CHAPTER 7

This Always Secret Influence
The Poet’s Changing Relationship with His Father

I

Rilke’s relationship with his father was far more complex than a narrow “orthodox” Freudian analysis, such as Erich Simenauer’s, would have it. Reduced by Simenauer to oedipal phase antagonism, with expressions of love and esteem defined as “nothing more than ‘cant,’” camouflage created under the dictates of the superego, their relationship becomes a simplistic cartoon. In this chapter I delineate the poet’s multilayered feelings about Josef, his ambivalences, the conflicts and tensions between opposing emotions and attitudes, their origins in his pre-oedipal childhood, and their development during his adolescent and adult years.

It is hard to imagine a less likely father for this great poet than the railway inspector whose ambition to be an army officer was defeated after ten years of service, this absurdly old-fashioned gentleman, rigidly devoted to propriety and conformity. Nonetheless, to argue, as Simenauer does, that Rilke’s discoveries of redeeming qualities in his father are simply defensive “reaction formations,” covering up his oedipal hostility, is to miss by a mile the fascinating complexity of this relationship and the father’s pervasive influence on the poet, whose vocation Josef could not begin to understand or value.

Rilke expressed the belief that his father was “incapable of love” in a letter written early in 1914 to Magda von Hattingberg, eight years after
Josef Rilke's death. In this letter he complained that his father's concern for him had taken the destructive form of "speechless anxiety," against which Rainer had found it almost impossible to defend himself. It was, after all, the source of Josef's attentiveness and generosity.\(^2\)

In June 1914 Rilke wrote to Lou, lamenting the "region airless and loveless" which he found in himself. He was afraid that if any benevolent and loving person came to him to try to help him, he would imprison the kind person in this region, "so that his aid, unusable, would grow overripe in him and wilted and horribly atrophied" (*Letters* 2:113). The year before, he had written to Princess Marie, explaining that he was not a lover possibly because he could not love his mother. He lamented this emotional poverty, associating it with his caution and fear of danger (see *Letters* 2:90).

Taken together, these letters suggest that in his sense of being crippled by an "incapacity for love," the poet may have felt identified with his father. One can see how the feeling that he shared his father's incapacity for love would affect his sense of himself. In this respect Rilke struggled to overcome his father in himself. In the first few months of 1914, Magda von Hattingberg raised his hopes of overcoming this emotional sterility, but the hopes soon died.

The description of the father in the letter to von Hattingberg reveals conflicting feelings in the son. To be sure, one sees affection, compassion, and gratitude, but also contempt for the old man so fearful and timid, so constricted in emotion and limited in understanding. Josef's fear is recalled again in the fourth Duino Elegy (1915), where Rilke thinks of his father as "occupied [or preoccupied] with the aftertaste of such an alien future" (his son's), and imagines that Josef has, since his death, often experienced fear within the poet, "within my hope."

\begin{quote}
und, mit dem Nachgeschmack so fremder Zukunft
beschäftigt . . .
der du, mein Vater, seit du tot bist, oft
in meiner Hoffnung, innen in mir, Angst hast. . . .
\end{quote}

(*WDB* 1:454)

The passage suggests that the poet has internalized and identified himself with the anxious father and thus come to share the paternal fear about his future. Even within his hope the son finds the gnawing worm of Josef's anxiety, which has become part of himself.
In a number of letters Rilke contradicts this impression of his father. In January 1923, writing to Countess Margot Sizzo, from the perspective of a man who had achieved fulfillment in his work (the final Elegies, the Sonnets), the poet remembered the strong love between him and his father in his childhood and his fear that Josef’s death might mean the end of his own existence. Then, with wisdom later acquired, he reflects that death cannot negate love, that it thrusts someone we have loved intensely only more deeply into “our heart,” where the dead person continues to exercise a “secret influence.” These thoughts lead to the conclusion “Where can we come closer to it, where more purely celebrate it, when obey it better, than when it appears linked with our own voices, as if our heart had learned a new language, a new song, a new strength” (Letters 2:315-16).

Is Rilke covering up in this letter his true feelings as a child toward his father? He does remember their “extremest difficulty in understanding and accepting one another,” and he emphasizes the great difference between their orientations. From what we know about his life as a child and from what we know generally about the ways in which young children experience their parents, his recollection of his fantasy that loss of his father would mean the end of his own existence is persuasive. His mother’s self-absorption and withdrawal may have encouraged a transfer of such intense feelings of dependency to his father, as René began to struggle to free himself from the enmeshment with Phia which continued through much of his life. I cannot agree with Simenauer’s argument that such reflections about his relationship with Josef were “nothing more than ‘cant’” or a “reaction formation,” reinforcing the repression of his hostility toward his father by exaggerating his love for him. The poet’s linking of the “new strength” which he has found in himself with his father’s “ceaseless,” “secret influence” reveals a conception of Josef which is clearly opposed to the one we find in the letter to von Hattingberg and in the Fourth Elegy. Both may be partial truths, reflecting different aspects of the father and of his effect upon his son, brought to memory by different moods and states of mind in the poet.

Does Rilke idealize his father or their relationship in this letter to Margot Sizzo, written in 1923, so long after Josef’s death? Rather than “cant” or cover-up, the letter may express a rediscovery of the strength of his childhood love for Josef, underlyin...
he had attained through his fulfillment and extraordinary achievement in the *Elegies* and the *Sonnets*—above all, freedom from repression and defensiveness, and, as a result, greater access to emotional energies and to memories.

In commenting on Rilke’s relationship with Phia I referred to Harold Searles’s observations concerning patients whose fear of their early love for their mothers had caused them to repress it. Through analysis Searles was able to help some of his patients “de-repress” this long-unconscious love. Searles’s supporting evidence for this argument is persuasive. From many of the images of the father in Rilke’s writings, it seems clear that the affection he expresses for Josef involved something like this retrieval of early feelings. Obviously there was ambivalence. Some of the passages expressing love for the father suggest attempts to cover up hostility. At times the retrieval of genuine affection may have become confused with the need to veil painfully negative attitudes. Such confusions and ambiguities of genuine self-expressiveness and defensive concealment may be found in all of us. The affection for the father shown in letters, poems, and Ewald Tragy probably had its roots in periods of Rilke’s childhood preceding the “oedipal phase,” which is the focus of Simenauer’s analysis.

On his nineteenth birthday Rilke wrote to Valery David-Rhonfeld, his fiancée, “If in my father’s house love was shown me with both care and concern only by my papa, I was in general thrown entirely upon my own resources.” There is a mixed message here. The emphasis falls upon the child’s neglect by everyone. Much of the letter is devoted to the young man’s bitter resentment of his mother’s behavior. But he distinguishes between his parents, crediting his father with “both care and concern,” which at this point in his life he does not reduce to “speechless anxiety” (*Letters* 1:18–19).

While some biographers suspect that the poet’s memory or imagination distorted the mother of his childhood, there is little evidence that Rilke’s recollections of his father’s solicitude were inaccurate. E. M. Butler tells us that Josef changed his son’s nurse twenty-four times in Rainer’s first year of life. Obviously this piece of information has a double edge. It suggests his devotion to his infant son was fraught with the infectious anxiety which the poet found distasteful and destructive.

Psychological studies of the father’s role in the pre-oedipal years make Rilke’s statements about Josef’s importance to him during his childhood
more intelligible. Some child psychologists see the father “as a powerful and necessary support against the pull back to the primary undifferentiated symbiotic phase” during the second year of childhood. They tell us that the child’s attachment to the father (“establishment of a libidinally cathectized object representation of the father,” in their technical language) “promotes separation.” He is perceived more objectively and realistically than the mother during the second year. He is felt to be part of the external world at a time when the mother is still extensively confused with the self. “Some youngsters seem to turn exclusively to the father to evade the regressive pull, while others are so ambivalently enmeshed with their mothers that they do not have time for their fathers.” These tendencies do not end with the second year. They may influence much later stages of life, though the influence may be unconscious. Rilke seems to have been caught between these two opposing inclinations. We can find both attitudes reflected in his work.

In Ewald Tragy (1898), a novella which is crude and obviously autobiographical, the mother is absent, an object of longing and bitterness, while the father is central in the first part of the narrative. He is the focus of a range of conflicting feelings in his son, from humiliation and contempt to love, tender concern, admiration, and a strong sense of affinity.

Ewald Tragy is eighteen. Rilke was probably twenty-two when he wrote the story. His portrayal of Ewald’s closeness to his father and of Herr von Tragy’s centrality in his son’s life at this time when the boy is determined to get away from Prague and his family, and his dramatizing of both positive and negative feelings toward the father in all their intensity are compelling and convincing despite or, perhaps, because of the rawness of the work.

Herr von Tragy gives “commands” to his teenage son. He is peremptory and abrupt with him, humiliating Ewald by snatching his hat off his head because he thinks the dust on the hat disgraces them in the eyes of people they meet. The “inspector” is angry with his son because Ewald is about to leave him to go to Munich. The story seems to reflect Rilke’s guilt at leaving his father. Saying that he will not hold Ewald back, Herr von Tragy tries to persuade him to remain at home, asking him what he lacks, pointing out that if he remains in Prague and treats “people correctly, the best houses will be open to you” (ET, 8). Reacting with angry scorn to this line of persuasion, Ewald replies, “That’s all you
are concerned about. To lie on one's belly before ... people—that's the right way; and to crawl on one's belly to ... money—that's the goal, isn't it?" \( (ET, 9) \).

The material probably comes from the time when Rilke was twenty \( (1896) \) rather than eighteen, and the choice of Ewald's age suggests that the author wishes to place more distance between himself and the younger self he is writing about.\(^8\) No doubt, as he looked back on his shame and rage, Rilke could be more objective. But, reading this novella, one can see that the younger self's contempt for the attitudes of the Prague bourgeoisie, exemplified by the father, persisted in the author.

The novella delineates the other side of Ewald's ambivalence as well, his love for his father. The "old gentleman" smiles at his son and answers "patiently," but finally the teenager's rage gets to him. "The old officer in him" "commands" his son, "Don't yell!" and for a second time "crosses, with rigid formality, to the other side of the street." Then, as Ewald watches him, "It is somewhat disquieting to see the old man so completely abandoned on the endlessly bare sidewalk. How alone he is, he thinks,—and if something should happen to him. His eyes do not leave the father any more" \( (ET, 10) \).

Are we to doubt the feelings expressed here? Commentators on this early story agree that it is autobiographical. Is this passage "cant"? Surely it does not reflect a cover-up, a denial, or some other form of self-deceptive defense. The son's hostility is not hidden in the story. I suspect that Rilke has recaptured his intensely ambivalent feelings rather accurately in this scene, which is both moving and funny, as in the clumsy way in which Ewald, now once more standing beside his father, tries to express his love, although he is unwavering in his determination to leave the old man to go to Munich:

Ewald begs:
"Papa!" For a moment he is confused, and then the words tumble out of his mouth: "You should turn up your collar, Papa—it is always so chilly on the staircase." \( (ET, 10-11) \)

Josef Rilke opposed his son's vocation. Writing in April 1903 to Ellen Key, the Swedish author, whose enthusiastic reactions to his early Stories of God made her seem a potential source of financial and emotional support, he says, "My whole art has grown up from its first day against
opposition: against the laughter and scorn of the noncommissioned officers, against my father, against all about me” (Letters 1:100). Carl Sieber quotes a note Josef Rilke sent to Phia while their son was in military school, urging her not to excite René’s emotions with her extravagant letters, to keep them short, and not to encourage him to write poetry.9

In Ewald Tragy, Ewald describes his father’s lack of faith in his vocation in terms that emphasize the old man’s bourgeois values and incomprehension. He tells a French girl that Herr von Tragy considers his desire to be a poet “simply ridiculous,” because “it is no profession. It does not pay, one does not belong to any class, is not entitled to any pension, in a word: one is disconnected from life.” The passage also reflects the effect of Josef Rilke’s narrow, timid doubts and fears upon his son. Ewald goes on to say, “And I myself have so many doubts. Really: I spend whole nights lying awake with folded hands and torturing myself. ‘Am I worthy?’” (ET, 21). Perhaps the young author of the story wondered if he would ever write poetry which might redeem him from the fear and doubt Josef had fostered. His father’s belief that a poet “is disconnected from life” might turn out to be true in his case. Obviously this fear goes beyond superficial concerns (pay, class, pension) to something else which profoundly concerned Rainer. In Paris Malte Laurids Brigge is “disconnected” from the life around him. And Rilke’s letters suggest that at times he was no better off than Malte in this respect.

Writing to Ellen Key about his father’s inarticulate kindness and anxiety for him, Rilke imagined that Josef yearned to understand who he was and what he was doing. Living on the old man was doubly painful because he so completely lacked confidence in what his son was doing. Deeply troubled because he could find no other way to support himself, the poet longed to show his father “a great, great deal of love” (Letters 1:99). The complexity of the analysis in this letter encourages me to trust the poet’s sense of his father and his account of his own feelings. At the time the old man was suggesting that Rainer take a proper job and give up this perverse, irresponsible way of life; Rilke explained to Key that such a job would be like his old military school or a jail, though he noted that Josef was not pressing him, just offering to find him employment in Prague if at last he would see that his present way of life was a failure (Letters 1:103). At twenty-seven the poet was aware of a range of conflicting feelings about his father. Here, as in Ewald Tragy, there is no reason to believe that the love, gratitude, and empathetic understanding
are any more superficial or less honest than the resentment and the desire to be freed from dependence on this very limited, uncomprehending old man.

I have said that Ewald Tragy is raw. Yet the scene in which Ewald talks to the French girl in his aunt's home skillfully creates, with dialogue, Ewald's thoughts, and a few gestures, a many-sided relationship between father and son. After Ewald has lamented his bad luck in parents, he "remains sad and silent." In a good mood the inspector "gently taps his son on the shoulder: 'Well, old man?'" Poor Ewald "tries to smile and kisses his hand," as the old man blindly decides that his son is not going to leave him. Then the scene comes to a focus in a passage of great clarity which suggests that even in 1898 Rilke could be extraordinarily articulate in defining his feelings about others (here they are projected onto his fictional surrogate). Ewald is talking to the French girl: "You see, this is how he holds me. So gently, without force or influence, almost with nothing but a memory, as though he were saying: 'Once you were small, and every year I lit a Christmas tree for you—remember?'—With all this he makes me quite weak. His kindness has no exit, and behind his wrath there is an abyss. I am not brave enough for this leap."

10

Herr von Tragy differs markedly from the oedipal fathers in Kafka's writings and D. H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers, though there is a suspicion here of lurking wrath. Exemplary kindness and goodness in a parent can make it very hard for the child to liberate himself from the parent's wishes, fears, and pressures. The Prodigal Son episode in The Notebooks reaffirms this theme. Rilke's repeatedly expressed distaste for possessive love was probably rooted in the manipulations of the parents who coddled him as a youngster, as he tells Ellen Key. Parental kindness may become a prison from which, it seems, there is no exit. And the father who keeps his anger largely in reserve, while giving his son hints of it, but, for the most part, shows him benevolence and generosity, such a father may have more power to hold and manipulate his son than one who shows little kindness and a lot of anger.

Paul Morel in D. H. Lawrence's novel Sons and Lovers, is largely freed from his father's power by the older man's rages and bad treatment of the mother, while the mother, with her love, holds her son far too tightly for his own good. Living a life which radically goes against the wishes of a parent who shows much kindness and generosity, and continues to
do so despite his doubt and fear, is likely to give one a sore conscience. We can believe that Rilke’s letter to Ellen Key in 1903 truly expresses the suffering he felt when he thought of his father.

Parental kindness which has no exit and makes the child feel weak can inspire hate and even the desire to murder. I cannot argue with Simenauer’s conclusion that Malte’s account of the perforation of his father’s heart after the old man’s death and of his own reaction to this grisly ritual suggests a desire to kill his father or see him dead. Herr Brigge’s death is a welcome source of freedom and independence. But the feelings in Rilke which this episode reflects were part of a larger range of conflicting emotions which developed in the poet at various stages of his life. They cannot be interpreted merely in terms of an oversimplified version of the oedipal theory.

As for the wrath with an “abyss” behind it, imagined by Ewald, we have observed that Herr von Tragy does show anger, as, for example, when he snatches off Ewald’s dusty hat. But he keeps his anger under control and gives way to it infrequently. A father whose suspected rage seems to lurk behind kindness, giving only hints of itself, may be more frightening than one whose anger explodes and lets itself be seen to its full extent. Not knowing how to measure a father’s anger may create the fear that it has the power to annihilate one. Yet reading this story, in which the father appears relatively mild and the son vents a harsher anger, I suspect that the danger of annihilation by the father’s anger is a fantasy arising, at least in part, from unconscious projection. This is to say that young Rilke, identifying himself, to a large extent, with Ewald, unconsciously projected his own anger onto Herr von Tragy, whom he identified with his father.

Often the punishing or murderous father in the mind is invested with such projected and, thus, fantastical anger. Does the father whose wrath has the power to annihilate the son turn up in Rilke’s later work? Only rarely. Later I shall discuss the poem “David Sings before Saul,” in which this fantasy of the father is obliquely represented in an oedipal competition for women. Do the terrifying Angels of the First and Second Elegies represent this wrath at a later date, as they seem to menace the poet with annihilation? If so, an analyst might argue that the menacing paternal rage has gone through several stages of displacement from its original source. Originally found in the father himself or projected in the son’s perceptions of the father, the analyst would say that it was then taken
into the superego and projected onto these figures of the imagination, who do seem to embody projections of the superego's power to annihilate the self and of the ego ideal toward which the poet is aspiring. In the Seventh Elegy, the poet holds off the menacing Angels with the "powerful current" of his "voice," his "cry" (SP, 191 and 187). But the comparatively abstract Angels of the Elegies seem far removed from the highly individualized, autobiographical fantasies of the father which we find in *Ewald Tragy*.

II

About five or six years after writing *Ewald Tragy*, Rilke began to recreate earlier stages of his life in the thicker disguises of *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. The autobiographical material was more extensively transformed in this later work, parts of which were sheer invention. One important difference between the two books lies in the characterization of the mother and the father. Malte's Maman is far more sympathetic than his father. The master of the hunt is an unwelcome intruder on those brief, rare occasions when Maman spends time with Malte: "But we did read a little, so that we would look occupied; it was unpleasant for us when anyone came in, to have to explain what we were doing; especially toward father, we were exaggeratedly explicit" (99).

As we have seen, Malte's love and admiration of Maman are central in the novel, and he is rather distant from his father. If there are hints that Maman is not a perfect mother, the critical attitude toward the father is explicit. When the parents are called home from the crown prince's ball because Malte is feverish, badly frightened, and in a rage, the father is stern, if also gentle. "And my father ordered me to say what was the matter. It was a friendly, softened order, but it was an order nevertheless" (96). The master of the hunt here is reminiscent of Herr von Tragy. When the boy does not answer, his father becomes impatient.

The echoing of "befahl" ("ordered" or "commanded") in "Befehl" (the noun, "order" or "command") reminds one of Josef Rilke's military background and mentality. As I have indicated, Malte's father is an officer of the court, the master of the hunt. In *Ewald Tragy*, we are told Herr von Tragy is an old officer. Rilke's father served in the Austrian army, intent upon a career as an officer. Disappointed in this hope (he
did not receive a commission and withdrew from active service after ten years in the army), he was determined that his son should become an officer and achieve the kind of glory which he had too briefly tasted as commander of the fortress at Brescia in the Franco-Austrian War of 1859.

The master of the hunt, ordering his raging, frightened, feverish son to explain himself, seems an indirect reflection of Rilke’s distaste for his own father’s association with the military life, its values and style. Yet the poetry and prose Rilke wrote from his early years until he witnessed the hideous spectacle of World War I reveal that he had internalized his father’s ideals and fantasies of military glory, that he, at least partly, identified with Josef in this respect, and was fascinated by stories of heroes and battles.

Carl Sieber, the poet’s son-in-law, informs us that from the first it was determined René would be an army officer. The boy received dumb-bells for exercise. He had tin soldiers to deploy in imaginary skirmishes like the ones he sketched. His mother told Sieber that he was trained in making military reports. He wore medals for battles the imperial army had fought. His father’s sister’s husband sent René a sabre and a helmet.¹

Though he hated the two military schools to which Josef sent him, St. Pölten and Mährisch-Weisskirchen, and finally persuaded his father to let him leave the second one in June 1891, after this release René wrote his mother, “[T]he military profession is the only profession for which I long. I have taken off the Emperor’s coat to put it on again in a little while—forever; and be convinced, I will wear it with honor.”² While studying at St. Pölten, René dreamed of gathering laurels in war and wrote eighty-one pages of a History of the Thirty-Years War, which shows his fascination with such military heroes as Wallenstein, Tilly, and Gustavus Adolphus.³

A number of Rilke’s early poems reflect the extent to which Josef’s preoccupation with military glory affected his son. The most famous of these is “The Lay of the Love and Death of Cornet Christoph Rilke” (“Die Weise von Liebe und Tod des Cornets Christoph Rilke”), written in the autumn of 1899, revised in 1904 and 1906. Dashed off in one night when Rilke was twenty-three, the Cornet tells the story of Christoph Rilke, who fought in the Imperial Austrian army against the Turks in Hungary in 1663 and died in battle. This romantic tale of old-fashioned heroism was inspired by some family papers which the poet’s Uncle Jaroslav had got from the Royal Saxon State Archives in his attempt to
prove that the Rilkes of Prague were closely related to the noble old Saxon family by the same name. Thousands of German soldiers carried the *Cornet* with them into battle in the First World War. At eighteen Christoph Rilke, a knight in armor in the youthful first version, a squire in the tighter, tougher, artistically more sophisticated third, is made a cornet (ensign) by the great general Count Spork. Leppmann points out that this was young Josef Rilke’s highest rank in the Imperial Austrian Army. The cornet rescues a naked woman, tied to a tree, cutting her bloody ropes; sleeps with a countess in her castle; races out of the burning castle after the pagans who have set the castle afire, and carries the flag beyond his own army into the midst of the enemy, who kill him: “But, as they close in about him, they seem to be certainly gardens again, and the sixteen curved sabres, which leap up towards him, flash after flash, are a festival. A laughing fountain display” (WSR, 88).

If the original inspiration for the *Cornet* came surely from Rilke’s identification with his father as the young cadet who had commanded the citadel at Brescia in 1859, and with his paternal uncle in Jaroslav’s mooning over fantasies of noble warrior ancestors, the poem also shows the importance of the absent mother in Rilke’s mind, even in 1899. Time and again the poem returns to the thought of a mother or mothers who have been left behind by the young men riding out to war. Contemplating a drooping young French marquis, Christoph Rilke says to him, “You have strange eyes, my Lord Marquis. You must favour your mother,” at which “the youngster revives and brushes the dust from his collar and is like a new man” (WSR, 79).

In the next paragraph, “[s]omeone is talking about his mother.” These “gentlemen” from many different countries “are all united in one common feeling,” “[a]s if there were but one mother.”

Later in the *Cornet* Christoph Rilke writes a letter to his mother:

> “Dearest Mother,
> be proud: I carry the flag,
> be undisturbed: I carry the flag,
> love me: I carry the flag—”
> (WSR, 83)

It is easy to see that the energy behind this fervently inspired work of one night, which brought Rilke long-lasting popularity, the splendid energy which also made him go back to the poem in 1904 and 1906 to
work it over very carefully, must have been fostered by the paternal ideal which he had taken into himself and by the longing for the ideally supportive mother he felt he had never had. In the poem’s last section, a courier from Christoph’s commander rides into Langenau, Christoph’s home village, with his letter to his mother. “There he beheld an old woman weeping” (WSR, 88).

In writing the *Cornet*, through identification with his young hero, Rainer may have experienced a brief, sublimated, limited fulfillment of his father’s fondest aspirations for him, after disappointing the old man in reality. He also invented a mother who would grieve for her lost son. In the *Cornet* the poet accomplished in sublimated form what his paternal uncle was not able to do in fact. He gave a vivid life to the vague legend of the old Saxon Rilkes, linking them inseparably through his authorship with the modern Prague family. And perhaps Rilke felt, as he provided the young cornet with his marvelous adventures and glorious death, that he was writing about that other young cornet whose adventure in the army had ended badly, re-creating his father’s life in a much more appealing form.

Rilke’s poetry shows that Josef’s military ideals, memories, and dreams, which Rainer had made a part of himself as a child, continued to influence him at least until the beginning of the First World war, when, in August 1914, he wrote the five hymns to the war god. The poet’s continuing identification with his father’s attachment to military ideals was probably also a source of inspiration for the sixth Duino Elegy, a celebration of the hero, most of which was written in 1912 and 1913. The childhood fantasy of the young father as a commander of the citadel at Brescia in the Franco-Austrian War of 1859 and the fantasies of ancestral heroes, which his father and his Uncle Jaroslav fostered, may well have played a part in inspiring and shaping this Elegy:5

Wunderlich nah ist der Held doch den jugendlich Toten.
Dauern
ficht ihn nicht an. Sein Aufgang ist Dasein; beständig
nimmt er sich fort und tritt ins veränderte Sternbild
seiner steten Gefahr. Dort fanden ihn wenige. Aber,
das uns finster verschweigt, das plötzlich begeisterte
Schicksal
singt ihn hinein in den Sturm seiner aufrauschenden Welt.
Hör ich doch keinen wie ihn. Auf einmal durchgeht mich
mit der strömenden Luft sein verdunkelter Ton.
The hero is strangely close to those who died young. Permanence

does not concern him. He lives in continual ascent, moving on into the ever-changed constellation
of perpetual danger. Few could find him there. But Fate, which is silent about us, suddenly grows inspired
and sings him into the storm of his onrushing world.
I hear no one like him. All at once I am pierced
by his darkened voice, carried on the streaming air.
(SP, 182-83)

The hideous realities of World War I undermined this part of Josef’s influence on Rainer. Soon after writing the five hymns, he began to express his revulsion from the war. His forced induction into the army reserve in 1916 intensified his dislike of the military. Nonetheless, it is hard to believe that he ever entirely lost all vestiges of his attachment to those early images of his father as a young hero, commanding a fort during the Franco-Austrian War of 1859. In 1916, after having been discharged from military service because so many important and powerful people had intervened on his behalf, Rilke wrote, “Somewhere there is a strain of old soldier’s blood in me that makes me ashamed to create such a fuss and to be such a rebel.” He completed his celebration of the hero, the Sixth Elegy, in 1922, adding the following lines:

War er nicht Held schon in dir, o Mutter, begann nicht
dort schon, in dir, seine herrische Auswahl?
Tausende brauten im Schooss und wollten er sein,
aber seh: er egriff und liess aus—, wählte und konnte.
Und wenn er Säulen zerstieß, so war es, da er ausbrach
aus der Welt deines Leibs in die engere Welt, wo er weiter
wählte und konnte. O Mütter der Helden, o Ursprung
reissender Ströme! Ihr Schluchten, in die sich
hoch von dem Herzrand, klagend,
sein die Mädchen gestürtzt, künftig die Opfer dem Sohn.

Wasn’t he a hero inside you, mother? didn’t
his imperious choosing already begin there, in you?
Thousands seethed in your womb, wanting to be him,
but look: he grasped and excluded—, chose and prevailed.
And if he demolished pillars, it was when he burst
from the world of your body into the narrower world, where
he chose and prevailed. O mothers of heroes, O sources
of ravaging floods! You ravines into which
virgins have plunged, lamenting,
from the highest rim of the heart, sacrifices to the son.
(SP, 182–85)

Thus the reality of Josef Rilke’s disappointment and frustration as he
grubbed his way in demeaning railway jobs did not obliterate Rainer’s
identification with his father in Josef’s military memories, fantasies, and
aspirations. Nor did Rilke’s growing mastery and recognition as a poet
and his relationship with Rodin, the father surrogate who provided him
with an ideal model of mastery in an art.

In the scene of Malte’s parents’ return from the crown prince’s ball, the
master of the hunt’s insensitivity and lack of sympathy are nuanced. The
order Malte’s father gives him is “friendly, softened” (96). There is at
least a modicum of sensitivity and benevolence in the father at this point.
But Herr Brigge takes his son’s pulse and says, “What nonsense to send
for us” (97).

The response of the father seems all the worse because it is motivated
by his desire to get back to the crown prince’s ball. “They had promised
to go back if it was nothing serious” (97). Yet as an adult of twenty-
eight, looking back upon his childish terrors, Malte agrees with his father
in his skeptical response to the child’s fears: “certainly it was nothing
serious” (97). Is this irony? As an adult Malte still experiences those fears
with all the child’s feverish intensity. And so did Rilke, as his letters
reveal. During 1902 and 1903 the reawakened anxieties of his childhood
threatened to overwhelm him. Yet he also knew that if he could master
them and turn them into poetry or prose, they would prove a resource
for his genius. In writing the scene of the parents’ return from the ball
to the feverish boy, he was giving himself confirmation of his mastery.
Malte’s retrospective affirmation of his father’s view expresses the side
of Rilke that was impatient with his own weaknesses, his fears, his emo-
tional illness, and longed to have the toughness and unyielding strength
of will he had found in Rodin, the master and second father who was
his model and a great source of strength during the years 1902–6.

Other interpreters have rightly found oedipal feelings in this episode
of The Notebooks. Though there is nothing like the seething reaction of
Paul Morel’s father in Lawrence’s Sons and Lovers to the physical affec-
tion between Paul and his mother, one can sense the anger lurking behind the master of the hunt’s impatience and in his “What nonsense. . . .” We are told that in his fever Malte is possessed by rage. Its source and object are not named. But the scene as a whole intimates where it is coming from. Reading the passage, one feels that the child’s fury arises from the father’s lack of sympathy, the mother’s submissiveness to the master of the hunt, and his ability to separate his son from this enchanting mother so easily when she is most needed. Maman, much as she loves her son, spends little time with him and has persuaded him to pretend to be a little girl, to deny the little boy in himself in order to please her. Thus, the novel makes one feel that the boy’s rage arises partly from his mother’s behavior and that Rilke transferred the anger aroused by her to the father. This latent transference helps him to isolate and distance, and thus to defend, the love Malte feels for his enchanting Maman from his rage. The idea that Malte might be angry with Maman is never expressed in the novel.

III

Elsewhere in The Notebooks the father evokes little sympathy, except, perhaps, when Malte sees him laid out after his death. In comparison with Herr von Tragy, the master of the hunt seems relatively flat, simplified. He is an aristocrat, but he makes one think of Kokoschka’s portraits of the Viennese bourgeoisie and of Grosz’s satiric sketches and lithographs of German civilian and military bureaucrats.

Malte remembers his father’s stiffness and rigid concern for social propriety and contrasts Maman with him in this respect. “As for my father, his attitude toward God was perfectly correct and irreproachably courteous. . . . Maman, on the other hand, thought it almost offensive that anyone’s relationship with God could be merely polite” (109–10). Here, as elsewhere, the hard, sharp edge of Malte’s (Rilke’s) irony makes the haughty father a contemptible figure. The contrast between the parents emphasizes the deadness of the one, the vitality of the other. The artist-son’s hostile destructiveness is all the more damaging because in the years since he had written Ewald Tragy Rilke had developed distance and restraint, greater skill in indirection and irony, and the ability to simplify
his live model into this relatively abstract and highly integrated figure of fine art.

One can see Malte’s comments on the master of the hunt’s attitude toward God as an oblique attack on Josef Rilke’s devotion to conventional correctness and propriety in general. Sieber tells us that when Rilke and Clara wanted to visit Josef in Marienbad, he wrote to them, expressing his concern that they might not be properly dressed, and he made it a condition of his consenting to see them that they should provide themselves with “respectable clothes for traveling,” underlining the words. In his next letter he returned to the same theme, expressing the wish that they be well dressed, without eccentricity. He advised René to have his (Josef’s) Prague tailor make a suit for him and closed with the worried comment that, although unfortunately he could do nothing for Clara, he hoped that she would be well dressed.

Sieber denies that a concern for external appearances outweighed Josef’s love for Rainer. He says that the poet’s father “loved his son with all the ardor of which he was capable, but his love was always adjusted by his correctness and his correctness by his love.”2 Apparently Sieber saw only a few letters and cards from Josef to Rainer. Apart from the old man’s repeated adjurations about decent clothes, what struck him was the father’s fears about Rainer’s future. Josef wrote to the poet, urging him not to live so much from day to day, asking, “Do you think constantly, dear René, of your secure future?”3 He worried about the couple’s vegetarian diet. Sieber, whose sources included Phia and possibly Clara as well as Rainer, makes the old man, with his fussy, irritating, anxious love and concern, seem a figure in an old-fashioned stage comedy, though the author of this portrait might be surprised and dismayed to hear one say so. He too seems comically proper and stuffy.

Another passage in The Notebooks confirms the impression that Rilke’s satire of his father’s attitudes in the master of the hunt reflects scornful hostility, at times even intense dislike. Shortly after describing his parents’ attitudes towards God and religion, Malte recalls his father’s reaction to his mother’s disfigurement near the time of her death: “Then my father said, ‘She is very much disfigured.’ . . . [I]t was probably his pride that suffered most in making this admission” (111–12).

Could anything be worse?! Does this reflect the poet’s feelings about his father? It does not recall specifically anything that we know about Josef Rilke. Phia long outlived her husband and suffered no such disfig-
urement through illness. But the passage brings to mind Josef Rilke’s pride, which had been so badly undermined that it evidently suffered spasms of anxiety about the way members of the family looked to other people. It must have seemed fragile and rather hollow to his son.

Years after Maman’s death, when Malte is twelve or thirteen (much younger than Ewald Tragy), his father takes him to Urnekloster, the home of Maman’s father, Count Brahe. In the high dining hall, which produces intense fear of disintegration and annihilation in the boy, he stretches his leg until his foot touches his father’s knee. This “slight contact” with his father gives him “the strength to sit through the long meal.” Later he suspects that the master of the hunt has understood his attempt to make contact and to find some emotional support, but he is uncertain about this. He takes some comfort in the thought that his father “seemed to tolerate” his behavior, but sees their relationship as “almost cool” (26). Malte feels alone at Urnekloster and very fragile, as he must rely upon this tenuous relationship with a distant father to help him hold himself together. This is not the old man of Ewald Tragy, who touches his son affectionately on the shoulder, hoping that he won’t lose him.

One can only speculate as to whether or not the distance which had grown between Rilke and his father after Rainer left Prague in 1896 is reflected in this passage. Surely Josef could not offer his son emotional support in 1902 and 1903, when Paris brought back childhood fears of disintegration with a vengeance and memories or fantasies of his loneliness as a child, of receiving relatively little help from his parents during episodes of severe anxiety. At twelve or thirteen, Malte’s age at Urnekloster, René was in military school. His mother responded sympathetically to his anguished letters. His father seems to have been relatively unresponsive to his misery at St. Pölten and Mährisch-Weisskirchen, until he finally let René end his military schooling after five very painful years (September 1886 to June 1891). The best evidence of Josef’s attitude at this time is offered by Sieber, who quotes the following message from Josef to Phia:

I am sending you all the letters which in the course of the last difficult days I received from René. I have received a report from Weisskirchen that you overwhelmed René with, frankly, extravagant letters, which agitated his mind far more than they cheered it. Please, be brief in your letters and do not not in any way excite René, likewise do not encourage René’s versifying.
At Urnekloster the master of the hunt is frightened by the ghost of Christine Brahe the first time he sees her. He attempts to approach her, is dragged back to the table by Count Brahe, and finally in his terror rushes out of the dining hall. But the last time they see the ghost, the master of the hunt manages to stay in the room and, as the count raises a glass of wine toward him, is just able to raise his own glass, as if it were a great weight, a few inches off the table (37). Malte makes the meaning of his father's behavior clear. He asks himself a question concerning the master of the hunt which seems to answer itself. "Had he wanted to force himself, precisely because he was of such a passionate nature and yet so invested in logic and clarity, to endure this adventure calmly and unquestioningly?" The father's behavior and his character are intelligible to his son only in retrospect. "I saw, without comprehending, how he struggled with himself, and how, in the end, he triumphed" (36).

Malte's attempt to formulate the father's character in this passage comes early in the novel. Nowhere else does he credit the master of the hunt with "a passionate nature." Does the passage involve a brief attempt to redeem Herr Brigge, to give him admirable qualities? Does it cast light on Rilke's understanding of Josef? Sieber says that the poet got his extraordinary strength of will from his mother. Does Malte's expressed sense of his father's triumphant struggle with himself in this episode suggest that Rainer may have thought of Josef as a model for the struggle of the will to overcome inner weakness, fear, and disappointment at frustration and failure? Having given up his hopes of an officer's career, Josef worked his way up to "a fairly high post in a private railroad, which he has earned with infinite conscientiousness" (Letters 1:98). There is no evidence that he expressed despair or depression at his fate.

Against this argument one must set the mute fear Rilke ascribes to his father in the letter to Benvenuta, the anxiety mentioned in the Fourth Elegy. In his account of the ghost's visit at Urnekloster, Malte's description of his father's struggle for self-mastery undermines, with implicit satiric irony, any appeal which this struggle might have for us. Reading the details of the father's reactions to the first visitation, one feels that he is not admirable but ludicrous, leaping up from the table, "deathly pale," with his hands "clenched at his sides," shouting in fear and anger, his face "swollen with blood," tearing himself away and rushing out of the room, neglecting, in his fright, to take his son with him (33–34). Later, as the ghost once more walks slowly past, responding to his father-
in-law’s raised glass, Malte’s father still seems to be shaped by the novelist’s sense of the ridiculous, which is no less damaging to him than it is to the major, Malte’s uncle, with his writhing tongue, his rotten teeth, his mouth fallen open, and his withered hand quivering in the faint brought on by the sight of his long-dead relative. And it is possible that in writing this scene, consciously or unconsciously, the poet-novelist split his father into the master of the hunt and the major, since the old uncle, like Josef, retired from the military at a relatively low rank (one of Josef’s brothers had killed himself because he was not promoted).5

Malte’s account of his father’s behavior in his paternal grandparents’ home, Ulsgaard, also satirizes the master of the hunt as the only person who takes his absurdly egocentric mother’s recurrent bouts of choking seriously and seems to be “offering her his own normally functioning windpipe, placing it completely at her disposal” (121). Reading these scenes, I regret that Rilke did not do more with his talent for satiric-ironic comedy.

The father’s overwrought struggle for self-possession is comic partly because he is so frightened by his own passions. His efforts produce stiffness and rigidity. Doubtless, Josef Rilke had urged René to bring his emotions under control, to strengthen his will, to work for logic and clarity. Earlier I quoted the message Josef wrote to his estranged wife, urging her not to agitate René’s mind while he was in military school. He was eager to see his son master all his fears and doubts so that he could become a good officer. Rilke must have understood that such a rigorous effort at self-control as he portrayed in the master of the hunt can be deadening, can kill one’s passionate nature and result in the petrification which pervades the portrait of Herr Brigge.

Malte’s description of his father after his death was probably based on Rilke’s experience when Josef died.6 Malte’s impressions of the corpse and the apartment in which the master of the hunt ended his life implicitly define his father’s character and his life. One cannot miss Rilke’s irony in the sentence, “I felt as if I had seen him dead several times before: so familiar did all this seem” (155). The late master of the hunt wears “the expression of a man who out of politeness is trying to remember something.” This recalls, in contrast, the monstrous roaring of his own father, Chamberlain Brigge, as he lies dying at Ulsgaard. The image of Malte’s dead father reminds us of his sterility, his stiffness, his apparent hollowness in life. The roaring of the chamberlain’s dying body
seems to express all the unused energy and passion the grandfather has had in reserve during his lifetime. The father’s hands, which lie “obliquely crossed,” look “artificial and meaningless” (155). This is what the striving of the will to overcome his passionate nature, to achieve correctness, logic, and clarity, has come to. The long endeavor to maintain self-mastery has deadened the master of the hunt many years before his death. The corpse is the symbol of this struggle and its results.

Earlier I asked if, despite his sense of these truths, Rilke identified with his father in the older man’s admiration of discipline and self-mastery. Certainly he discovered a positive model of such virtues in Rodin, and I shall develop this argument in my chapter on his relationship with the sculptor. In psychoanalytic terms, one could say that early identifications were modified by later ones and that antagonistic feelings toward the father and critical attitudes toward the qualities which we have been exploring also brought about modifications in Rilke’s sense of himself. The poet could resolve the contradictions between opposing attitudes toward the paternal values by finding a creative way in which to realize them without allowing them to deaden him, rejecting the kind of life exemplified by the master of the hunt.

One closely related aspect of Rainer’s identification with Josef becomes apparent in the poet’s clothes and manners, as described by Wilhelm Hausenstein, the art historian (quoted in chapter 3, part 2)—the cautious gestures, gray-blue suit, deerskin gloves, walking-stick, and “light gray spats,” all of which gave him “the conventional appearance of a man of the world.”

In her *Freud Journal*, writing about a 1913 reunion with Rilke, Lou Andreas-Salomé says, “When the old ebony walking stick he had inherited broke last summer—the silver handle of which his father held at the little boy’s eye level in all their walks, Rainer shuddered, and was shocked, as though it was the ominous destruction of something which had to be an organic part of him, something which infused him with the power of his father.” Lou reveals at least part of the motivation for Rilke’s identification with his father—something we might not have suspected, if we did not realize that early impressions and fantasies of a parent continue to shape our psychic life long past the time when these impressions have been forgotten and the parent himself has changed substantially. If Salomé is to be believed, the small child’s impressions and fantasies of the father’s power continued to influence him long after his
father’s failures and disappointments became painfully clear to him and even after Josef died. Some elements of Rainer’s early identification with Josef may have remained very much alive, if unconscious. In 1915 Rilke acquired a new walking stick of his own to replace the broken one.

The clothes of the “conventional” “man of the world,” as Hausenstein describes them, would surely have pleased Josef. I said in chapter 3 that this conventional appearance may have shielded Rilke from intrusiveness, defending his inner life as a mask or a false self can protect those who fear that knowledge of their feelings and thoughts can give other people power to manipulate, exploit, depersonalize, or engulf them. Rilke’s clothes, his manners, his walking stick, all the paraphernalia of the social persona, sustained an identification with Josef that was motivated by the desire to make his father’s power a part of himself. But they may have reflected as well his need to protect himself against the railway inspector’s efforts to shape him. They may have been his way of appeasing his father even after his death and of concealing the inner life which made Josef anxious and moved him to pressure his son to conform.

Lou’s *Freud Journal* records one of Rilke’s dreams, in which his mirror reflection seems to change into an image of his father, “grown smaller than he, a little bent and sad, holding his head to one side,” as both Ewald and Herr von Tragy do in the novella. The feelings experienced in the dream were “horror and melancholy.” Was this a wish fulfillment, as psychoanalysts tell us dreams are at their deepest level of motivation? Was it a fulfillment of a wish to be identified with the father? If so, the feelings expressed in the dream were ambivalent, obviously. Did the dream fulfill the desire of the poet to be his father, but also express his feeling that he was a much diminished version of the older man? Did it express the fear that in fulfilling his wish to be like Josef he had grown smaller, bent, and sad? Hausenstein describes the poet as “somewhat stooped.” Did the horror in the dream come from self-recognition or a fantasy of self-recognition? One can only raise questions. Salomé offers no interpretation. If the poet provided one, she does not mention it. Rilke had steadfastly fought off his father’s efforts to get him to take a civil service position, which he feared would reduce him to such a figure. Yet the belief that he might become this man discovered in the mirror of his dream must have remained.

Two years after the 1913 meeting which Lou describes in her *Freud
Journal, Rilke wrote the Fourth Elegy, in which he expressed his aversion to the ordinary bourgeois whose life before his inner eye was hollow, tawdry pretense and deception, recalling Josef and Phia in his childhood, with their falsely labeled bottles of cheap wine. In the Elegy the poet asks if anyone has not sat anxiously before his own curtained heart and watched the curtain go up and then the dancer on this inner stage, only to realize in dismay that, whatever lightness and ease he brings to his performance, this dancer, under the costume and make-up, is the burgher, the commonplace, middle-class fellow who enters his house through the kitchen. The poet has had more than enough of such "half-filled masks."

Wer sass nicht bang vor seines Herzens Vorhang?
Der schlug sich auf: die Szenerie war Abschied.
Leicht zu verstehen. Der bekannte Garten,
und schwankte leise: dann erst kam der Tänzer.
Nicht der. Genug! Und wenn er auch so leicht tut,
er ist verkleidet und er wird ein Bürger
und geht durch seine Küche in die Wohnung.

Ich will nicht diese halbgefüllten Masken. . . .
(WDB, 1:453)

After a few intervening lines the Elegy focuses upon Josef in the passage quoted earlier, where Rilke sees his father as having been "occupied with the after-taste" of his own "alien future" and as having been anxious often since his death "within my hope, in me." I have discussed the poet's feeling, expressed here, that he has internalized his father's fear for him and that it gnaws at the very center of his hopes and aspirations. What we know of Josef Rilke and the proximity of the father and the "Bürger" in the poem associate the two figures. People who are half-filled masks because they are governed by fear and timidity, such as Josef's, cannot live fully out of their own instincts and passions, must costume and mask themselves to be in conformity with the expectations of those around them. (Among such people are Herr von Tragy and the father who wrote to Rilke and Clara, demanding that they come to visit him in proper clothes—and the poet himself, insofar as he has become identified with the father who gnaws at his insides.)

This father has been introjected. He lives on in his son as a "felt
presence.” (In Internalization in Psychoanalysis, W. W. Meissner defines an “introject” as “an inner presence of an external object” and says that “relations between subject and introject may be as varied as the relations between two separate persons,” though introjects may also “become phenomenologically confused with and mistaken for the sense of self in varying degrees.”) Unlike the military man with his dreams of glory, this bourgeois father was an antimodel, an image of what the poet feared in himself and defended himself against. But the father who became such an antimodel was also much loved and esteemed, remained long after his death an embodiment of power, love, and generosity for his son, continued to draw Rainer into identification with him and continued to be a felt presence within Rainer, because the poet wanted and needed him there.

Except for the forced service which he briefly endured during the First World War, Rilke kept clear of the military in which his father had failed to obtain a commission. He fled the bourgeois life in Prague and rejected all thoughts of a civilian career in any way resembling Josef’s. The poet’s inability to maintain long-term intimacy with a woman may have been partly due to Josef’s loss of his wife’s love and respect and his abandonment by Phia. These childhood experiences must have been traumatic. He feared that, like his father, he could not give a woman the kind of deep, sustained love many women (and men) require from lovers. In The Notebooks and elsewhere he lamented man’s inability to reciprocate such love in women (see The Notebooks, 133–35). Leaving so many women after brief relationships, he may well have been motivated by the wish to avoid the pain and humiliation of being left, which his father had suffered.

IV

In the fall of 1904, although he had serious misgivings about Ellen Key’s glowing essay on him, published in a Swedish periodical, he sent a copy to his father. He “was touched by” the old man’s “evident pleasure at it.” The poet had expressed to Lou his anxiety about the essay and about Key’s lectures on his life and work. “I am afraid she has . . . given everything [his early work] a semblance of conclusiveness which it doesn’t possess and in which people will feel cheated when they buy my books
now” (Letters 1:165). Perhaps it was this very quality that worried him so much—Key’s excessive generosity, her inflated sense of his achievement and mastery—which moved him to send the essay to his father, who was, as he wrote to Lou, “patient with me now in such a sad way” (Letters 1:180). Plagued by a “guilty conscience” because he was making so little progress with his work, no doubt he sent Key’s essay to his father in the hope that it would reassure him, lighten his sadness, reward his patience, and thus ease the old man’s infectious anxiety and his own guilt.

Expressing his doubts about her lectures and essays to Ellen Key in March 1905, Rilke urged her to speak only of his truly accomplished work, a few poems and stories. But he made an exception, saying that she could talk about his poetry and fiction without such restraint and caution in Prague, where he imagined her bringing “his long-suffering father” the news that he had finally won “recognition.” Although Josef Rilke could not attend Key’s Prague lecture, she visited him, and his letters to his son showed that she had been an effective missionary. The poet wrote to tell her that she had achieved what he had been trying to do without any hope of success. She had convinced Josef that his son’s vocation and way of life were “essential.” Key’s effect upon his father was one of the factors, Prater says, that at this time produced “a euphoria he [Rainer] had not felt for a long time.”

Josef was aging. He would die the following March (1906). If only Rilke could convince his father before he died that he was on the way to becoming a grand success in his chosen profession, the happiness he could give the old man would make up for and undo the disappointment, pain, and anxiety he had caused him for so long—initially by leaving military school and rejecting a military career in which he might have rescued Josef from his own bitter failure. He had chosen a profession which the old man found, not only incomprehensible, but unreal, had cut himself off from the only kind of community and society which his father understood, and had failed to assume full responsibility for supporting himself, his wife, and his child. His dedication to poetry had left his father fearing that his only son would sink into miserable and shameful poverty, if he had not already done so.

One can see his stake in converting his father, in affording him the narcissistic delight a parent can obtain from a child’s success. If only he could compensate the old man for the anxiety he had given him and
replace that fear with confidence and pleasure and the self-esteem of a father who had seen his son achieve fame and praise, he could feel that he had repaid Josef's love and generosity. When his father died, Rainer could look back upon the end of his life without guilt. By relieving Josef's anxiety and by replacing it with confidence, Rilke could clear away one main source of his own self-doubt and replace it with a memory of his father that would encourage his own self-confidence in the future. If by converting Josef he could create a final image of the old man which would be largely benevolent, it would make a great difference after his father's death. I am verbalizing intuitive feelings that probably never came to reflective consciousness in the poet's mind.

As he sensed what his father's death might mean to him, he made use of Ellen Key and his growing reputation to reshape Josef's attitudes. If he succeeded in doing this, his success was due to a combination of luck, cunning intuitive foresight, and single-minded, willful creative energy.

The poet saw his father for the last time in late October 1905, when he went to Prague to give a lecture on Rodin. Josef was too weak from illness to come to the lecture. But while he was in Prague, Rainer spent much of his time with the old man. Prater notes that Josef Rilke "was understandably delighted at his son's material progress and new-found independence."5

Rilke's sense of liberation at the time of Josef's death is reflected in Malte's reaction to the perforation of his father's heart. Malte sees this as the destruction of the heart of the family, the cutting of his connections. His father's death gives him for the first time a firm sense of his individuality. Now his is "an individual heart" and at last it can do "its work of beginning from the beginning" (159). Years later, in 1921, Rilke developed this idea in a letter of condolence, in which he sees the loss of a father in old age as an impelling motive for gathering oneself together and relying on one's own abilities. While a father lives, the son is "modeled in relief upon him." His death is the blow that knocks us "free, alas," so that we achieve, at last, the fullness and separateness of a figure standing on its own (Letters 2:249).6

A letter written on April 6, 1906, little more than three weeks after Josef's death, leaves one in no doubt concerning its liberating effect. The poet describes "the feeling that I could do, should do something now,—something that may perhaps never come again like this" (Letters 1:202).
In the next two years many of the New Poems were written. This was a period of sustained creativity upon which Rilke was to look back with longing: “With a kind of shame I think of my best Paris time, that of the New Poems, when I expected nothing and no one and more and more the whole world streamed toward me merely as a task and I replied clearly and surely with pure work” (Letters 2:34). These poems took him well beyond the level of achievement he’d reached in earlier work. In the year and a half that followed their completion (August 1908-January 1910), he wrote much of The Notebooks. Never afterward was he to sustain such an outpouring of remarkable work for anywhere near the same length of time, though the month of February 1922 is more familiar to most of his readers as the period of almost miraculous creativity during which the Duino Elegies were completed and the Sonnets to Orpheus were written. The sense of liberation, of freedom, of a new beginning, and all the creative energy that came to him at the time of his father’s death seem to have been reinforced by the knowledge that he had allayed his father’s doubts about him, won his approval, and thus given him great pleasure and undone much of the harm he had inflicted by disappointing and worrying the old man.

These changes also helped Rilke to continue the work, which he had begun long before his father’s death, of restoring and redeeming Josef’s image in his own mind, creating a truly loving, generous, large-minded father. Just after Josef’s death, Rilke described him as “kindness itself to me, the most loyal aid and the most touching friend.” Two years later the poet recalled that he had “experienced infinite bigness and generosity” through his father (Letters 1:329).

How useful it was to have such a father in memory, as a supportive presence in his mind, a parent with whom he could identify himself. How very different it would have been to live with the memory of a father reduced at death to bitter failure, fear, and doubt.

The work of redemption and restoration both before and after Josef’s death seems to have been achieved in a number of ways. Possibly the poet’s filial relationship with Rodin enabled him to associate his two fathers in such a way that, through a reverse transference, his idealization of the sculptor helped him to idealize the railway inspector. Increasingly Rilke tended to polarize the positive and negative qualities of his parents, shifting all the negative ones to his mother. As his father aged and became ill, and after his death as well, this ongoing process of polarization may
have helped him to isolate Josef from the kind of hostility and revulsion which he felt toward his mother and to redeem his father in his mind. Often negative qualities are transferred from a dead parent to a living one or to a stepfather or stepmother. This defense supports the idealization of the dead parent and distances him or her from hatred, anger, and related feelings.

It is not unusual after separation or divorce for the children to attach most of the blame to one parent, sometimes the one who has left, sometimes the one who remains with them and is held responsible for all constraints and punishments, frustrations, and disappointments. This division defends the children against painful emotional conflicts. Perhaps the idealization of Josef and the concentration of negative feelings on Phia helped Rilke to defend himself against fears of engulfment, as this threat seems to have been associated far more with his mother than his father. Perhaps, also, the concentration of negative feelings on Phia helped the poet to defend himself against an oedipal attachment to her, reflected in The Notebooks and in his affair with Lou. Obviously, this polarization would reinforce the repression of those hostile feelings toward his father which originated in the oedipal rivalry, the focus of Simenauer's analysis of the relationship between Josef and Rainer.

Rilke defended himself against grief with a conception of the continuing existence of the dead, imperishable within the mental depths of the survivors who love them. Recalling his father, he reasons that a connection with someone else often "goes on more strongly and powerfully" in the unconscious mind. The rooting of a relationship in the unconscious results in our "possession" of the other person. And the "lasting," immutable nature of feelings, objects, and relations in those "invisible" depths makes our "possession" permanent as long as we live. (Here Freud would have agreed with the poet, to a large extent.) Rilke's reasoning on this subject takes a Kierkegaardian and paradoxical turn when he notes that acquaintance, friendship, or love, involving such possession, turns us back into ourselves, because it requires so much lonely inward activity "that it would suffice to occupy us each by himself forever" (Letters 1:330-31). This conception of human relationships makes more sense if we remember that the poet is thinking partly about the work of imaginative transformation he must do on everything mutable and changeable which he loves and values. The ninth Duino Elegy makes his
meaning clear. In the following lines the poet reflects that ephemeral things understand he is praising them and rely upon us, the most ephemeral of all beings, for salvation, wishing that we will be impelled to transform them inwardly, invisibly, into ourselves.

... Und diese, von Hingang
lebenden Dinge verstehn, dass du sie rühmst; vergänglich,
trau sie ein Rettendes uns, den Vergänglichsten, zu.
Wollen, wir sollen sie ganz im unsichtbarn Herzen verwandeln
in—o unendlich—in uns! ...  
(WDB 1:475)

Rilke’s letter concerning the permanence of the dead suggests an effort to achieve what the analysts would call “denial” of reality, reinforcing suppression of grief. The letter also seems to imply an assumption that a person enters into friendship or mutual love in the hope of taking the object of his feelings into himself so that he may enjoy the loving relationship in solitude or at a distance. Often this was the pattern of Rilke’s life.

Did Rilke take possession of his father at last by persuading him, with Ellen Key’s help, that his son’s vocation was real and valuable? Writing about Josef explicitly or indirectly in short stories and poems, in Ewald Tragy and The Notebooks, and in his letters was a way of possessing and achieving mastery over him. Ewald Tragy shows the son assuring himself that his father loves him, even as he reassures himself that he is quite capable of separating himself from his father, objectifying and satirizing and thus distancing the older man while at the same time delineating and intimating the redeeming qualities that made Josef lovables despite his rigidity and his limitations.

Analysts might say that Rilke’s theory of love and death suggests the poet preferred a relationship with an introject (the living presence of a person within the mind) to a sustained, intimate relationship with the real person. An introject may live on as long as we do, even after the real person has died. No doubt, Rilke’s sense of the reality of the introjected benevolent, generous, large-minded, loving father was so powerful that, having accustomed himself to the presence of this father, he softened his grief for the real one whom he had been distancing for years. As we can see in lines of “The Book of Pilgrimage,” the second part of The Book of Hours, written in 1901 and revised in 1905, a year before Josef’s
death, he had converted his father into a ghostly phantasm even before his death. On one side of an evident split in the father’s image, the poet was seeing Josef as a faded old man of the distant past, withered, barely alive:

Ist uns der Vater denn nicht das, was war;  
vergangne Jahre, welche fremd gedacht,  
veraltete Gebärde, tote Tracht,  
verblühte Hände und verblichnes Haar?  
Und war er selbst für seine Zeit ein Held  
er ist das Blatt, das, wenn wir wachsen, fällt.  
(WDB 1:68)

Isn’t the father for us what was;  
years gone, which seemed alien,  
obsolete gestures, dress out of fashion,  
withered hands and ashen hair?  
And if he was a hero for his time  
he is the leaf that falls when we thrive.

Another poem, “Jugend-Bildnis meines Vaters” (Portrait of My Father as a Youth), written in June 1906, is ambiguous. It expresses the poet’s sense of the poignancy of his father’s life, as well as Rainer’s love and, perhaps, grief for that young man who had hoped for much and realized none of his hopes. But it ends with the father as a “quickly disappearing daguerreotype,” his hands nearly lost to sight. Josef’s eyes dream. His large mouth becomes an image of his youth. He is in full dress uniform, wearing a saber. The poet thinks of his father’s hands as waiting, at rest, not impelled toward anything, perhaps suggesting a lack of motivation and direction. As they come near vanishing in the old daguerreotype, they seem to be grasping remoteness. Everything else about that young man is veiled, beyond the poet’s understanding. At the end of this poem about his father’s vanishing, Rilke realizes that his own hands are perishing, though more slowly than those of the youth in the photograph:

Im Auge Traum. Die Stirn wie in Berührung  
mit etwas Fernem. Um den Mund enorm  
viel Jugend, ungelächelte Verführung,  
und vor der vollen schmückenden Verschnürung
Written a few months after the father’s death, this poem reflects opposing attitudes, feelings, and needs—the divided poet’s ability to see his father from a distance, objectively, his sympathy and tenderness for the man, and an inclination to depersonalize and derealize him, to turn him into a “quickly disappearing daguerreotype.” Yet this is countered by the last line, which suggests Rilke’s sense of affinity with his father.

Prater quotes a letter describing a visit to the father’s grave on All Souls Day of 1907. The inscription had “weathered into the stone,” “as if it had stood in an old park undisturbed for a century.” The poet’s feeling that his father has been dead for a century reflects the inclination to distance and derealize Josef.

The Notebooks entry in which the sight of the dead father gives Malte the feeling that he has “seen him dead several times before” reveals a struggle to suppress grief at the sight and at the memory, of that scene (The Notebooks, 155). It also supports the thesis that both before and after his father’s death Rilke struggled to suppress all attachment by turning Josef into a thing of the past, a faded photo, furniture, someone who had been dead for a long time before his death, whose grave had been there for a century.

The poet was divided between the inclination to defend himself against his father in this way and a need to preserve him redeemed and restored as the image of paternal love and generosity. In 1923, after having completed his greatest task, the writing of the Elegies and the Sonnets, which repeatedly reaffirm the continuing presence and vitality of the dead and the past, Rilke tried once more to formulate his sense of their immediacy and influence. Recalling his fear of his father’s death as a child and his
fantasy that his own existence was inseparable from Josef’s, he wrote to Countess Margot Sizzo, expressing his belief that death cannot end the existence within us of someone we love, as our image and conception of that person become increasingly “independent of his tangible presence” during his lifetime. The “secret influence” of someone dear to us would surely be kept safe within us. “Where can we come closer to it, where more purely celebrate it, when obey it better than when it appears linked with our own voices, as if our heart had learned a new language, a new song, a new strength” (Letters 2:315-16).

This comes very close to the language Freud and later analysts use to explain the way in which we successfully work through the pain experienced at death and other forms of loss. It leads one to think that Rilke had a fairly clear understanding of his introjection of his father and his identification with him as the means of overcoming the anguish and loneliness arising from the separateness, distance, and loss of his father, first during childhood, because of the older man’s emotional stiffness and constraint, then at various times of physical separation when he went away to military school and when he left Prague to make a life on his own. Surely, before his father’s death, he had accomplished much of what Freud and other analysts call “the work of mourning” by taking Josef into himself through introjection and by making him a part of himself through identification, two processes suggested by the language of the letter quoted above.

Anyone who has read Freud’s The Ego and the Id can see how closely Rilke’s ideas resemble the psychoanalyst’s. Freud theorizes that a loved one we have lost becomes “set up inside the ego.” This process makes an essential contribution to the development of character.9 Using anthropomorphizing terms, he argues that in the process of persuading the id to give up the loved one and to accept his or her loss, the ego turns the id’s love to itself by making the lost “object” a part of itself. Thus, object-directed libido becomes narcissistic libido. This change brings about the “desexualization” of the libidinal energy and its use for other aims, such as creating art. The transformation and shifting of the energy of love from object to ego involves “a kind of sublimation.” Rilke’s letter was written a few months before the publication of The Ego and the Id in April 1923, though not before the publication of “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917).10 Had Rilke read the latter essay? Had he heard about
these ideas through friends, such as Lou Andreas-Salomé, who were immersed in psychoanalytic theory, or through other analysts among his acquaintances? I know of nothing that answers these questions definitively.

More recent theory tends to confirm Freud’s notions concerning the internalizing of objects that have been lost or given up, though analysts have continued to argue about the ways in which we take such objects into ourselves, the nature of the objects internalized, and the meanings of the terms—“incorporation,” “introjection,” and “identification.” Two of the best clarifications of these phenomena and terms in recent years are Roy Schafer’s *Aspects of Internalization* (1968) and W. W. Meissner’s *Internalization in Psychoanalysis* (1981), cited earlier.11

In “Mourning and Its Relation to Manic-Depressive States,” Melanie Klein observes that “the mourner obtains great relief from recalling the lost person’s kindness and good qualities, and this is partly due to the reassurance he experiences from keeping his loved object for the time being as an idealized one.” Klein argues that the feeling that we possess “the perfect loved object (idealized) inside,” which is supported and strengthened by focusing upon the lost person’s kindness and good qualities, helps us to defend ourselves against the “feeling of triumph” which may arise from the death of somebody close and one’s own survival, from the hostility and murderousness which also may come near to consciousness at the death of a loved parent, and from the sense of liberation, which Rilke experienced at the time of his father’s death. According to Klein, we are likely to feel that the good, kind parent whom we possess within us will defend us against the vengeful parent within, who wishes to punish us for desiring his death and for feeling triumph and liberation when he dies.

Such benevolent and malevolent introjects exist within us from a very early time, Klein believed. From infancy we reshape our parents by projecting our feelings and fantasies onto them. Meissner argues that it is these images of parents, in which object and subjective fantasy fuse, that we introject. They continue to live in us as presences, sometimes experienced as objects within the mind, sometimes closely identified with our sense of self. The death of a parent may provide such introjects with an unusually intense life. What seems especially relevant to our exploration
of Rilke's response to his father's death is Klein's argument that fantasies of kind, loving, idealized parents within us help surviving children to defend themselves against hostile, even murderous emotions and a sense of triumph, as well as against guilt and the internal presence of a vengeful, punishing parent.