strength and creativity, and, in particular, his ability to support and sustain her and to give her intellectual and imaginative work which she can value and esteem. His reaction to her failure to do this shows that he is not in the least independent of her, though he needs to feel free and powerful and male. Her failure to collaborate with his “masquerade” plunges him into uncertainty and despair. He feels that he has lost or cast away all his riches and is miserably poor. Above all, he feels a desperate need to escape the degrading encirclement of her goodness. While it expresses infantile dependence and vulnerability, this entry also brings to mind an adolescent’s humiliation and anger over his dependence on a powerful mother, whose benevolence he cannot, but badly needs to, escape.

Reading the correspondence between Rilke and Salomé, I am struck by the fact that so many of his letters show comparatively little interest in her life, though he is eager to have her response to his accounts of his own experience. (I should emphasize the word comparatively, because at times he does show interest and concern; but these times are the ex-
More often than not her letters focus upon his experience, thought, and work.

In 1900 Rilke’s narcissism and egocentrism, combined with his high anxiety and smothering dependence on Lou, compelled her to try to distance him. She was especially put off by his behavior in the summer of 1900. After they traveled in Russia together, she left him to spend several weeks with her brother and his family in Finland. The poet wrote her an anguished letter out of his loneliness, appealing to her to hurry back to him, emphasizing his anxiety in her absence and his preoccupation with the prospect of her return.10

Years later, recalling his response to her brief absence, she remembered that he had seemed almost depraved in the arrogance and presumption of his importunities. The fact that she might be having a lovely reunion in Finland with her brother and his family had mattered not at all to Rainer in his infantile need of her. The memory of Rilke’s extreme egocentrism and anxiety at that time brought back the strength of her own reaction, her need to be free of him.11

Despite Rilke’s greater maturity in 1903, his letters to Salomé then and in 1904 continue to approximate what Alice Balint labels the “naive egoism” of a child’s love for a mother. Balint is describing “an archaic, egotistic way of loving, originally directed exclusively to the mother,” and characterized above all by “the . . . lack of reality sense in regard to the [libidinal and ego] interests of the love object.” The “fundamental condition” of such “archaic love” is the child’s assumption of “the complete harmony of interests” between his mother and himself.12

Obviously, Salomé’s strength of mind and will prevented the young poet from losing all sense of her separate needs even during the early years of their relationship. But he was much inclined to see her largely in terms of an identity of interests. His attitude toward her calls to mind the blindness of which he accused Phia. No doubt, the attitude was rooted in close identification, at an early age, with his narcissistic, egocentric mother. Eventually the egocentrism which grew out of this identification must have been reinforced by the need to fence out Phia’s separate needs and interests in order to defend himself, in his dependence, against Phia’s desire for separateness and distance. No doubt, the tendency to fence, if not wall, out Lou’s separate life originated also in the poet’s need to defend himself against Phia’s destructive, alien preconcep-
tion of him. Furious with both women for their inclination to separate themselves from him and for their egoism, he denigrated his mother’s life and interests and, to a large extent, refused to give mental space and energy to Salomé’s, while at the same time idealizing and overestimating her. In his letters to Lou, the fury, the hostility, had to be repressed; the idealization dominated conscious thought.

Michael Balint suggests that naive, infantile, egoistic love in adults reflects a desire to recover the primary “ego-object identity.” The fantasy of complete fusion with the mother may be transferred to a maternal figure, such as Salomé, with whom Rilke longed for “final unity.” Alice Balint argues that all of us (some far more than others, of course) continue, throughout our lives, to retain the “naive egotistic attitude” toward mothers, the expectation that “the interests of the mother and child are identical,” with the result that “one hates the mother [as Rilke loathed Phia] because she is no longer what she used to be.” Such hatred for the maternal therapist in psychoanalytic transference reveals “the preservation of the attachment but with a negative sign.”

Psychoanalytic transference reflects the fact that an adult in whom this primitive attachment remains strong often seeks a perfect surrogate. When, almost inevitably, any such surrogate fails to maintain the harmony demanded by naive, archaic, infantile egoism, she is likely to reawaken the hatred originally felt for the mother. When Mother Lou failed to give the required response to the Florentine diary presented to her at Zoppot in the summer of 1898, Rilke wrote in his diary, “I hated you as something too big.”

Quickly the young poet’s hatred yielded to his earlier idealization of Salomé as the embodiment and image of all the goals he was striving toward. His need of her was so strong that he could not break away. Shattered by her failure to continue to give him the mirroring gleam, by her unwillingness to provide a joyful affirmation of his grandiose conception of what he had done, in his despair and his poverty he felt all the more intensely dependent. “But then, in this state of shock, I became aware . . . that all motion in me wants to go to you.” Several paragraphs later he reflects that she is not one goal for him, but a thousand. She is everything, and he knows her in everything.

Eventually, Rilke’s dependence, along with his narcissism, volatility, and anxiety, made Salomé want to send him packing. But this did not happen until more than two years after their meeting at Zoppot. The high points of the relationship during those two years were their trips
to Russia together in the spring of 1899 and the spring of 1900. They spent months together preparing for these trips, studying Russian history and culture. These two journeys were among the poet's most memorable and pleasurable experiences. I have described their visits to Tolstoy. They were welcomed by aristocracy, artists, intelligentsia, and peasants, including a peasant poet, S. D. Drozhzhin. Like Salomé, Rilke was deeply moved by the religious devotion of the people. Their first Russian Easter, the ringing of the bells and the joyous responses of the masses of celebrants at the news of Christ's resurrection, left memories which remained vibrant for years. Rilke's impressions of the Russian idea of God became a central theme of *The Book of Hours*. Writing to the painter Leonid Pasternak (father of Boris) a quarter of a century later, Rilke said that Russia was "forever embedded in the foundations of my life." His thinking and feeling about this adopted spiritual "homeland," which he never again visited, were inseparable from his attachment to Salomé.

Their second trip ended with her leaving him in St. Petersburg, while she journeyed to Finland to see her brother and his family. Her absence set off the fit of anxiety which I have described above. He sent her the letter begging her to return to him, then apologized in a second letter. Reading his first letter, she recalled earlier times when he had been deeply disturbed, plagued by fears, and childishly dependent on her for maternal support, and this made her think of putting distance between the two of them. But even before this episode, while they were traveling through Russia together, thinking that she would like to have some time away from him after their trip, she had persuaded him to accept an invitation from Heinrich Vogeler, a young painter, book illustrator, and designer whom Rilke had visited in his home at Worpswede, near Bremen, for Christmas in 1898.

Salomé was delighted when he went off to Worpswede at the end of August 1900. Rilke was soon spending much of his time with members of the artists' colony there, especially two attractive young women: the painter Paula Becker, whose work was to earn her lasting distinction, and the sculptor Clara Westhoff, whose work had been critiqued by Rodin when she attended his school in Paris the year before. He was to marry Clara the following spring. On October 5 he left Worpswede to return to Berlin and Schmargendorf, where he resumed his Russian studies with Salomé. But fairly soon he must have realized that she no longer wanted their old intimacy. On October 18 he began to write glowing letters to
Clara and Paula, and he continued to do so during the rest of the fall, though his letters to Paula were affected by the news of her engagement to the painter, Otto Modersohn. During that fall and winter Salomé's determination to get rid of Rilke apparently intensified, to the point where, on January 20, 1901, she was writing in her diary, "Outside rainy weather. Let R. go away with it, far away..."18

In mid-December, probably because he sensed that she would no longer play the part of the benevolent mother for him, Rilke was plunged into a depression, which he described at length in his diary, recording that he felt buried, hopeless, frightened at everything that was happening around him, confused, and sometimes insane.19

Salomé's rejection of the poet must have brought back with great force the anguish which had followed his mother's withdrawal. It must also have swept away the defenses which Salomé had helped him to build against that trauma at the center of his psychic life. Or, to use Rilke's own metaphor, it tore wide open again the wound that ran all through him and his life, the wound which the relationship with Lou had been helping to heal.

After the resumption of the friendship by way of correspondence in 1903 Lou's letters show a sober, well-considered enthusiasm for his writing, which must have pleased him more than any reaction he had dreamed of winning from her at Zoppot in 1898. In January 1904 he imagined that he would become a great river which might flow into her, a sign of his new confidence that he had successfully attained the right to the powerful, penetrating, and giving masculine role in their relationship, the role which he had longed for in bitter frustration at Zoppot.

Yet this letter also expresses his feeling that his power as a writer and a poet is dependent upon her maternal mirroring, her empathetic hearing, her capacity for "stillness" so that nothing, in particular no egocentric interest of her own, may distract her as she listens to him. His grandiose, infantile narcissism dreams of maternal silence as the most perfectly attuned and receptive response (Letters 1:140). In April 1904, after the shock of a meeting with his disconnected mother in Rome had made him feel like "a convalescent... weightless, tottering," Rilke wrote to Salomé to say, "A help it would be to talk to you... and to see you listening and keeping silent..." (Letters 1:147 and 149). Such receptive silence
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would defend him against the threat of her egotism, reinforced by a powerful intellect, which had shattered him at Zoppot six years before.

Deprived of the opportunity to talk with her, he finds that just writing his letters gives him the feeling of having a "refuge" in her. His mother makes him feel that he shares her unreality and disconnectedness, whenever he sees her. In contrast, even a dream of Salomé is "more real than all daily reality" and has the power to restore his sense of his own reality and cohesion. Her "presence," created by the dream, "makes me peaceful, patient, and good" (Letters 1:146).

Psychological theory would suggest that Rilke's sense of his own unreality arose at least partly from early identification with a mother he felt was ghostly and from the inadequacy of her responsiveness to him as a child, her inability or unwillingness to make him feel that he was physically and mentally and emotionally there for her by the ways in which she saw him, listened, touched, and talked to him. A good mother enables her child to experience the world around him as having a comparatively stable and dependable reality. Like the protector who comes to the frightened child at night in The Notebooks and the Third Elegy, she gives form to the chaos around him by her reactions to it, by explaining it to him, by helping him distinguish illusion from objective reality. Self-absorbed in illusions, pretensions, and narcissistic religiosity, Phia apparently failed to do this for her son. The consequences of her failure may be found in the letters and The Notebooks.

Rilke's letters to Lou reveal that during his twenties he found in her a mother who could shape his experience of the world and make it real for him. Reading them, one can see that she may have been a model for the mother in The Notebooks and the Third Elegy, who confers solidity, form, and benevolence on the chaotic, frightening darkness. In November 1903 Rilke wrote saying,

[T]he experience of formlessness, which, at that time, seized me in a hundred places at once, that was ended by the inexpressible reality which you were. . . . [Y]ou bore witness to the existence of all things you [touched] . . . and [saw]. The world lost its cloudiness for me, this fluid taking and abandoning of form, which was my first verse and poverty; things emerged, animals, one distinguished, flowers. . . . And all this happened, because I was permitted to meet you . . . when I was . . . in danger of dissolving into formlessness. . . . In Paris, . . . when all things drew back from me, as if from a man gone blind, when I trembled
with fear that I would no longer recognize the face of the person closest to me, then I healed myself with the thought that I still recognized you within myself, that your image had not become strange to me . . . but had remained standing alone in the alien void in which I had to live.30

III

In essential respects the two mothers—Phia and Salomé—are diametrically opposed in Rilke’s mind. He could not convey to Phia “the least thing that is real for [or about] me,” for she saw him in the mirror of her preconceptions. When she looked at him, he felt the gap in her perceptions as a hole, a void, in himself. Her blindness tore him down. When he felt that he was disintegrating or feared that he had become emotionally dead and his imagination barren, he appealed to Salomé for help. Her answers gave him a sense of clarity and confidence. “You are so wonderfully right . . . the way you feel it [the anguish he has described to her in an earlier letter] and clarify it with your great knowledge of the human: you prophetess” (Letters 1:123).

Most biographers agree that Rilke probably never underwent analysis or that, if he did, it was for a very brief time. He said that expelling his devils might well mean expelling his angels. He did not want some analyst bringing the mysterious processes and contents of the unconscious to light before the poems germinating there were ready to be born and subjecting them to alien systems of classification before they arranged themselves, and were re-formed by him in his poetry and prose (see Letters 2:44-45).

But Salomé became an unofficial, informal, geographically distant mother-therapist, as their correspondence continued both the transfer-ence (projection of maternal images upon her, displacement of feelings for a mother to her) and the insights which he would not seek in an official, formal relationship with a psychoanalyst such as her friend Gebsattel.

As he turned to her for help again early in the summer of 1903, after a breach of more than two years, Rilke’s letters showed the infantile nature of what Kohut might have called his “idealizing transference.” His language calls to mind Kohut’s observations about patients prevented in childhood, by a parent’s traumatic withdrawal, from going through
the normal gradual process of shrinking that parent down to fairly realistic dimensions while internalizing his or her power to calm anxiety, to clarify, and to give guidance. Never having adequately internalized such maternal and paternal functions, these patients continued to seek surrogates whom they could idealize and invest with the great power to perform them which infants and small children attribute to their parents. “[Y]ou alone know who I am. You can help me, and I feel . . . in your first letter the power which your calm words have over me. You can clarify for me what I don’t understand, you can tell me what I shall do; you know what I must fear and what I need not fear—: must I be afraid? . . . every word from you means a great deal to me and vibrates and lives a long time for me.”

Two main foci of Rilke’s thought were an egocentric, destructive mother and one who was idealized, all-seeing, life-giving, life-preserving. He distanced them from each other as much as he could in his imagination, though sometimes his early love for Phia broke through his defenses, and sometimes he hated Lou and saw her as a destroyer. Such splitting, such polarities suggest a need to isolate the love for a parent from hatred and fear. The ego may be too weak or immature to sustain ambivalence. Or, perhaps, as in Rilke, the negative feelings are so strong and fierce that they must be isolated from the positive emotions in order to sustain the child’s sense of having a good, benevolent, protective mother, to preserve his belief that he is loved, to defend him against fear and guilt.

The fact that such splitting and extreme polarization may be found in work of great genius makes me reluctant to see these phenomena simply as signs of ego weakness or immaturity. King Lear and Hamlet exemplify this tendency in Shakespeare’s work. In King Lear the playwright himself polarizes good and evil daughters and sons. In Hamlet, although the prince sees Claudius, his uncle and stepfather, and the dead king, his father, as extreme opposites, Shakespeare has the ghost of old King Hamlet acknowledge that he has been sinful, and Claudius is given some redeeming qualities. To some extent, in other words, the playwright qualifies Hamlet’s polarizing of these two fathers. In both plays the splitting and polarizing calls to mind the small child’s and the adolescent’s tendency to divide parents and parental figures into good and evil, benevolent and destructive, protective and frightening, and the child’s comparative incapacity for ambivalence. In Hamlet, as psychoanalytic
criticism has shown, the splitting and polarizing enable the prince and the audience to isolate hatred and the desire to kill a father from love and idealization of a father: hateful Claudius is so distanced from the ghost of the dead king that neither Hamlet nor the audience consciously associates the two, though they are brothers, husbands of Hamlet's mother, and rulers of Denmark. In this way Hamlet and the audience, insofar as they identify with him, can defend themselves against the guilt arising from unconscious negative feelings (the desire to kill the father and possess the mother) and against the fear of a vengeful, punishing parent.

In Rilke the mind's maneuvering took another course, because it was guided by other motives. The memory or fantasy that his mother had withdrawn from him and eventually abandoned him for a time made him see her as hateful, a destroyer. He defended himself against Phia and from his loathing for her, his fear and despair, by devoting a great deal of energy to creating her opposite in Salomé. Having done so, he immersed himself in his love for Lou, returning to her with devotion unabated after the breach of more than two years and sustaining his idealization of her as a saving, all-knowing, benevolent mother for most of his life, though she successfully managed to avoid seeing him after their break in February 1901, except on a few occasions. The fact that when they parted in February 1901 she left the door open to him, should he really need her, and the extraordinary generosity of her response when he took advantage of this offer in 1903, obviously strengthened his inclination to maintain the polarization of these two maternal figures. He used this maneuver and Salomé's renewed willingness to collaborate with him to provide himself with a sense of maternal love strong enough to heal, at least temporarily, the self-doubt, the sense of unreality and vulnerability with which, he felt, Phia had infected him, and to defend himself against the maternal destroyer he feared he had within him.

For many years Rilke thought of himself as a traveler seeking a home and a mother (the two were associated in his mind; see Letters 1:46). Early in the summer of 1903, deeply disturbed and depressed, he imagined Salomé holding in her hands all the experiences which, if he had been stronger, he might have transformed into the work that would have been a home to him (see Letters 1:116). Six months later, in January 1904, he wrote to Lou about an ancient mural he had seen in a Paris art dealer's
shop, implicitly identifying himself with the traveler in the painting and her with the woman listening as the traveler spoke both to himself and to her. The woman in the mural seemed “home-filled.” Given the refuge she offered, the traveler would find “a final unity that was slowly closing like a healing wound” (Letters 1:139–40). In the same letter his mouth, his song, his being flow into the “stillness” of Lou’s maternal “depths.”

“To Lou Andreas-Salomé,” a poem written in the autumn of 1911, reaffirms and develops his conception of the kind of shelter he can find in her. Only when his face has sunk into Lou is it not exposed; it grows into her and together with her, as it “settles darkly,/ infinitely [farther] into [her] protected heart.”

... Ach nur zu dir gestürzt,
ist mein Gesicht nicht ausgestellt, verwächst
in dich und setzt sich dunkel
unendlich fort in dein geschütztes Herz.
(WDB 2:39)

The home to which the poet longs to return, which will guard him against exposure, is the heart or the womb of this mother. To grow into her “depths,” her protected and protecting heart and womb, would be to retrieve the original unity of mother and child “in a final unity,” so that the “wound” of division between them could close and heal. Not exposed, completely defended, his face would continue to grow, as would the self and the work which he was building.