

T R A N S I T I O N

The constructivistic turn
in modern literature

RILKE AND KAFKA ON THE POWER OF POETIC ILLUSION

Three annotations with an epilogue about Celan

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SEPTEMBER 2009

Auch die sternische Verbindung trägt.
Doch uns freue eine Weile nun
der Figur zu glauben. Das genügt.¹

¹ **Rilke, Rainer Maria:** Sonette an Orpheus, part 1, XI. sonett, verses 12 – 14.

WHAT IS FICTION FROM A CONSTRUCTIVISTIC POINT OF VIEW?

About Rilkes poetization of World I and Kafkas literary production of Life II

It is Rilke, who writes that *the visible has to be transformed into the invisible*². This poetological dictum of “the last poet except George” (Erich Kästner³) is indeed part of a wide-ranged and deeply working constructivistic turn in modern literature, which makes us believe in the truth of fiction in the way our mind works and acts, on behalf of thoughts – in no way more truthful than anything else we have in mind.

„Es wird alles lebendig, was man sich vorstellt“, says Kafka in G. Schneiders novel „Kafkas Puppe“⁴. Like the hero himself we are impressed by a word the author Kafka might never have said. On the other hand, we all know Kafka’s eclectic style of writing.

What kind of „Lebendigkeit“ does Schneider make Kafka think of? It is, somehow, the enigma of all structural and procedural networking of fictional worlds, we have in mind. Their mental presence is a cognitive fact, therefore real – in the mind.

The difference between cognition and sensation truly depends on the origin of the *phenomena*. Mental-made things are accessible. It is their constructivity which keeps them accessible

² See Rilke’s letter to **Witold Hulewicz** (Sierre, 13.XI.[19]25), the seventh of the Duineser Elegien, where we have a group of verses (v. 50 – 62), starting with the following words: “Nirgends, Geliebte, wird Welt sein, als innen (...)” and in the eighth of the Duineser Elegien v. 67 – 70: “Erde, ist es nicht dies, was du willst: *unsichtbar* / in uns erstehn? – Ist es dein Traum nicht, / einmal unsichtbar zu sein? – Erde! unsichtbar! / Was, wenn Verwandlung nicht, ist dein drängender Auftrag?”.

³ **Kästner, Erich**: Rainer Maria Rilke. First print: Neue Leipziger Zeitung 30.12.1926. In: Kästner, Erich: Werke [in IX vols.]. Ed. by Franz Josef Görtz. 1998 (Carl Hanser Verlag) München / Wien, vol. VI, p. 52 – 53. Kästner’s obituary finds Rilke the last but one poet: „Sein Tod wird nicht so sehr deshalb ergreifen, weil ein Dichter, sondern weil einer der letzten Dichter starb! Rainer Maria Rilke galt unserer Generation, in gewissen Jahren, als Repräsentant eines erlöschenden Typus. Nach seinem Tode bleibt nur einer noch zurück; härter, kühler und größer: Stefan George ...“ (p. 52). See also **Görner, Rüdiger**: Rainer Maria Rilke. Im Herzwerk der Sprache. 2004 (Paul Zsolnay Verlag) Wien, p. 12 and p. 307 (ftn 4).

⁴ **Schneider, Gerd**: Kafkas Puppe. Roman. 2008 (Arena Verlag) Würzburg, p. 40 – 41.

for mental power. The poet on the other hand is forced to make his reader believe in a selfdependency of the poetic fictional worlds. He needs the so called “Schein”, whom Rilke wants us to believe in⁵. Kafka transforms this demand into his special labyrinthine world, makes his figures’ and readers’ minds gambling – and losing as well.

From the constructivistic point of view belief and knowledge are two different sides of the same coin. There is no reason to degrade poetic belief, which indeed is reflected – poetologically. The process of making something fictional is what Rilke calls the “Verwandlung des Sichtbaren ins Unsichtbare”. Our *mind* doesn’t detect any difference between fictional and fictitious objects. This means aesthetic belief.

DO RILKE AND KAFKA INTEND TO RECREATE THE WORLD IN THE MIND?

On poetic rebirth

Girls play with dolls, and sometimes “little doll” is the nickname of a handsome young girl. In fact, Kafka writes some letters to a young girl pretending them to come from a doll, which the girl has lost. The author meets her in a public garden, while he is in Berlin during his last two years. Suffering from tuberculosis, Kafka feels compassion and sympathy for the young girl, who is an orphan.

The author is an “orphan”, too. Not long before he meets Dora Diamant, who somehow makes him happy. Nevertheless, Dora’s biographical report about Kafka⁶ gives us the impression of a mental transformation of sorrows into hope by the poetic creativity. Kafka makes himself a fictional partner to the little girl, writing letters to her in the name of the doll. The girl believes in the power of words and becomes happy, hoping her doll being on a journey. But in fact Kafka isn’t the postman. He is the “author” of the letters.

The biographical dialogue between the girl and the doll is literature and also real correspondance. The hidden author (Kafka) puts the girl’s

⁵ See p. 2.

⁶ **Diamant, Dora:** Mein Leben mit Franz Kafka. In: Koch, Hans-Gerd (Hrsg.): Erinnerungen an Franz Kafka. 1995 (Wagenbach Verlag) Berlin.

situation on the stage of the mind and makes the writing process a metaphor for living. This is what we are asking for: What does “Lebendigkeit” mean? We may be allowed to say now: It is a special “Lebendigkeit” of life within the mind. We call it “reflection”.

Everybody’s mind is “alive” in elevated terms as long as life itself is reflected. Reflected life has become one’s own. The fundamental aspects of human liveliness (“Lebendigkeit”) is consciousness. Self-consciousness – the mental status, different from the psychic one, called: self-confidence – therefore seems to be the ultimate status of “living”. Beyond this status nothing can be said, therefore nothing really exists – in constructivistic terms of an epistemological ontology. What we have in mind *does* “exist”. What exists without being conscious no one can even believe in.

Poetic truth is the so-called “Schein”, which talks to the heart as well as to the mind and changes one’s feelings. Every reader with empathy is like that girl. Literature makes the dialogue happen between everyone’s subjectivity and the “real” world. Kafka’s “Puppe” *figures* this hermeneutic fact *out*: Everything we have in mind becomes “alive” in cognitive terms and in terms of one’s heart. Literature makes us believe in poetic truth, somehow. Rilke’s “Verwandlung” and Kafka’s “Puppe” are focussing the poetic process as a metamorphosis of World I (which is the physical world) into World II (the metaphysical). This poetic process of “world becoming word” intends to complete God’s first creation of the world⁷ by transforming it back into the word. Therefore Rilke calls the critical moment of this poetic process “Umschlag”.

⁷ See **Genesis 1, 3**: “And God *said*, Let there be light: and there was light” and **John 1,1**: “In the beginning was the *Word*, and the *Word* was with God, and the *Word* was God“ (King James Version).

**DOES RILKE INTEND TO ANSWER THE OLD QUESTION ABOUT
THE RELATION BETWEEN RELIGION AND POETRY WITH HIS POETOLOGICAL
CONSTRUCTION OF A ‘COSMIC POET’ WITHIN A ‘POETIC COSMOS’?**

Belief and faith – are no longer alternatives from a constructivistic point of view. With this ground poets in the early 20th century renew the whole range of mythic parameters of poetic constructivity. They think “life” fades itself out within the limits of modern life, therefore real “life” should have to be brought back by mythopoiesis and poetic reflection.

The conventional attack against the suspicious unseriousness of myth has become to mythopoietic poets a myth in itself. The fundamental condition of conscious life, self-reflection, indeed has been outmanoeuvred by a couple of presuppositions, which don’t make sense. Absolute relativity is nothing we can truly believe in. Since the early 20th century myth, on the other hand, is pretended to be a form of reflection, not an unreflected form of belief.⁸

Rilke creates some “Figuren” (“figures”) to turn poetic reflection into a literary dialogue with the lost “world”, lost by all actual historical forms of objectivation, especially: rational thinking and science, chemical and physical analysis of structures and processes, technical self-empowerment of man, massaction in society, psychoanalytical deformation of one’s personality. The most fascinating verses against this process of losing the “Bezug” to man’s “world” in the early 20th century, becoming more and more selfish, are probably worked out in Rilke’s poem “Solange du Selbstgeworfnes fängst (...)”. The lyrical subject reports his initiation as a “cosmic artist”. This process of becoming a “second maker” proceeds from *inspiration* via *conspiration* to *creation* by losing cognitive distance without losing consciousness. We may call this process the *m y s t i c t u r n*.

In order to visualize the reflectivity of selflessness Rilke’s poem dramatizes the mythic picture of a pseudo-erotic game with a divine “Mit-Spielerin”, whose Wurf

⁸ Christoph Jamme works out a new focus on myth. I try to make his thoughts useful for a different interpretation of myth in Rilke and Kafka. See **Jamme, Christoph**: „Gott an hat ein Gewand“. Grenzen und Perspektiven philosophischer Mythos-Theorien der Gegenwart. 1991 (Suhrkamp Verlag) Frankfurt am Main.

“in genau / gekonntem Schwung” transforms the cognitive receptivity of the poem’s lyrical subject into a “Vermögen / (...) einer Welt”. The process of realization of “world” needs selflessness and reflection, too. Therefore Rilke’s lyrical subject supposes transcending the mirror Paulus is talking about, when he characterizes the difference between the human subjectivity within and outside the world here and now⁹. The poet in Rilke’s poeto-logy becomes a cosmic gambler, creating illusions¹⁰ like God stars.

We may not intend to find Rilke an idiot. He truly knows the difference between the first (real) and the second (poetic) way of creating. His poietological focus is anthropological, the way his poetry is literary anthropology. But Rilke’s poetry is social-criticism, too, not eclectic and not unpolitical – as some often say. Myth in Rilke’s poems is a poetic form of a new kind of religion in a secularized world of modern living, a poietic religion by which man makes himself the ‘god’ of a second, (re-) humanized reality¹¹. Modern artists like Rilke deal with liturgic forms and processes as if they are to be used in poetic processing of a stigmatized World I in World II, because World I obviously *is* deported (from paradise). God’s history of healing man from being deported is recovered by poetic metaphors. One of them is Rilke’s metaphorical “Verwandlung”, another Kafka’s semifictional World II of the “Puppe”.

We may reconstruct Rilke’s idea of “Verwandlung” from the poetry and philosophy of the Renaissance, which then again depend on Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy; but we also have to recognize that this poet’s motives in the early 20th century are quite different from those.

⁹ 1. Corr. 13.

¹⁰ See also p. 2.

¹¹ Therefore we can say that mythopoietic poets in the early 20th century like Rilke affirm what they are criticizing.

Pico della Mirandola for instance worked out the idea of man as a microcosmos and second maker¹², which is a creator of man, too. *Being created as indetermined, man shall be determined to determine himself*. The logical mistake the Renaissance philosophers make is to transform *epistemological* indeterminacy into an *ontological* one and to declare man of being free in an *absolute* manner.

The poet Rilke explicitly doesn't get beyond this apotheosis of man, nor does Kafka, but Rilke and Kafka really don't want man to become his own creator in terms of the philosophical anthropology of the Renaissance. Rilke, Kafka (and some other poets since 1850 ?) find themselves to be forced to rehumanize man's "life", where man stigmatizes himself, taking part in the "new life" of a global technical environment and mass-structure in the late 19th and early 20th century.

Let us sum up: Rilke elaborates the *dynamic* poetic figure of a mythic game between a cosmic poet within a poetic cosmos and authorizes himself to give old liturgical forms a new function in his poeology. Kafka transforms life into the scenery on the stage of mind and is pretending to free man's (the girl's) existence by the phantasmagorical figure of a writing doll, which seems to put new lines into a young life by pieces of paper. We remember Rilke's lyrical picture for the metamorphosis of (written) words *into the image of a tree in the poet's mind* in one of his sonnets:

Erkennst du mich, Luft, du, voll noch einst meiniger Orte?
Du, einmal glatte Rinde,
Rundung und Blatt meiner Worte.¹³

¹² See **Mirandola, Giovanni Pico della** [1463 – 1494]: *Oratio de hominis dignitate* [posthumous]. 1997 (Philipp Reclam jun.) Stuttgart, p. 6: "Statuit tandem optimus opifex, ut, cui dari nihil proprium poterat, commune esset, quicquid privatum singulis fuerat". P. della Mirandola calls man ("quasi") a maker ("plastes et fctor") of himself: "Nec te caelestem neque terrenum neque mortalem neque immortalem fecimus, ut tui ipsius quasi arbitrarius honorariusque plastes et fctor, in quam malueris tu te formam effingas" (p. 8). – The idea of man as a second maker is born in ancient times. See: **Bormann, Karl**: Nikolaus von Kues: "Der Mensch als zweiter Gott". Trierer Cusanus Lectures, booklet 5, 1999 (Cusanus Institut / Paulinus-Druckerei GmbH) Trier.

¹³ **Rilke, Rainer Maria**: Sonette an Orpheus, part 2, I. sonett, verses 12 – 14.

POETIC EPILOGUE

It is Paul Celan, who leaves this little poem (in two strophes), which verses we have to recognize, when we find out that *the tree in the mind* doesn't answer:

Das Wort vom Zur-Tiefe-Gehn,
das wir gelesen haben. weißt du,
Die Jahre, die Worte seither.
Wir sind es noch immer.

Weißt du, der Raum ist unendlich,
du brauchst nicht zu fliegen,
weißt du, was sich in dein Aug schrieb,
vertieft uns die Tiefe.¹⁴

But the interpersonal dialogue, this poem is about, doesn't solve fundamental existential problems of man, too, even if the poet, if man keeps silent.

¹⁴ **Celan, Paul:** Die Niemandsrose. Part I. In: Celan, Paul: Gesammelte Werke [in 5 vols.]. Ed. Beda Allemann and Stefan Reichert. 1983 (Suhrkamp Verlag) Frankfurt am Main. Vol. 1, p. 212.