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Rendering Rilke: Rilke's Afterlives in Modern English-language Poetry

Karen Leeder

Abstract. It is paradoxical that Rilke, who felt no affinity with English, and indeed despised American culture, has had such a profound and broad reception in various English-speaking countries. Rather than tracing the longitudinal tendencies, this contribution focuses on recent developments, highlighting the often radical conversations that take place within translations and versions of Rilke in the English language. The first section explores the reception in general terms and suggests ways of thinking about the extraordinary uptake over the last two decades. A second section explores concrete examples: especially the dialogical relationship of a number of poets from different English-language traditions (Scottish, English, Australian, American). In close readings from collections over the last two decades, and drawing on interviews and essays, it demonstrates how Rilke is used by contemporary poets to treat some contemporary issues quite alien to Rilke's own thinking, thus testing the limits of authority and kinship. A Conclusion examines how the German tradition has also worked its way out from under the shadow of Rilke's achievement and asks what this reception tells us about the importance of Rilke for posterity.

Keywords. Afterlife, Reception, Rendition, Rilke, Translation, Versioning [Paul Batchelor, Tommye Blount, Chris Edwards, Don Paterson, Jo Shapcott, Ulrike Almut Sandig]

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"statt des Besitzes erlernt man den Bezug"
("Instead of possession one learns relation")
Letter to Ilse Jahr, 22 February 1923

The afterlife of Rainer Maria Rilke in modern literature, film and other art forms is fairly unique and is at its most extensive and paradoxical in the English-speaking world. Indeed, one might argue that there is a distinct phenomenon, one that John Bayley once called "Rilke-in-English" (18). Looking at this phenomenon, I hope to illuminate aspects of the poet's recent reception; but also to reveal the place Rilke occupies for us today—that is the relation between Rilke and his English-language admirers, detractors, translators, versioners—hopefully also to shed light on the conditions and mechanisms that allow some writers (including Rilke) to move beyond their own historical place and moment to enter into a new relation and become world writers—especially through the medium of English.

Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), poet, novelist, secretary to Rodin, and fascinating correspondent, lived a short and itinerant life that conforms in many ways to the image of the archetypal poet: troubled and existentially homeless. "When life occurs at this level of intensity, biography turns into myth," writes Stephen Mitchell in his introduction to Rilke's *The Sonnets to Orpheus* (7). Indeed, Rilke's life and loves have inspired numerous films and fictions. He was himself also concerned with his legacy. Both these things are doubtless important in establishing his place in the minds of later readers. Nevertheless, Rilke had little affinity for Anglo-Saxon culture, and indeed a marked hostility towards many aspects of it, which might be thought to complicate the picture. His often-cited letter to his Polish translator and populariser, Witold Hulewicz, of 13 November 1925 makes clear his own sense of an end-times in the transmission of human impressions and in particular the failure of the Anglo-Saxon (American) way of life to furnish the true connection to a living essence he thought essential.

> Nun drängen, von Amerika her, leere gleichgültige Dinge herüber, Schein-Dinge, Lebens-Attrappen ... Ein Haus, im amerikanischen Verstande, ein amerikanischer Apfel oder eine dortige Rebe, hat nichts gemeinsam mit dem Haus, der Frucht, der Traube, in die Hoffnung und Nachdenklichkeit unserer Vorväter eingegangen war ... Die belebten, die erlebten, die uns mitwissenden Dinge gehen zur Neige und können nicht mehr ersetzt werden. *Wir sind vielleicht die Letzten, die noch solche Dinge gekannt haben.* (Rilke *Briefe* II: 377).

> Now from America, empty, neutral things are pouring across, sham things, *dummy* life . . . A house, in the American sense, an American apple or a grape vine over there has *nothing* in common with the house, the fruit, the grape, into which went the hopes and reflections of our forefathers . . . Live things, things lived and conscient of us, are running out and can no longer be replaced. *We are perhaps the last still to have known such things.* (Rilke *Letters* 374–5)

So, it is an intriguing paradox that Rilke is, in America today, as Steven Kaplan has noted, "the most popular German literary export to the country outside of Goethe" (231). His influence on modern culture is both well-documented and inescapable; it reads like a roll-call of the greats of the twentieth century. His poetry has inspired other poets from Auden to Tsvetaeva; it has been set to music by a range of composers. Translators, many of them distinguished poets in their own right, have repeatedly offered translations, versions or responses to him with the result that there are always multiple distinguished and competing versions of his work in print. He has been quoted on TV by representatives of the popular mainstream such as Oprah Winfrey; he is cited in work by authors like J. D. Salinger, James Merrill, Adrienne Rich, Milan Kundera, Amitrav Ghosh and Philip Roth as well as contemporary authors from as far afield as Iran and Cuba; he has been subjected to a range of cultural analyses by important critics from Heidegger to Agamben. Despite his aversion to the paraphernalia of the modern, he has fascinated many in the cinema too: from auteurs, who have set out to come to terms with his legacy, such as Wim Wenders in his *Wings of Desire* (1987), to the Hollywood mainstream where he pops up in a plethora of often unlikely places from Woody Allen's *Another Woman* (1988) to Philip Kaufmann's brutalist postmodern *Synecdoche, New York* (2008) where Caden Cotard (played by Philip Seymour Hoffmann) awakes on the first day of Autumn to a full reading of Stephen Mitchell's English translation of Rilke's "Autumn Day" on his clock radio. Rilke has, in short, moved far beyond the historical and geographical context he inhabited to enter into a new relation with world culture, to accrue a new currency. Final proof of his contemporary influence: an extract from his *Letters to a Young Poet* appears tattooed on the arm of none other than Lady Gaga; and for a younger generation, Park Jimin of K-pop band BTS sported the words "Ich lebe mein Leben in wachsenden Ringen"

("I live my life in growing circles"), from the *Stundenbuch* (*Book of Hours* (Rilke I: 157) in a temporary tattoo around his torso for a 2023 tour.[1]

If Rilke's reception in the English-language world had already been well established in the early decades of the twentieth century, the history of his reception in the German-speaking world has been more difficult—arguably bound up with the need to come to terms with Fascism after the Second World War. After 1945, the poet Hilde Domin even complained of a "Rilke Black-out" (61). Rilke was, however, in the end too formative a poet to be cold-shouldered for long. By the 1970s, and certainly by the centenary of his birth in 1975, it was clear that his influence had continued working and now emerged onto the scene as an icon of a certain kind of poetic diction. This was demonstrated, when the Austrian concrete poet Ernst Jandl was asked to deliver a "homage" to Rilke in December 1975. In his sequence of absurd poems "der gewöhliche rilke" ("the ordinary Rilke") Jandl countered the prevailing classical image of the poet by focusing on Rilke with a cold, Rilke opening a drawer, Rilke's shoe etc. [2] The lack of upper case, the baldness and repetition and the repertoire of comic props signal his intent, as here in "rilke reimlos" ("rilke rhymeless") : "rilke / sagte er // dann sagte er / gurke // leise dann / wolke" ("rilke / he said // then he said / gherkin // quietly then / cloud") (Jandl 12).[3] And three years later in 1978, the world was treated to the famous airplane skit by the comedian Loriot (Bernhard Victor Christoph-Carl von Bülow) in which the rapturous recitation of lines of Rilke offered by his long-term sidekick Evleyn Hamann is punctuated by messy mishaps opening the stubborn airplane meal (Loriot from 8.39).

The interest in Rilke has continued pretty much uninterrupted since then and is today as strong as ever especially around the anniversaries of his birth and death and the centenary of the *Duineser Elegien*. In

[1]In 2009 Lady Gaga acquired a tattoo in an old German script on her left arm from the first of the *Briefe an einem jungen Dichter* (*Letters to a Young Poet*) written on 17 February 1903. The Rilke tattoo appeared for a 2023 performance of Park Jimin's solo song "Set me Free Pt. 2." There is a review in the online journal *View of the Arts*, with an image: https://viewofthearts.com/2023/03/18/finding-order-within-chaos-a-review-of-park-jimins-set-me-free-pt-2/. Lady Gaga's own official Facebook (53 million followers) lauds precisely this poem in 2019. https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10156200061774574&id=10376464573&set=a.89179709573.

[2]Compare Frieder von Ammon, who reckons "gurke" and "wolke" an unholy alliance of the name Rilke.

[3]In a large public event in July 2014 "What if not Transformation?" (on Rilke-reception) at the Southbank Centre, London, Durs Grünbein chose to open his reading "after Rilke" with what he called a "strict (that is literal) translation" of Jandl's satirical poem which is an interesting attempt to deal with Rilke at double arm's length.

addition, the new treasure trove of materials acquired by the German National Literary Archive in Marbach has projected his legacy to the fore, and has already begun to reshape what we know about the poet (see the work of Sandra Richter). But the reception is still divisive. In "Ein kleines blaues Mädchen" ("A Small Blue Girl") of 2007, an essay on Rilke's famous poem "Das Karussel" ("The Carousel") (I: 490), by one of the most remarkable German-language poets to have emerged in the united Germany, Durs Grünbein detects "eines der Urgeräusche, das den Beginn der modernen deutschen Dichtung markiert" ("one of the primeval sounds that mark the beginning of modern German poetry") (Grünbein 141).

By 2011, the young poets of the volume *Helm aus Phlox* diagnosed a "Virus Rilke" ("Rilke virus") in a new satirical take on the *Briefe an einem jungen Lyriker* (Cotten 317–19). German-American poet and translator Paul-Henri Campbell, in his *Am Ende der Zeilen / At the End of Days*, includes a section of strung-out sonnets entitled "Rilkexorsizmen" ("Rilke-exorcisms") (Campbell 69–73). And Uljana Wolf, together with the American poet Christian Hawkey, enacted a more literal exorcism in their "erasure project," *sonne from ort* (2013), that is the overpainting and deletion of words from Rilke's poems using the Insel facsimile of Rilke's translations of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (Hawkey and Wolf).

This brief excursion gives a sense of how different the relation is between Rilke and the English-language tradition from that in the German-speaking world. Perhaps the greater distance from Rilke for those poets working in the Anglo-Saxon tradition allows for a more relaxed encounter with what has gone before (with less of Bloom's post-Freudian melodrama). There is less need to "exorcise" Rilke, because he is less present in an immediate, anxiety-inducing way. One can work with him instead. In English-speaking cultures, Rilke has enjoyed a much more unequivocal welcome notwithstanding what Jeremy Noel Todd wickedly calls "flicks of the knotted towel," from W. H. Auden ("the Santa Claus of loneliness"); and Philip Larkin: "I feel I must alter my life, as Rilke said, didn't he, i.e. find a different princess to live off" (Noel-Tod). Or most trenchantly and famously, John Berryman in his third "Dream Song," *A Stimulant for an Old Beast*: "Rilke was a *jerk*." (5). This sentiment was reaffirmed by Michael Robbins' more recent collection, *Alien Vs. Predator*, where in the opening line he writes "Praise *this* world, Rilke says, the jerk. / We'd stay up all night. Every angel's / berserk." (4). But how is it that a writer transcends their own time and place and begins to circulate

[81.156.211.202] Project MUSE (2026-07-03 17:36 GMT)

in another? And what can the experience of Rilke tell us about the processes that allow this?

Rilke was translated early: this is a key point. In 1915, first translations attracted attention of W. W. Norton & Co., which brought out a collection in the 1930s by Mary Dows Herter Norton. And he has continued to be translated frequently and well. What is more, he has been served by a number of major poets in their own traditions, which has helped secure his place in the larger world. Some of those translations have even come to exist as definitive works in their own right. The famous translation by J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender of the *Duino Elegies*, published with the Hogarth press in 1939, is a case in point.[4] It has now become a literary landmark and remains the first contact of many with this most extraordinary and contradictory work. Today, translation of Rilke has become something of an industry. But more significant, perhaps, than the number of translations or even their quality: a galaxy of prominent poets and novelists have attested to the affinity between them and Rilke, the importance of Rilke for their thinking and have been demonstrably inspired by him in their work, thus creating an authoritative place for Rilke's vision and a channel for his voice in English. That list is often surprising, including names one would not immediately link with Rilke, such as Ernest Hemmingway or the Scottish Nationalist and Communist Hugh MacDiarmid (Christopher Murray Grieve). The fact that many writers attest to certain personal affinities with Rilke (especially his existential homelessness), speaks to the power of the figure itself, a power that caused Marina Tsvetaeva to remark in a letter to him that he was not a poet but the very "Embodiment of Poetry" (Friedmann 537).

Others have demonstrably learned from Rilke; especially his use of motifs, his treatment of landscape and his mastery of form. Auden himself, for example, learned about aspects of sonnet form from Rilke in his own work; and one could make a similar argument for other contemporary translators and poets. But many poets have a singular presence; many are technically proficient; it requires more to understand why he has called forth such a marked response. There are a number of possible answers.

[4]Leishman's *Sonnets to Orpheus* published in the Christmas 1936 issue of *New Verse*, were reviewed by the magazine's editor, Geoffrey Grigson, who criticized them as "worthless translations." He longed instead for "accurate versions"; identifying "presumption, stupidity and inaccuracy," and also taking issue with *The Duinese Elegies* translated by Edward and Vita Sackville West which he deemed "crammed with inaccuracies and ineptitudes" (Pilling and Robinson 1).

Firstly: there is certainly the need among later writers "to measure the achievement" to quote William Gass: to measure themselves against a "great" poet, to respond to him at some level, and this works differently in English and German traditions (34). Secondly, Rilke might be thought of as an existential poet in that he treats death, love, being and change, i.e. universal concerns, universally applicable. This aspect of his work has arguably led to the popularization of Rilke in projects like the large-scale live tours and the award-winning CDs of the "Rilke Projekt" (2001–2010), which saw famous actors and musicians reinterpret Rilke for huge stadium audiences (Schönherz and Fleer).

Thirdly, it might be the case that poets are responding to what Scottish poet Don Paterson has called "Rilke's call" (*Orpheus* 72). Though, to be fair, this might be seen in quite broad terms. Michael Eskin, for example, has argued that poets like Paterson himself and indeed Durs Grünbein have fashioned themselves and their work under the sign of "fidelity to Rilke's ethical-poetic legacy," crystallized in the famous line of Rilke's poem "Archaïscher Torso Apollos" ("Archaic Torso of Apollo," I: 513): "Du muβt dein Leben ändern" ("You must change your life") ("The Poet's Fidelity" 63).[5]

Rilke's is perhaps the ultimate poetry of translation, driven as always by his desire for transformation, transition and change in every sense, from the poetic to the essential and, in turn, demanding that of others. But caution is advised. Certain lines can have a life of their own quite divorced from their context: they become poetic irritants (like a grain of sand in an oyster) calling forth specific and more or less serious responses. This is less the case with Rilke than with another great German poet, Bertolt Brecht (Rilke is in a bit less "snappy"); though precisely some form of "you must change your life" is an exception. It is spliced into any number of contemporary works by German or English poets, as an echo. William Gass, for example, is a case in point with his amplification "Change, then, Change your life" (92), but it also appears in ironic modes. Of unappreciative readers, Don Paterson's poem "A Talking Book" in his 2003 collection *Landing Light* (*Landing Light* 28) quips:

> unmoved by the recto or the verso,
> they stand before Apollo's ancient torso
> and all it says is You must lose some weight.

[5]I am grateful to Michael Eskin for allowing me to quote from this manuscript in proof. See also Eskin "Wake-up Call" and "Call and Response," which discuss "Rilke's call" in similar terms.

Nevertheless, drawing these different factors together, it can perhaps be claimed that the extraordinary extent of the reception owes its existence to the fact that Rilke represents something largely absent in English poetry, but not beyond it (a balance that is significant). Rilke epitomizes certain aspects of the German poetic tradition; in taking up his legacy one might argue that poets are finding a lever with which to explore that tradition rather than just the poet himself. The importance of various aspects of that tradition can change, of course, as can the works that strike a chord at a given historical moment. For those English poets writing at times of war (especially in the 1930s and 40s), for example, it was a question of identifying with a kind of "pathological Romanticism" that they saw at the heart of Rilke as a "poet of death" (Leeder 191–95).This led to a dominant interest in the *Duino Elegies* for poets like Auden and Sidney Keyes, for example. In the United States in the 1960s and 70s, on the other hand, and focusing on the *Neue Gedichte* (*New Poems*) it was largely the "inwardness" of Rilke's project that struck a chord for writers like Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell and Robert Bly (all also noted translators of Rilke) and which, as Bly put it in an essay of 1963, represented a very different tack from the "explosive outwardness" (16) that characterized contemporary American writing.[6] Since then, to be sure, this focus on the inner self has been trivialized, simplified and commercialized to the point where Rilke has been reinvented as "a high Priest of Narcissism," who has earned his place (ironically enough) as a self-help guru, part of West Coast wisdom literature; inspiration for spiritually inclined environmental activists; as a mainstay of angelology and as a firm favorite of boardroom culture (compare Komar; Fiedler; Macy; Mood).[7] In recent years this accessible Rilke, extrapolated to support almost any interest, has expanded many times over. At a serious level the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, especially, have found new admirers and translators as well as the French poems written during the last years of his life in Switzerland.

There are two further aspects of this positioning of Rilke that help to explain why he has enjoyed such a particular and vigorous afterlife. He is also a poet's poet—in the best sense of the phrase. Very many of his poems are also finally about the transformative energies of poetry

[6]For accounts of this trajectory see Komar and Leeder.

[7]Compare the CEO of Microsoft Europe, Satya Nadella, who is frequently cited drawing on *Letters to a Young Poet* www. washingtonpost.com /news/on-leadership/wp/2014/07/10/microsoft-ceo-satya-nadellas-love-of-literary-quotes/ (10 July 2014).

itself: examples of "P²," as Erich Fried, writing about Brecht called it.[8] And it is perhaps for that reason too that those who have come after have felt themselves called on to respond both to their own times and, simultaneously, to the larger demands of poetry.

Finally, there is Rilke's particular use of language. As the poet and translator Michael Hofmann put it: Rilke is "the poet in whom its [that is the German language's] persuasions, abstractions and music are most triumphantly effective" (60). In responding to Rilke, poets are responding to the opportunities and challenges afforded by an encounter with the German language itself. As Randall Jarrell noted ironically: "It is by Trust and Love and reading Rilke / Without ein Wörterbuch, that man learns German" (151).

It is worth trying to tease out the implications of these different motivations. Rilke's "call" might be translated into very different terms. It is noticeable that Rilke strikes a chord in a very essential and immediate way—for all his complexity. Galway Kinnell remarks how readers are frequently overcome by a feeling of recognition. "Perhaps the intimacy of Rilke's voice makes it seem that he speaks to you alone and that only you understand him" (i). People use his poetry for weddings and funerals; and the internet is full of those who feel their emotions caught exactly by Rilke. How can the poet who represented the embodiment of elitist hauteur for the poets of the 1970s, now appear to chime with the everyday experiences of those far removed from his time and place? The answer might come in a special facet of the poet's language that has been commented on in diverse ways by different commentators and translators. Kinnell also hints at it: "Perhaps the elusiveness of his poetry makes reading Rilke a more creative act than with most poets and the poem you come away with more than usually your own" (i). That is to say, Rilke's poetry is remarkably open: characterized by what poet and translator of Rilke, Ian Crockatt, terms "radical inconclusiveness"; and what another translator C. F. Macintyre calls "purposed vagueness"; or David Oswald dubs "careful indeterminacy" (Crockatt 8). Crockatt carefully explains that he has tried not to abuse this as a license "to take off anywhere," but to bring life and clarity to the apparent significance of the poetry for the twenty-first century English language (8). But the danger, perhaps, remains; as in the Canadian poet Mark Goldstein's Martian experiment *After Rilke* (2008), which ironically announces its own program ventriloquized by Jack Spicer: "As to the poems themselves I'll be brief. It'll be obvious to anyone with half a brain that these aren't

[8]Fried is borrowing this from Friedrich Schlegel, para 518, and note p. 250, who uses p2 or π2.

[81.156.211.202] Project MUSE (2026-07-03 17:36 GMT)

translations. The poems come clean. Mr Goldstein seems to get off on substituting most if not all the words in any given poem . . . and say just the opposite of what Rilke wanted to say. Besides, who cares what Rilke had in mind. Herein one will find a disordered devotion to the real." (Goldstein n.p.).[9]

But the terms "elusiveness," "inconclusiveness," "vagueness," and "indeterminacy," what critic Judith Ryan moreover calls "overdetermined indeterminacy," all suggest that Rilke appeals in part because of an "abstract" quality to his work (3). Rilke's poems are somehow capacious, open, enough to allow everyone to see their own feelings mirrored in them, on the one hand, but that same quality simultaneously allows poets to see many different things in them that can be used as an inspiration to take off in quite different directions. But the term "abstraction" does not quite hit the mark either, if one examines his work. In short: Rilke's abstract constructions are often tantalizingly figurative; and sometimes figurative forms, on being looked at closely, fall back into the abstract.

The flip side to the liberty afforded by Rilke's abstraction is a feeling that sometimes when one sits down to translate a poem by Rilke, it dissolves under one's fingers leaving almost nothing. This suggests that capaciousness might at times be another word for, or married with, technical virtuosity for its own sake. But there is another more concrete interpretation. It is possible that precisely the abstractions of German (much more foreign to the English language) afford opportunities to English language poets. Engaging with Rilke, translating him, responding to him, permits vatic gestures; it permits use of the resonant words, the big effects, without irony. And once one has engaged in such possibilities, one's own tolerance, one's own capacities and one's own language have been stretched.

After these general considerations about what makes Rilke such an attractive model for English language poetry, some examples are necessary. Here I shall focus on more recent reception over the last two decades or so. While it is naturally difficult to generalize over a range of writers and styles, what is particularly noteworthy about this phase of reception, this reincarnation of Rilke, is that poets have been interested not simply in re-translating Rilke for their own historical moment (that is fetching him from one relation to another), and bringing him to bear on contemporary concerns, but also entering into a more profound poetic exchange or conversation with him that also foregrounds their own position within that exchange.

[9]The book is a homophonic translation of Rilke and a homage to the American poet Jack Spicer, especially his *After Lorca* (1957).

Conversations with Rilke

The Scottish poet Don Paterson was born in 1963. His ten collections of poems have been garlanded with prizes, and he was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for poetry in 2009 (compare Pollard; Wilkinson). Translations or versions have been a part of his work right from the beginning. His *The Eyes* of 1999 is written "after Antonio Machado" and is a radical re-versioning of the Spanish poet. He has also engaged with Rimbaud, Dante, Cavafy, Abbas Ibn Al-Ahnaf, Propertius and others, always in an inventive spirit, but not exactly as a translator. His *Orpheus*, a version of Rilke's fifty-five *Sonnets to Orpheus* (Rilke II: 237–272), was published in 2006. In an illuminating "Afterword," and an "Appendix" on the business of versioning, Paterson sets out his intentions with regard to Rilke: "I wanted to make a rhymed English version for my own use . . . one I could memorize and carry around in my head" (*Orpheus* 65). Turning to Rilke's *Sonnets* as a kind of godless metaphysics that "locate[s] all spiritual wonder in the life we lead now," Paterson says he is drawn to the work's "clear pragmatism" its quality as a "plain-speaking manual of practical instruction" (*Orpheus* 66). Elsewhere again, he explains that the *Sonnets* offered a way into thinking about elegy (de Mlinko et al.). In interview too, he explains how he was drawn to the "ideas of Rilke," but also precisely because of Rilke's otherness, because he enjoyed the opportunity of "selfishly taking on someone else's clothes, and manner and rhetoric; arrogating to oneself the bravery to say certain things one wouldn't normally be say in one's own poetry." (Paterson and Dodd).

So here we see an affinity, Paterson himself calls it a "sympathetic magic," with what he reads as Rilke's ideas—the content—but he also simultaneously uses the foreignness of Rilke to stretch his own possibilities of saying. Ultimately, he sees both himself and Rilke responding to the same question from their individual vantage points: "How in heaven's name are we to live, now the soul we have bred into ourselves no longer has a heaven to ascend to" (*Orpheus* 72). This intellectual, or indeed existential, push and pull is echoed in the very business of reinventing Rilke at the linguistic level. Paterson is open about "triangulating" existing translations of Rilke in order to allow him to translate from a language (German) he does not master: the "integrity of the end" (*Orpheus* 81), according to Paterson, justifying the means (de Mlinko et al.). But he acknowledges the difficulties: the "necessary oracularity" of Rilke's poems, he argues, "leaves us with poetry that can only be talked around and about, but not *with*" (*Orpheus* 65). This then is Paterson's attempt to force Rilke into dialogue, to make

him comprehensible in a new tongue. Precisely this has made the project controversial, however, with Michael Schmidt's 2009 article "Anyone seen Rilke?" and a rather defensive piece by Paterson in the *New Statesman* of the same year giving a sense of the scope of debate. The important thing, however, is that we are dealing not with translation in its strictest sense (one of the things that annoys Schmidt), but explicitly with "versions" where, as Paterson says, "your allegiance must switch from the original words to your subjective interpretation of them" (*Orpheus* 75). And indeed, in Paterson's O*rpheus* there is no mention of Rilke on the cover, no parallel text. The poems are titled, rather than numbered as they are by Rilke, thus highlighting the preoccupations (in Paterson's eyes at least) central to each poem. Already, then we see Paterson intervening in our experience of Rilke, staging what he calls a dialogue with the original, talking "with" instead of about the poems.

But the interventions go further. Some of the poems are fairly conservative versions of the Rilke, others take a more oblique approach. In general, the versioning strategies used by the poet tend to make the poems much more personal, more of the here and now and much closer in tone. This might be summarized as a making "immediate," making "personal," and "making present"—that is, as Michael Eskin puts it, "translating Rilke's often removed, impersonal, and epic gestures, into personalized action, unfolding before our very eyes" ("The Poets Fidelity" 64).

An example might be Rilke's sonnet II 5 (II: 259) which conjures the unfolding of an anemone's petals and becomes in Paterson "Anemone" (his title for the poem) (*Orpheus* 35).

Blumenmuskel, der der Anemone
Wiesenmorgen nach und nach erschließt,
bis in ihren Schooß das polyphone
Licht der lauten Himmel sich ergießt,

in den stillen Blütenstern gespannter
Muskel des unendlichen Empfangs,
manchmal so von Fülle übermannter,
daß der Ruhewink des Untergangs

kaum vermag die weitzurückgeschnellten
Blatterränder dir zurückzugeben:
du, Entschluß und Kraft von wieviel Welten!

Wir, Gewaltsamen, wir währen länger.
Aber wann, in welchem aller Leben,
sind wir endlich offen und Empfänger?

Rilke's poem sees in the anemone a largely passive receptacle of infinite receiving ("unendlichen Empfangs"), in line perhaps with the many poems that treat female figures in the same way (Roberts). Focus is on the light and the morning. The flower is presented in largely passive terms: it is "übermannt" ("overwhelmed"), hardly able to be "given back" its petals. The verbs associated with it (übermannt, zurückgeschnellt, erschließen) suggest in tense and form something that has been done and done to it. The mention of the muscle and the lap underline a reading of it as feminine and passive. The focus is instead on the active intervention of the morning, the light pouring into the flower's lap "ergießen" (a pointed rhyme for "erschließen") before the poem moves to "Wir, Gewaltsamen" ("we violent/powerful ones") in the last strophe.

By focusing on the flower's struggle to open ("creaking open" l. 1) and investing it with active verbs, Paterson transforms Rilke's essentially static and passive observation into something more immediate, fluid and filled with action. The flower is "tensed" in Paterson, it "opens," "drowns," is unable to find the "willpower" to "refurl," "heeds" the call. The time and place are also specified giving the sense of immediacy and movement to the poem ("In the meadow" [l.1], "by midday" [l. 3], "sunset" [l.8]). Meter and rhyme are unobtrusive but draw together the sounds of the sonnet giving the whole a sense of vibrancy and resonance. Fittingly, the poem concludes with a reflection on being open as "true receivers" in Paterson's English take on "offen und Empfänger," shifting the passive quality of the verb to receive into an open and exemplary listening to and communing with the universe. The conclusion also bears witness to the way that dialogue can take place, and the status of these versions themselves as vehicles and continuations of such a project: as "open ended enquiries" (*Orpheus* 78), taking up and amplifying Rilke's own interest in the idea. In a letter of 26 June 1914 to Lou Andreas-Salomé, Rilke had identified with a similar flower:

> Ich bin wie die kleine Anemone, die ich einmal in Rom im Garten gesehen habe, sie war tagsüber so weit aufgegangen, daß sie sich zur Nacht nicht mehr schließen konnte. Es war furchtbar sie zu sehen in der dunkeln Wiese, weitoffen, immer noch aufnehmend in den wie rasend aufgerissenen Kelch, mit der vielzuvielen Nacht über sich, die nicht alle wurde.
>
> […] Ich bin auch so heillos nach außen gekehrt, darum auch zerstreut von allem, nichts ablehnend, meine Sinne gehn, ohne mich zu fragen, zu allem Störenden über: ist da ein Geräusch, so geb ich mich auf und bin dieses Geräusch. (Rilke *Briefe* I: 538–39).

[81.156.211.202] Project MUSE (2026-07-03 17:36 GMT)

> I am like the little anemone I once saw in the garden in Rome; it had opened so wide during the day that it could no longer close at night. It was terrible to see it in the dark lawn, wide open, still taking in, through its calyx, which seemed as if frantically torn open, with the all-overpowering night above it without end.
>
> […] I too am as hopelessly turned outward, thus also distracted by everything, refusing nothing, my senses go without asking to every disturbance: whenever there's a noise I give myself up to it, and *am* that noise.[10]

By this stage, however, receiving is accepted as necessary work ("heartwork," as the same letter has it) associated for better or worse with the sensibility of the poet. In such a way, poets because receivers but also transmitters constantly allowing the poem to persist beyond its moment and place. Paterson even argues for a new life, a potential new relevance, for such a poem.

> The strange anomaly—the fact that the translated poem can undergo continuous cultural rebirth, in a way denied to the original—raises the possibility that some poems in translation could, theoretically, end up being *more* central to a culture than that of the language in which they were first conceived. (*Orpheus* 74–75)

Here, for example, for all its focus on the business of poetic inspiration, and the implied sexuality of Paterson's version, it is difficult to read "Anemone" without thinking of ecological threat of the present moment. And indeed, this squares with Paterson's "ecological" reading of the collection as a whole: "The word Earth is the *Sonnets*' heartbeat" (*Orpheus* 72). But beyond that, Paterson's emphasis on "process, activity, and, hence, immediacy of experience," resonates with the *Sonnets*' overall concern with change and transformation (Eskin, "The Poet's Fidelity" 65). Rilke's sonnet II 18, titled in Paterson's version "The Spin" (*Orpheus* 48), might stand as an apt summary of Paterson's overall approach to Rilke and his embrace of an aesthetics of transformation. Rilke's line "… o du Verlegung / alles Vergehens in Gang" might be translated literally as "Oh you transposition / of all dying away into movement." For Paterson it becomes "O translator of all passing / into act." Rilke's apostrophe provides Paterson with the opportunity to comment on his own approach in the very process of executing it.[11] Eskin comments: "The use of 'act' to render 'Gang' is especially significant in the present context [. . .] as if the very act of

[10]My translation.

[11]Eskin also calls it "a general motto for Paterson's overall approach to Rilke and the latter's poetics of existence-*qua*-transformation" ("The Poet's Fidelity" 66).

versioning "Rilke's call" bespoke the translator's acknowledgement of its moral imperative and made good on the paradigmatic injunction to 'change your life' in response to the interpellation of art." ("The Poet's Fidelity" 66).

This reading is, I would argue, supported by decision to call the book *Orpheus* rather than *The Sonnets to Orpheus*. By doing this Paterson keeps the address of the poems open; the book is at once to Orpheus, about Orpheus, and by Orpheus, the god of song or, to put it in a more secular framework, the principle of singing itself. As the poet Mark Doty puts it in a review: "Rilke both sings to Orpheus and ventriloquizes him, creating, in these 55 sonnets, the remarkable sense that it is song itself, finally, that speaks" (Doty).

But one could read this in another, more negative, way. Whereas Rilke's sonnets had transcended bourgeois subjectivity in an exemplary way, Paterson reinscribes it in the emphasis on the here and now and the active participant, and finally the act of the transforming poet. And, moreover, Rilke is eclipsed. To quote Michael Schmidt: "But like Machado before him, Rilke is subsumed in the living poet, nourishing him at whatever cost" (Schmidt).

Paterson is not the only poet to foreground a conversation with Rilke in their versions of his poetry. Jo Shapcott's *Tender Taxes*, a collection of versions of Rilke's poems in French, was published in 2001 and attempts to bring Rilke into the realities of the here and now. Shapcott was born in 1958 in the UK and is also a winner of the prestigious Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry. Her fourth collection, her only translation so far, refers to what she calls "the tender and taxing conversation" held with Rilke over a decade as Shapcott worked on, and with, his *The Valaisian Quatrains* and the sequences "Windows" and "Roses" from the 1926 collection *Vergers* (*Orchards*), each of which furnish a section of her collection (Shapcott, xi). As Shapcott comments: "What transpired was not translation: my poems became instead responses, arguments, even dramatizations. I have called them versions here, reluctantly. We don't have the word for this kind of exchange" (ix). And the concluding section of poems, "Tender Taxes" (83–98) is a sustained dialogue with a "you" that is at once Rilke, a lover, the angel and poetry itself. The poems, like Paterson's poems, are more often written in response to Rilke's originals than offering direct translations: for example, in Shapcott's "Roses" sequence the roses themselves "speak to the originals."

> My roses are given their own voice. They speak. And if you put my poems alongside Rilke's, more often than not you'll find my roses addressing his,

> saying, in effect: "It's not like that it's like this." […] Finally though, just as I believe Rilke's roses to be one extended love poem, so mine became the same and, in the end, a love poem to him. (x)

This sense of dialogue with the original poem and poet and elsewhere "arguments with Rilke," and a dramatization of voices (as of for example "a drunk guy in a hotel room, Philip Marlowe the detective") mean that the poems rarely square one to one with the French originals (Shapcott and Leeder). Some begin as translations, but others take up motifs from the French poem and combine or vary them. So, for example, Shapcott's poem "Dinner with Rilke" starts as a translation of Rilke's third of his 1924 *Orchards (Vergers* V: 10–12)

> Reste tranquille, si soudain
> L'Ange à ta table se décide;
> efface doucement les quelques rides
> que fait la nappe sous ton pain.
>
> Tu offriras ta rude nourriture,
> Pour qu'il en goûte à son tour,
> Et qu'il soulève à la lèvre pure
> Un simple verre de tous les jours.

For comparison, poet Paul Batchelor offers an excellent translation that follows the rhymes and nuances of the original (Batchelor 91) and offers helpful perspective.[12]

> Rest easy should you find
> an angel at your table: these things happen.
> Make sure the wine is open,
> smooth the tablecloth, and never mind
>
> that our food must seem gross
> to so refined a palate. Let him eat.
> Let him raise a humble glass
> to those exquisite lips. He will be glad of it.

Already here one sees additions and changes that give the Rilke poem a sense of immediacy and familiarity in its new home. The aside "these things happen" (l. 2) for "soudain," for example, removes the shock of the arrival of the angel into the everyday, underlined by the "rest easy" and "never mind," and almost pointing forward to the "de tous les jours" in the final line of the French. The original balances the

[12]Selected poems from sequence appeared in *Oxford Poets Anthology* as listed in the Bibliography. They have now been reworked and expanded for future publication. I cite from the manuscript which I am grateful to the poet for making available.

purity of the angelic realm with the crudity of the human (in the juxtaposition of "pur" and "rude"). The English continues that balance. But the vocabulary ("gross," "refined," "humble," and "exquisite") moves into a human and quite sensory realm. Striking in the second strophe is the extension from the French subjective ("pour que") into a much more immediate future in the English. This is brought home also by the confident final clause missing in the French: "He will be glad of it." This phrase, along with "let him eat," renders the much more delicately imagined tasting and rising of a glass to the angel's lips into something more solidly real. It also implies a mutuality in the angel having accepted the offering and the finding pleasure in the human. Notable too is the confidence of the implied you in the poem who encounters the sublime assured that that meeting will serve both.

Jo Shapcott takes this sense of mutual encounter further but in a different mood (91). There are some small additions in the first two strophes: so, for example, where the angel of Rilke's poem is simply deciding to grace your table with his presence ("à ta table se decide"), in Shapcott's version the angel is already there but deciding whether to "love you." The lyric subject's gentle smoothing out the wrinkles in the tablecloth (l. 3) is exquisitely visualized as an act of nervous anxiety. This is extended into the lyric subject's keeping "stock still" (l. 1) and observing the angel without appearing to. These are the actions of someone observing or hunting: who does not want to frighten a wild creature away, alert a quarry, or does not themselves want to be seen. There is also something potentially flirtatious in the gesture, picking up on the word "love." In the second strophe, the striking addition of "watch beauty" aligns with this sense of a covert witness of a fleeting and beguiling bodily moment. The French places that moment partly into the realm of the mystic (bread and wine are mentioned) while maintaining the everyday; but also suggests the moment of poetic inspiration. Both translations follow the French in suggesting the encounter with a secularized version of the divine and suggesting also an interpretation that prioritizes poetic inspiration. The mood though is quite different. In Batchelor's translation, the focus is on the angel. The "you" is curtailed: simply making sure the wine is open rather than offering anything or indeed anything of himself. The final vision imagines the very human enjoyment of the angel. In Shapcott the encounter is met with apprehension and a certain amount of subterfuge: the pretending not to be watching, the casual offering of food (over an exquisite line break), as if one might at any moment either dispel the vision or be overwhelmed

[81.156.211.202] Project MUSE (2026-07-03 17:36 GMT)

by it. Batchelor projects into a confident future; Shapcott does the opposite. She adds a final strophe, absent in the French as a kind of effacing denouement.[13]

The first line of this bold intervention into Rilke's poem suggests that the lyric subject "cannot help" itself has two possible meanings. On one level, it suggests that the "you" is beyond help in the dangerous intensity of the encounter. On another, it might mean that the "you" has been knowingly reckless, abandoning their carefully maintained distance and revealing themselves, or revealing their desire, too fully, and thus rendering themselves in turn helpless. The angel is emphatically humanized in its avidity and sexual appetites: "for . . . eating, / kissing," but also displays a larger and more exorbitant threat. It will do "everything," "anything," (l. 11), not only to take what is offered but take over the "you" of the poem and its larger context: "to repossess your house." (1. 12).

This final interpolated strophe captures well the intimacy of lyric (and sexual) exchange but also the threat of loss associated with the transaction. It is at once figured as a love affair, but also a literary encounter, thus possibly conjuring the specter of the "anxiety" of a female poet writing in, but also attempting to write against, a male tradition. The final page of the collection would seem to support this; it is given over to a single line quotation from Borges, which speaks of intimacy but also the potential loss of mutual possession: "I do not know which of us has written the page" (Shapcott 100). One might think of the "tristia" that comes from too violent and transforming a possession in George Steiner's *After Babel*, but the overtones of carnivorous enjoyment in the Rilke poem speak of a greater threat: an evacuation, even a silencing.[14] To "repossess" a house, is after all, to withdraw an agreed tenancy and to remove the right to belong there at all. And yet Shapcott has in fact re-possessed Rilke's house in the act of building a discussion of gendered authorship, a love affair and indeed a new strophe, into her version of his poem.

[13]According to a note included in the *Kommentierte Ausgabe* edition, an early draft of the poem included a third strophe: "Ingénuement, en ouvrier céleste, / il prête à tout une calme attention; / il mange bien en imitant ton geste, / pour bien bâtir à ta maison." (*Werke, Supplementband* 461). This three-stophe version is also included in Alfred Poulin's volume of translations as an independent poem: "Ingenious celestial carpenter, / he lends all a calm attention; / he eats well, imitating your gesture, / so he can build well on your house" (89). Shapcott is undoubtedly responding to this.

[14]Steiner (1975) traces a four-stage process of interpretation: trust, aggression, incorporation, compensation.

Rendering Rilke

Following the lead of Paterson, Batchelor and Shapcott especially, I would like to examine a number of recent works that take the exchange with Rilke to a new level, that is they continue this kind of transformation to its logical corollary, translating Rilke into their own world, context and language, repossessing him.

Experimental Australian poet Chris Edwards's (b. 1955) sequence *O sonata* published in 2016 is a series of homophonic renditions of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*. As an inside page makes clear, the word "rendition" comes from the early 17th century French "render, the modern "rendre" meaning "give back" or "render." The various contemporary meanings of "rendition" range from a performance of a dramatic role or piece; to a representation or reproduction; a translation or transliteration and include "extraordinary rendition": "the practice of sending back a foreign nation covertly to be interrogated in a country with less rigorous regulations for the humane treatment of prisoners" (*O sonata* n. p.) Edwards's "renditions" of Rilke are in themselves extraordinary and offer a very productive new interpretative lens on the business of translation, or more accurately, transliteration and transmogrification of the original German, which is printed alongside.

Dramatizing the mythic role of Orpheus as "futile Male," from the phrase "Ein für alle Male" in l. 5 of Rilke's I. 5 (*O sonata* Poem 5), the sequence also gives Eurydice a voice, to offer a rewriting of gender roles. But over and above that, Edwards's renditions deliberately mistranslate, transliterate and obscure, in order to interrogate the lyric impulse. To follow the idiom for a moment, one might ask whether Rilke and his words are being held hostage in a foreign realm or being performed anew? Edwards is not a confident German-speaker, and this is vital to the style and substance of *O sonata*. The poems start as homophonic transliterations, self-consciously detached from semantic content of the German, in a way that likely only a non-speaker would attempt, but become looser as they go, also branching out to reveal all kinds of word play. As Edwards comments: particular words "jumped out, making their own arrangements talking to one another," with Rilke an "innocent bystander," and one might add, Edwards at times too ("On Rilke"). For the bilingual reader of the texts, it feels strangely as if Rilke's Oprheus, Rilke even, has been kidnapped by what "Rilke rendition 1" (a version of Rilke's first sonnet) calls a "verse-writing gang" of students of "Aust Lit" (an especially enjoyable mis-translation of "aus List" from the same sonnet) on the rampage through a literary underworld peopled by the poetic debris of the twentieth century.

Rejected, in any case, is "the lot, dross, old shoes fit for anyone who hoards them" in the last line of the same poem: a version of Rilke's "da schufst du ihnen Tempel im Gehör" (*O sonata* Poem 1).

But the sequence constantly reflects on duality and its revision as reciprocal. Poem 31, for example, comments "With someone one Goes waltzing, with oneself one wanders off"; suggesting that the cycle as a whole is a dance, and a comment on its own processes, even as it charts the "long climb from Hades." As Thornback observes: "Edwards invites us to see how syntax has the power to unhinge and re-charge, the liberal capitalization of words injecting the unexpected and signaling pause" (Thornback). This process destroys any sense of wholeness and means that, as a reader, one is delivered with the poem into the "vortex" which is the "in-between-ness" between Rilke's originals and the new poems, as Poem I has it: "a vortex // Turning on the same old Still point—we *really* tore up / that dungeon" (*O sonata* Poem 1). The metaphoric violence implied by the extraordinary rendition of Rilke into this place forces us to consider what it means to translate at all, what it means to read poetry in translation and what that question in turn reveals about what poetry can do. Edwards himself reflects:

> These sonnets are very loosely based on Rainer Maria Rilke's Sonette an Orpheus 1, 1–11. They might at a stretch be called mistranslations, though I haven't approached Rilke with homophony in mind, the way the Zukofskys approached Catullus, or I did Mallarmé in parts of *A Fluke*. In spite of my one year of German at high school, I'm never quite sure what Rilke's words sound like, let alone what more than a few of them mean—all I have to go on are the letters, which seem weirdly and wonderfully addressed to me: single letters, especially those Rilke has capitalized, like "O" or "W" in the first stanza of the first sonnet, but also consonant clusters like 'st" or "b . . . m" along with names like "Orpheus" and words like "Angst." Some, frankly, are suggestive. Others are enough to transmogrify a person—into Frankenstein's monster? You be the judge. If I've "responded" to the German's secret experiments, all very well. But the results in this case—So Not Orpheus, so not Rilke—are also, I feel compelled to imagine, "renditions" in all senses of the word, including the most extraordinary.[15]

[15]Edwards, "So not Orpheus"; Chris Edwards' *A Fluke* is billed as "A Mistranslation of Stéphane Mallarmé's 'Un Coup de dés with parallel French pretext," and was published by Monogene in 2005.

In Poem 2 Edwards acknowledges the futility of translation.[16] He takes as his springboard the final tercet of Rilke's second sonnet: "Wo ist ihr Tod O, wirst du dies Motiv / erfinden noch, eh sich dein Lied verzehrte? — / Wo sinkt sie hin aus mir? … Ein Mädchen fast …" (II: 241). Rendered across the page it becomes: "what a Toad is? Well, with links like these you'd have Motive. / As for that Big Stink we approach—again —it's Lies they tell me / to fix myself fast to . . . We're here, Madam. My chain . . ." (*O sonata* Poem 2). His response to the "Big Stink" is, as one poem has it, a "Frankenstein," yet one that every so often sheds glancing light on the original and constantly undermines the institutions of literature that seek to regulate the poetic. In Poem 7, for example, we dimly see the staging of Eurydice's return to the underworld but also, in the pairing of "verboten and adieu," a poignant rendition of the fragility of mortality and the human inability to redeem that.

> Any old
> Gods still lurking in the Shadows should be news by now
>
> Bid *verboten* and *adieu*. Your best alternative lingers in this here
> remedy for Turning: *Do not default*. The remainder's a black
> hole hollering Hey, Frankenstein, halt!

Against "the black / hole hollering" comes the injunction of the cycle which seems to be to meet the poetic and existential: "*Do not default*." Its power is underlined by the rhyme with "halt," which again harks back to the myth of Orpheus descending into the underworld for Eurydice. How this multiple refraction between the German and the English version works in detail can best be seen by comparing the poem that responds to Rilke's II.5 discussed above with reference to Paterson (*O sonata* Poem 31).

[16]One could compare Lightman (2019). The back note explains: "This piece was a special collage/remix/rewrite made to perform at the Scottish Poetry Library, October 1st 2019, for the Vespers reading series. It arose from a collaboration with Scottish poet Alan Riach, whom Ira Lightman first met in New Zealand in 1991. The piece set an atmosphere for Alan to read his own poems about New Zealand, creating a sympathetic energy both about New Zealand and about the post-New American Poetry poetics of the line interesting to both poets and prevalent certainly in 90s NZ. It enlists guest readers and audience participation, in a multi-vocal celebration of selected sonnets of Rilke and Orpheus, alongside remixed ditties from Ira's Twitter feed, alongside his own poem of first arrival in Wellington, New Zealand, in 1990. The poem can now be tested alongside many New Zealand poems or poetry sequences, pausing every double-page spread for the guest poem to be recited."

[81.156.211.202] Project MUSE (2026-07-03 17:36 GMT)

Bloomin' muscles, they're their own worst Enemy
when some morning, or night after night with the searchlight,
the bivalves here at the School of polyphonic
Light deride what the lutenist Himself is in search of a ghost

that in the still Blathersphere of his den gets the spanner
Muscle distended into unendingly Empathetic works,
much as if it were *so* Full of overmatter that many
Rude wink directed at all that hard slog the Undergang

came back to do or show was just guesswork Battering
the Blunt rear end of the zoo: Who goes there:
you, Enters shuffling, and the Kraft one weaves! Well then!

With someone one Goes waltzing, with oneself one wanders off.
And *when*, in what alchemical Lab, did the end of the world
ever come so often so Emphatically?

A detailed discussion goes beyond the scope of this piece, but beyond the humorous riffing ("Blumenmuskel, der der Anemone" / "Bloomin' muscles, they're their own worst Enemy"), it is interesting the extent to which the poem both follows the arc of the original but also entertains the apocalyptic anxiety of the Paterson version too: "in what alchemical Lab, did the end of the world / ever come so often so Emphatically?."

American Tommye Blount is a young queer Black American poet from Detroit, a Finalist for a National Book Award in 2020 with his *Fantasia for the Man in Blue*, published that year. His poem "Arcane Torso on Grindr" turns to Rilke's most famous sonnet and renders it into a bluntly twenty-first century meditation on sexuality and identity (96).

We cannot know his legendary head,
now hidden by a peach. Yet his torso,
all ink and Equinox, is backlit from inside
the phone: hard math; a circuitry of low

fires—sexy algorithm. Otherwise
the flexed bicep could not dazzle me so, nor could
his cum-gutter's v, his barely-shaved thighs,
nor his bottle rocket all set to flare.

Not on this phone, he doesn't have any face
pics to trade, nothing above the shoulders.
But his chest—bury my face in that fur!

Would not he, were it not for the cropped selfie,
arouse like a porn star. He says *your place*
or mine. I must lie about my life.

Here the poem extrapolates the famously sexual vitality of the headless statue in Rilke's "Archaïscher Torso Appollo" (I: 513) by transferring the scene from a museum to a profile on Grindr. The head is still missing, this time as a "cropped selfie" with a peach emoji to disguise the statuesque poser's identity. The mysterious dark center of Rilke's poem, "jene[r] Mitte, die die Zeugung trug," becomes in Blount's poem "the bottle rocket all set to flare": one of several explicit physical images. The famously transforming inner light of Rilke's poem is also taken up, but this time cunningly pivoted across a line break ("backlit from inside / the phone") to be robbed of its transcendent power. But a certain force is still there, reaching across the lines, as the poem culminates in an (implicit) invitation to change one's life, truncated and rendered bathetic in the throwaway "your place / or mine."

What is perhaps interesting is that the poem follows into the aftermath of the famous injunction that projects beyond the poem to address the reader in Rilke's original. Here the energy shifts from the work of art that bursts "wie ein Stern" ("like a star") in Rilke and is transmuted to "arouse like a porn star" in Blount. It is unclear whether the "call" will be taken up in the poem itself. Lying about one's life might imply making an excuse as to why one cannot follow; or more likely the opposite, why one's life (or simply one's own domestic arrangements) would not prove hospitable to a sexual adventure. The changed life, for better or worse, is thus the posited fictional life beyond the poem.

For all that Blount renders Rilke in a way some might find offensive or jarring, it is also fascinating how closely he follows structures of the original poem while it ends up leading somewhere quite new. The first line, "We cannot know his legendary head," is a direct translation of the Rilke and borrows Stephen Mitchell's translation of the first line of the sonnet before tipping into the bathetic "hidden by a peach" (Rilke, *Ahead of all Parting* 487). The poem continues by precisely echoing the argumentative arc of the Rilke: "Aber" ("yet") (l. 2); "sonst" ("otherwise") (l. 5); "sonst stünde" ("nor, could") (l. 9); "und bräche nicht" ("would not") (l. 12) exactly placed as the German and stretching the English syntax to accommodate the mounting energy of the original. Indeed, it follows exactly the daring runover of lines 4–5 across the first strophe break and the intensifying energy of the second strophe caught in the enjambement. It is a sonnet, rhymed, though not quite following Rilke's rhyme pattern. And there are a few striking images that also conjure a notable density of sound: "all ink and Equinox" focuses the thin "i"-sounds of the first strophe, for

example. Interestingly, the poem is also focused on the torso and its (tattooed?) allure; which seems to operate both mathematically, mechanically ("hard math; a circuitry of low / fires," "sexy algorithm"), but also to invoke a power beyond itself, perhaps justifying the curious "arcane" of the title. After all, the moment of imagined intimacy comes not in the explicit iteration of sexuality borrowed from pornography (ll. 6–8) but in an image of the subject wishing to bury his head in the chest of the man he is looking at.

In his note to the poem, Blount acknowledges that it "steals from Rainer Maria Rilke's 'Archaic Torso of Apollo'" (Blount 141). In truth, close scrutiny also reveals a debt to Stephen Mitchell's translation of Rilke. The rhyme scheme is used exactly, with only three small alternations: Mitchell's "flared" (l. 8) becomes "flare"; his "defaced" (l. 9) becomes "face" and in a paradigmatic shift from the twentieth to the twenty-first century "itself" (l. 9) become "selfie." The poem thus engages in its own algorithms or "hard math" to translate the formal architecture of Mitchell's translation of Rilke's poem into a new form too.

Blount's poem thus renders the image of famous stone torso in Rilke's poem into a staged camera image. It also demotes the meaningful encounter with the revered work of art to a chance swipe, moving across the centuries and from a museum into a phone app. that in many ways epitomizes casual, indeed meaningless, encounter. In this shift, the almost religious power of Rilke's artistic injunction is secularized into the sexual and likely prompts not change but existential evasion. But "Arcane Torso on Grindr" goes further, by actually inhabiting Rilke's poem, or rather the translation of it, and changing it from the inside. It is as if Blount has taken the architecture of the poem and created a new story within it. Bizarrely, one almost feels Rilke's poem still alive in the version, but subdued. The result takes further the tendencies noted in Paterson, Shapcott and even Edwards. One is reminded of the charge against Paterson's approach to Rilke that is reinscribed a bourgeois particularity; and of Shapcott's poem in which a subject gets dangerously usurped (repossessed) in a more than sexual encounter; or Edwards' renditions in which Rilke's language shines through the most extreme trans-literation. Here Rilke is truly rendered, repossessed and repurposed.

Conclusion

It is perhaps inevitable that over the course of time the course of reception will follow an arc of respect, critique, absorption and change as posterity becomes more confident in handling the legacy, more confident about meeting it as an equal. But fascinating, nevertheless, is the extent to which Rilke is quite violently transformed in these poems from a conversation in Paterson, to a loving but consuming encounter in Shapcott, the rendition of Edwards across international borders to be interrogated for its relevance to the here and now, and finally the kind of X-ray evisceration in Blount. Clearly the different versions of Rilke that have emerged over the last few years speak also to the needs of the moment and illuminate that moment. The struggle with belief so present for Rilke here makes way for a kind of handbook of a secular given; language is more active and earth-bound, even banal, while worrying at those abstractions and absolutes so foreign to it. The poems adumbrate issues that are the currency of our moment (eco-critical awareness, gender awareness, bodiliness, the possibilities of communication) while also actually offering versions of the Rilke. Finally, where in Rilke the merely subjective was gone, the poems serving a meaning innocent of the confessional that directly or obliquely dominates the mainstream Anglophone poetry today, these poems reinscribe that sensibility into the poems, even to the point of entering the poems as new subjects. This renders the poems perhaps more than ever SELFIES, selfies of the poets but also selfies of our moment. But in that foray into the fabric of the verse the contemporary poets are also acutely aware of their own transformative actions. In the dialogue with Rilke, they change and are changed.

By way of a coda I shall point to one further poem, this time by a young German poet and musician, Ulrike Almut Sandig (b. 1979), to demonstrate that some of the same shifts in approaches to Rilke have taken place the German tradition, in a less violent vein. She turns again to Rilke's French "rose" poems and again thematizes encounter; but marries the intensity of sympathetic attraction explored in Rilke's poem with a modern incarnation of "Rilke for Ravers" (Sandig).

> J'ai une telle conscience de ton
> être, rose complète,
> que mon consentement te confond
> avec mon coeur en fête.
>
> Je te respire comme si tu étais,
> rose, toute la vie,
> et je me sens l'ami parfait
> d'une telle amie. (Rilke *Supplementband* 118)

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Rilke's poem commonly known as "La rose complète" addresses the rose and celebrates a marriage of intellect and feeling, but also the perfect friendship that reaches across the distinction between human and natural world. The dense work with sound and AB–AB rhyme enacts a kind of total and perfect unity that is captured in the chiastic inversion of the final two lines "l'ami parfait / d'une telle amie." Sandig's response "Vollkommene Rose" ("Perfect Rose") acknowledges her "untreues Nachdichten" ("unfaithful adaptation"). Faced with the impossibility of rendering both content and form simultaneously in translation, she throws the content overboard and focusses on "die schönen Reime" ("the lovely rhymes"). It certainly shifts Rilke into a present very alien to him and his time: with the "coeur en fête" ("joyous heart") provoking "partytauglichem Herz" ("heart for partying") and the "respire" ("breathe") of the French translating into a snorted line of cocaine.

ich schwing mit deinem Wesen
vollkommene Rose, auf 230 Megahertz
mein Einvernehmen will dich lesen
mit partytauglichem Herz.

ich saug dich ein, als seist du, Rose
die Line fürs ganze Leben
und spür mich in perfekter Pose
zu deinem Tanze, Rose, beben.

Your inner being so touches me
that at 230 MHz we vibrate together
oh perfect rose, our inner sympathy
reads you as a right-on raver.

I snort you up as though, oh rose
you were a once in a lifetime line
and quiver in the perfect pose
to dance, oh rose, to your tune.

In fact, though, beyond updating the externals, Sandig's "Perfect Rose" returns to and reimagines the central sympathy between Rilke's lyric subject and the rose. She calls her poem a "transadaptation" resulting in "vom Original völlig verschiedene Gedichte, über die die Gegenwart hereingebrochen ist" ("poem[s] filtered through the present day, and totally different from the original") (Sandig). This process is figured in a contemporary image: a vibration of 230 Megahertz, which is the resonance of rose oil. But the poem does not stop there, it plays with the ambiguity of the "you" of the poem to suggest a further reading as addressing also a resonance with Rilke. The poem comments on its own processes in that it too "dances to the tune" of the original,

replicating the rhyme scheme and form and quivering with a kind of reciprocity across the encounter between poems and poets. This poem was first published in 2024 as part of a series of columns commissioned by the Goethe Institute in praise of translation and the role of the translator. It has now also been taken up into a new anthology, edited by Norbert Hummelt and Jan Wagner, *Tanzt die Orange: 100 Antworten auf Rilke* (2025, 207). The anthology was prompted by the call to a "Who's Who" of contemporary German poets to translate Rilke into their own time, their own idiom, "in die eigene Stimme zu übersetzen," as the publisher's website puts it.[17] This movement across borders and centuries, across countries and idioms suggests that the fascination continues and the responses that Rilke provokes will continue too.

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