

This Interpreted World: Towards a Bewildered Poetics of the Intellect
Samuel Hughes

Welcome to the handout for my class! Here you'll find the poems that I'm going to talk about. Also, since I didn't have to worry about actually printing these, I've included some bonus material as well: mostly, some extra sections from the Anne Carson pieces, and some of the prose that's informed my ideas about Rilke. If you leave the class wanting to know more, check it out, or (and) drop me a line at shughes0212@gmail.com

Yours,
Sam

*Spanish Dancer*¹

As on all its sides a kitchen-match darts white
flickering tongues before it bursts into flame:
with the audience around her, quickened, hot,
her dance begins to flicker in the dark room.

And all at once it is completely fire.

One upward glance and she ignites her hair
and, whirling faster and faster, fans her dress
into passionate flames, til it becomes a furnace
from which, like startled rattlesnakes, the long
naked arms uncoil, aroused and clicking.

And then: as if the fire were too tight
around her body, she takes and flings it out
haughtily, with an imperious gesture,
and watches: it lies raging on the floor,
still blazing up, and the flames refuse to die—.
Till, moving with total confidence and a sweet
exultant smile, she looks up finally
and stamps it out with powerful small feet.

¹ All Rilke from *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*. tr. Stephen Mitchell, introduction by Robert Hass. Vintage Books, New York, NY, 1984.

Archaic Torso of Apollo

We cannot know his legendary head
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,

gleams in all its power. Otherwise
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs
to that dark center where procreation flared.

Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:

would not, from all the borders of itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.

The First Elegy

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels' hierarchies? and even if one of them pressed me suddenly against his heart: I would be consumed in that overwhelming existence. For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we still are just able to endure, and we are so awed because it serenely disdains to annihilate us. Every angel is terrifying.

And so I hold myself back and swallow the call-note of my dark sobbing. Ah, whom can we ever turn to in our need? Not angels, not humans, and already the knowing animals are aware that we are not really at home in our interpreted world. Perhaps there remains for us some tree on a hillside, which every day we can take into our vision; there remains for us yesterday's street and the loyalty of a habit so much at ease when it stayed with us that it moved in and never left.

Oh and night: there is night when a wind full of infinite space gnaws at our faces. Whom would it not remain for—that longed-after, mildly disillusioning presence, which the solitary heart so painfully meets. Is it any less difficult for lovers?

Don't you know *yet*? Fling the emptiness out of your arms into the spaces we breathe; perhaps the birds will feel the expanded air with more passionate flying.

Yes—the springtimes needed you. Often a star was waiting for you to notice it. A wave rolled toward you out of the distant past, or as you walked under an open window, a violin yielded itself to you hearing. All this was mission. But could you accomplish it? Weren't you always distracted by expectation, as if every event announced a beloved? (Where can you find a place to keep her, with all the huge strange thoughts inside you going and coming and often staying all night.)

CI

*Multas per gentes et multa per aequora vectus
advento has miseris, frater, ad inferias
ut te postremo donarem munere mortis
et mutam nequiquam alloquerer cinerem.
quandoquidem fortuna mihi te abstulit ipsum,
heu miser indigne frater adempte mihi,
nunc tamen interea haec, prisco quae more parentum
tradita sunt tristi munere ad inferias,
accipe frater, ne multum manantia fleu
atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale.*

² Carson, Anne. *Nox*. New Directions, 2010.

multas

multus multa multum adjective

[cf. Gk μάλα, MELIOR] numerous, many, many of, many a; many people, many, many women, the ordinary people, the many especially in phrase *unus de multis*: one of many; many things, much, to a great extent, many words especially in elliptical phrases e.g. *quid multa? ne multa*: to cut a long story short; an abundance of, much, large, *multum est*: it is of value; appearing or acting on many occasions, assiduous, regular, used many times; (of persons) too much in evidence, tedious, wearisome, verbose; occurring in a high degree, full, intense, *multa dies* or *multa lux*: broad daylight, *multa nox*: late in the night, perhaps too late.

1.0. I wanted to fill my elegy with light of all kinds. But death makes us stingy. There is nothing more to be expended on that, we think, he's dead. Love cannot alter it. Words cannot add to it. No matter how I try to evoke the starry lad he was, it remains a plain, odd history. So I began to think about history.

multa

see above *multus multa multum*

1.3 Herodotos is an historian who trains you as you read. It is a process of asking, searching, collecting, doubting, striving, testing, blaming and above all standing amazed at the strange things humans do. Now by far the strangest thing that humans do - he is firm on this - is history. This asking. For often it produces no clear or helpful account, in fact people are satisfied with the most bizarre forms of answering, e.g. the Skythians who, when Herodotos endeavours to find out from them the size of the Skythian population, point to a bowl that stands at Exampaios. It is made of the melted down arrowheads required of each Skythian by their king Ariantes on pain of death. Herodotos describes the bowl, what else can he do?

Six times as big as the one set up by Pausanias at the entrance to the Black Sea. For anyone who hasn't seen that I'll say this: you could easily pour 600 amphoras into the Skythian bowl and the metal has a thickness of 6 fingers.
(4.81)

indigne

indigne adverb

[INDIGNUS+E] contrary to one's deserts, undeservedly; in an unworthy manner, unbecomingly, shamefully, outrageously, etc.; *indigne ferre* to be indignant at, take ill, resent; (in the context of *amor*) without return; (with *nox*) blushing.

7.1. I want to explain about the Catullus poem (101). Catullus wrote poem 101 for his brother who died in the Troad. Nothing at all is known of the brother except his death. Catullus appears to have travelled from Verona to Asia Minor to stand at the grave. Perhaps he recited the elegy there. I have loved this poem since the first time I read it in high school Latin class and I have tried to translate it a number of times. Nothing in English can capture the passionate, slow surface of a Roman elegy. No one (even in Latin) can approximate Catullan diction, which at its most sorrowful has an air of deep festivity, like one of those trees that turns all its leaves over, silver, in the wind. I never arrived at the translation I would have liked to do of poem 101. But over the years of working at it, I came to think of translating as a room, not exactly an unknown room, where one gropes for the light switch. I guess it never ends. A brother never ends. I prowl him. He does not end.

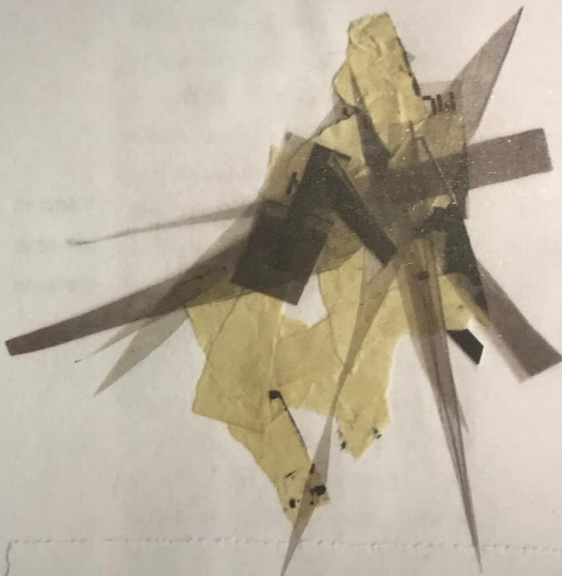


frater

see above *frater fratris*

Prowling the meanings of a word, prowling the history of a person, no use expecting a flood of light. Human words have no main switch. But all those little kidnaps in the dark. And then the luminous, big, shivering, discarded, unrepentant, barking web of them that hangs in your mind when you turn back to the page you were trying to translate.

mihi
see above *ego*



What if you made a collection of lexical entries, as someone who is asked to come up with a number for the population of the Skythians might point to the bowl at Exampaiois.

Sugar City, Colorado

Love makes you an anthropologist of your own life. What are these ceremonies and why should we take part in them? What is this language we have got backed up into on long worst fire nights like a bad translation? It is important to keep recording the dialect forms, tracking the idioms. Yes there is a violence in it. *Ask the badger for its hide*, says classical Chinese wisdom. A dialect will sound like your own language to you, only despoiled somehow, hung up by the tail. Late at night I sit in the truck transcribing my notes by flashlight, tape quality is poor. There is a nucleus of terms I never get right. (Pleasure). “Pleasure? You know what pleasure is—fun.” “Is pleasure important?” “Yes.” “Is language important to pleasure?” “No.” “When you say, Enjoy me, what does that mean?” “Means I want you to have pleasure too.” “Who am I?” “You? My partner. We’re such good partners,” he mumbles by now falling asleep—*then why am I so utterly alone?* But the tape broke before this.

³ Carson, Anne. *Plainwater: essays and poetry*. Vintage Contemporaries, 2000.

Peaks clamber onto peaks. Up over the shoulders of the mountains like eager tourists clouds come pressing. The emperor is cheerful after a night of luxuries. Although the love act with its various names does not interest me very much, I am by now a plausible anthropologist of his pleasure. “Make me your toy,” he says. “Make me something special for yourself.” I give thought to this while floating above the aspen trees. Hedonism comes naturally to men. At the sound of a key turning, a man has locks all over his body. But women are numb or liars or never stop thinking, you can not make me stop thinking. *Does a Flower Love to Have Its Ovary Sucked by a Bee?* is the title given by the Hades emperor of China to a treatise he composed during his camping trip of 1553. The scroll is very beautiful. So far as we know on the whole, a flower does not, he decided.

(from the introduction)

I lived alone for a long time.

What happened to me after that takes the form of a love story, not so different from other love stories, except better documented. Love is, as you know, a harrowing event. I believed in taking an anthropological approach to that.

Even now it is hard to admit how love knocked me over. I had lived a life protected from all surprise, now suddenly I was a wheel running downhill, a light thrown against a wall, paper blown flat in the ditch. I was outside my own language and customs. Why, the first time he came to my house he walked straight into the back room and came out and said, “You have a very narrow bed.” Just like that! I had to laugh. I hardly knew him. I wanted to say, Where I come from, people don’t talk about beds, except children’s or sickbeds. But I didn’t. Humans in love are terrible. You see them come hungering at one another like prehistoric wolves, you see something struggling for life in between them like a root or a soul and it flares for a moment, then they smash it. The difference between them smashed the bones out. So delicate the bones. “Yes, it is very narrow,” I said. And just at that moment, I felt something running down the inside of my leg. I had not bled for thirteen years.

Love is a story that tells itself—fortunately. I don’t like romance and have no talent for lyrical outpourings—yet I found myself during the days of my love affair filling many notebooks with data. There was something I had to explain to myself. I traveled into it like a foreign country, noted its behaviors, transcribed its idioms, prowled like an anthropologist for the rare and unwary use of a kinship term. But kinship itself jumped like a frog leg, then lay silent. I found the kinship between a man and a woman can be a steep, whole, excellent thing and full of languages. Yet it may have no speech. Does that make sense?

...

The man who named my narrow bed was a quiet person, but he had good questions. “I suppose you do love me, in your way,” I said to him one night close to dawn when we lay on the narrow bed. “And how else should I love you—in your way?” he asked. I am still thinking about that.

Man is this and woman is that, men do this and women do different things, woman wants one thing and man wants something else and nobody down the centuries appears to understand how this should work.

Appendix: On Rilke

(from a letter by Rilke to his wife, concerning Rodin)

Le modelé [...] is the character of the surfaces, more or less in contrast to the contours. It is the law and the relationship of these surfaces [...] For [Rodin] there is only *le modelé*... in all things, in all bodies; he detaches it from them, into an independent thing, that is, into sculpture, into a plastic work of art. For this reason, a piece of arm and leg and body is for him a whole, an entity, because he no longer thinks of arm, leg, body (that would seem to him too much like subject matter, do you see, too—novelistic, so to speak), but only of a *modelé* which completes itself, which is, in a certain sense, finished, rounded off. The following was extraordinarily illuminating in this respect [...] He took [a snail shell] in his hand, smiled, admired it, examined it and said suddenly: *Voilà le modelé grec*. I understood at once. He said further: *vous savez, ce n'est pas la forme de l'objet, mais: le modelé*... Then still another snail shell came to light, broken and crushed... :—*C'est le modelé gothique-renaissance*, said Rodin [...] And what he meant was more or less: It is a question for me, that is for the sculptor par excellence, of seeing or studying not the colors or the contours but that which constitutes the plastic, the surfaces. The character of these, whether they are rough or smooth, shiny or dull (not in color but in character!). Things are infallible here. This little snail recalls the greatest works of Greek art: it has the same simplicity, the same smoothness, the same inner radiance, the same cheerful and festive sort of surface... And herein things are infallible! They contain laws in their purest form. Even the *breaks* in such a shell will again be of the same kind, will again be *modelé grec*. This snail will always remain a whole, as regards its *modelé*, and the smallest piece of snail is still always *modelé grec*...

[...] He was silent for a while and said then... *Oui, il faut travailler, rien que travailler. Et il faut avoir patience*. One should not think of wanting to make something, one should try only to build up one's own medium of expression and to say everything. One should work and have patience.

(pp. 28-30)

Rilke, Rainer Maria. "To Clara Rilke, from 11 rue Toullier, Paris, 5 September 1902." Selected Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke. Edited by Harry T. Moor. Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY, 1960. pp. 27-31

(from Robert Musil's eulogy for Rilke)

The affect of a Rilke poem is of a very particular kind. We can understand it if we realize that this poem really never has a lyrical motif, nor is its goal ever a particular object in the world. It speaks of a violin, a stone, a blond girl, of flamingos, wells, cities, blind people, madmen, beggars, angels, the maimed, knights, rich men, kings...; it becomes a poem of love, of renunciation, of piety, of the tumult of battle, of simple description, even description laden with cultural reminiscence...; it becomes a song, a legend, a ballad... It is never identical with the content of the poem; rather, what releases and guides the lyric affect is always something like the incomprehensible existence of those notions and objects, their incomprehensible juxtaposition and invisible interweaving.

In this gentle lyric affect, one thing becomes the likeness of the other. In Rilke, stones or trees not only become people—as they have done always and everywhere poetry has been written—

but people also become things or nameless beings, and in this way, moved by an equally nameless breath, achieve the ultimate degree of humanity. We might say: In the feeling of this great poet everything is likeness, but nothing is *only* likeness. The spheres of the different orders of being, separated from ordinary thinking, seem to unite in a single sphere. Something is never compared with something else—as two different and separate things, which they remain in the comparison—for, even if this sometimes does happen, and one thing is said to be like another, it seems at that very moment to have already *been* the other since primordial times. The particular qualities become universal qualities. They have detached themselves from objects and circumstance, they hover in fire and in the fire's wind.

This has been called mysticism, pantheism, pansychism...; but such concepts add something that is superfluous and lead to fuzziness. Let us rather remain with what is familiar to us: What *is* it really that these images have? Upon the most sober investigation? What emerges I remarkable enough: the metaphorical here becomes serious to a high degree.

Let me begin with an example chosen at random: Say a writer compares a particular November evening he is talking about with a soft woolen cloth [...]. But now I ask you: Instead of saying the November evening is like a cloth, *or* that the cloth is like a November evening, could one not say both at the same time? What my question is asking is what Rilke was perpetually doing.

In his poetry, things are woven as in a tapestry. If one observes them, they are separate, but if one regards the background, it connects the things with each other. Then their appearance changes, and strange relationships arise among them.

This has nothing to do with philosophy or skepticism, nor with anything other than experience.

(pp. 245-246)

Musil, Robert. "Address for the Memorial Service of Rilke in Berlin." Precision and Soul: essays and addresses. Translated by Burton Pike & Davide S. Luft, Chicago UP, 1990, pp. 237-249

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(from *Reading Rilke*)

Images like this—of a space enlarged by the emptiness in a lover's arms; of a bat ricocheting through the air like a crack through a cup; of a child's death made from gray bread and stuffed in the child's mouth like the core of an apple...no...like the ragged core of a sweet apple; or the ideas themselves: that the world exists nowhere but within and therefore the springtimes have need of us; that the youthfully dead have a special meaning and life and death run like hot and cold through the same tap; that we are here just to speak and proclaim the word; that love should give its beloved an unfastening and enabling freedom; that praise it the thing—they belong to no language, but to the realm of absolute image and pure idea, where a simple thought or bare proportion can retain its elementary power; and it is the ubiquitous presence of these type-tropes and generalizing "ideas" in Rilke that makes translating him possible at all, as their relative absence in someone like Mallarme makes him as difficult to shape as smoke. (pp. 27)

Gass, William H. *Reading Rilke: Reflections on the Problems of Translation*. Knopf 1999.

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(from Hass' introduction to the *Selected*)

“Archaic Torso of Apollo” is an agonizingly personal poem...it begins from a sense of shock. In this case, the feeling occurs because, looking at a mutilated piece of old Greek sculpture, he suddenly realizes that it is more real than he is—not just more perfect, but more real. It is even, as he sees it, sexually more alive than he is. (pp. xxiii)

The *Duino Elegies* are an argument against our lived, ordinary lives. And it is not surprising that they are. Rilke's special gift as a poet is that he does not seem to speak from the middle of life, that he is always calling us away from it. His poems have the feeling of being written from a great depth in himself. What makes them so seductive is that they also speak to the reader so intimately. They seem whispered or crooned into our inmost ear, insinuating us toward the same depth in ourselves. The effect can be hypnotic. [...] That voice of Rilke's poems, calling us out of ourselves, or calling us into the deepest places in ourselves, is very near to what people mean by poetry. It is also what makes him difficult to read thoughtfully. He induces a kind of trance, as soon as the whispering begins... p. xiv

What makes it more than its subject is partly the furious concentration with which the poem is made, but also the persistent strangeness of Rilke's imagination. Characteristically, he begins with what is absent: “we cannot know his legendary head...” Absence, more mysterious and hopeful to Rilke than any presence, introduces immediately the idea of growth. “*Darin die augenäpfel reiften*”—in which the the-apples ripened—is the rather startling phrase in German. The ripening that he has imagined passes like light into the body of the Apollo where it becomes both animal and star, animal because it belongs to what is at home in the world in a way that human beings are not, star because it also belongs to what is distant from us and perfected. In this poem the speaker stands at a midpoint between them, neither one thing nor the other. That is when the eyes come back into the poem. “For here there is no place that does not see you.” It is an odd thing to say. What is seeing him is not there, and yet has passed everywhere into the torso, so that it makes the speaker visible—in the absence of those qualities in himself. That is what, for me, has always made the shock of the poem's last, imperative sentence almost sickening in its impact. There is a pause in that last line: “*die dich nicht sieht. Du must...*” It is as if the brief silence—the heart-pause, Rilke calls it elsewhere—between *sieht* and *Du* were a well that filled suddenly with a tormented sense of our human incompleteness, from which leaps the demand for transformation: “You must change your life.” The difference between this and other similar poems is that Rilke does not praise the perfection of art, he suffers it.

[...]

Looking at things, he saw nothing—or, to paraphrase Wallace Stephens, “the nothing”—that arose from his hunger for a more vivid and permanent world. He had a wonderful eye for almost anything he really looked at, dogs, children, qualities of light, works of art; but in the end he looked at them in order to take them inside himself and transform them: to soak them in his homelessness and spiritual hunger so that when he returned them to the world, they were no more at home in it than he was, and gave off unearthly light. In this dialectic, everything out there only drives him deeper inside himself, into the huge raw wound of his longing and the emptiness that

fueled. It is true that the Apollo answers him. Art answers him, but only by intensifying his desire to pass over into the country it represents. This explains to me why I have always thought that Rilke's attitude toward art seemed slightly mortuary, Poe-esque. There is something vaguely necrophiliac about it. "Archaic Torso" is primarily, stunningly, a poem about the hunger for life, but its last, darkest echoes carry the suspicion that its true provenance is death.

I think I should report that when I first recognized this impulse in these poems, I had a very strong, divided response. It made me feel, on the one hand, that Rilke was a very great poet, that he had gone deeper than almost any poet of his age and stayed there longer, and I felt, on the other hand, a sudden restless revulsion from the whole tradition of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century poetry, or maybe from lyric poetry as such, because it seemed, finally, to have only one subject, the self, and the self—which is not life; we know this because it is what in us humans stands outside the natural processes and says, "That's life over there"—had one subject, the fact that it was not life and must, therefore, be death, or if not death, death's bride, or if not death's bird, its lover and secret. It is not only that this portrait of the self's true dialectic has terrifying implications for our age [...] but that it also has the effect of making my own self seem like a disease to me. This is very much a case of blaming the messenger. Rilke has clearly not abandoned the symbolist quest for the absolute in *New Poems*, he has dragged it, like a sick animal, into the twentieth century and brought it alive before us.

p. xxiv-xxvi