

This is the author's final, peer-reviewed manuscript as accepted for publication. The publisher-formatted version may be available through the publisher's web site or your institution's library.

Rilke and historical discourse or the 'Historie' of Malte Laurids Brigge

Derek Hillard

How to cite this manuscript

If you make reference to this version of the manuscript, use the following information:

Hillard, D. (2006). Rilke and historical discourse or the 'Historie' of Malte Laurids Brigge. Retrieved from <http://krex.ksu.edu>

Published Version Information

Citation: Hillard, D. (2006). Rilke and historical discourse or the 'Histories' of Malte Laurids Brigge. *German Studies Review*, 29(2), 299-314.

Copyright: Copyright © 2006 [German Studies Association](#)

Digital Object Identifier

Publisher's Link: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27668036>

This item was retrieved from the K-State Research Exchange (K-REx), the institutional repository of Kansas State University. K-REx is available at <http://krex.ksu.edu>

Derek Hillard
Kansas State University

Rilke and Historical Discourse or the 'Historie' of Malte Laurids Brigge

For much 19th-century historiography the individual's sole and role – if any – is to move events. The great individual who might break through overwhelming institutional forces arrives on the historical scene, assimilates the powers of his environment through initiative and free productivity, and surmounts these forces. Opposite this atypical man, who appears with ever increasing rarity, are anonymous institutional forces and their human correlative the crowd.¹ By the beginning of the 20th century, these masses are inextricably linked with the metropolis. Indeed, the site for historical conflicts and modifications becomes the metropolis, with modernity's faceless and fragile masses providing the experiential equivalent to an anonymously driven history. If the individual was to survive an onslaught by dual historical powers – the big city's anonymity and the inspired whims of great men – he would need to craft a lithe model of self that could respond to the decentered terrain of urban modernity. The self, confronted with a historiography that hopelessly delimited it, sought to uncover an alternative that could drive the production of personality.

I.

At first glance, Rilke's novel *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (*Malte of Malte Laurids Brigge*) (1910) makes an unlikely source for a unique or particularly compelling notion of history.² It is the product of an intensely solitary narrator, Malte, a Danish would-be writer who has left his home in the countryside and come to Paris around 1900. It consists in large part of childhood memories, purportedly in the form of notebooks, interspersed with observations of Malte's present existence in the metropolis just a step ahead of the marginalized, sick, and impoverished whom he observes on the streets, and with whom he identifies. This of

course does no justice to the novel's famously heterogeneous and open form that collects within it the world as text: memories, reports, descriptions of paintings, quotations, literary paraphrases, exegeses of literary and biblical texts, poetological considerations, theories of the novel, analyses, and letters. In addition to these textual forms, *Malte* consists of a great deal of historical name-dropping, as well as recitations of moments from the lives of such historical figures as Jeanne d'Arc, the Danish King Christian IV, France's Karl VI and Charles the Bold, Pope Jean XXII, Boris Godunow, Iwan "the Terrible," and the false Russian Czar Demetrius. But this great processing of historical figures never becomes an explicit figuration of historical processes. Instead of exploring historical consciousness, the novel ritually evokes historical signifiers. In fact, explicit elucidations of historical processes or reflection on historiography are so absent that they thereby declare their negative presence.

Due to and alongside the ritual evocation of historical ciphers, the sense of history's absence is felt to be so strong that the question seems to be at once opportune and inappropriate: does Rilke's text yield insight into the relation of the novel to the historical? Is it concerned with historical processes? A hint of the narrator's concerns appears among the "big questions" in section 14:

Ist es möglich, daß die ganze Weltgeschichte mißverstanden worden ist? Ist es möglich, daß die Vergangenheit falsch ist, weil man immer von ihren Massen gesprochen hat, gerade, als ob man von einem Zusammenlauf vieler Menschen erzählte, statt von dem Einen zu sagen, um den sie herumstanden, weil er fremd war und starb?

Ja, es ist möglich.³

"Wenn aber dieses alles möglich ist," Malte concludes, "auch nur einen Schein von Möglichkeit," then something must happen. Someone "muß anfangen, etwas von dem Versäumten zu tun." Malte, this "junge, belanglose Ausländer, Brigge," "ja er wird schreiben müssen, das wird das Ende sein" (728). Malte will have to write this neglected, misunderstood history "von dem Einen." One of the novel's ends is to pursue this historically forgotten "one." In its pursuit, the narrator will rely on historical figures both to remember a past and to anticipate a future in the form of a developed self. Indeed, Malte's assertion and formulation of a self, one that is at stake in the pages of the novel, is dependent on the interpretation of historical texts and figures. True, Malte does not conceptually explore history. But it is in response to history, conceived in a particular way, that he turns to carefully chosen historical genres and the actors that their textuality make possible, for the production of a self. The self, "personality," is at stake in the novel because the metropolis and the new modes of perception that its technological form produces have produced a form of the self at the mercy of exterior disruptions, unprotected from its environment, unable to surmount and integrate exterior stimuli. With the 19th-century shift to the metropolis as the focus for networks of communication and modes of experience, models of the self could no longer assert independence from exterior stimulus; they could no longer claim to be protected by a barrier from their environment. If another modernist urban protagonist – James Joyce's Stephen Daedalus – famously tries to awake from history as a nightmare, then Malte tries to stay awake so as not to dream. For Malte to survive Paris he will have to survive history.

II.

Here it is necessary to distinguish between two kinds of history, a distinction that Reinhart Koselleck puts forth between a general history (*Geschichte* in the singular), or "history

itself," which emerges around 1770, and "histories," increasingly understood as particular accounts.⁴ Premodern "histories" (*Historie* or *Geschichten* in the plural), which one can locate in the genre of the chronicle or annals, always appeared as particular "histories" of a given subject, whereas the new "history itself," could exist independently of its written representation (*Historie*) as a hidden force with its own motives – a view from nowhere. Koselleck attributes this change to the shifting boundaries of poetry and history. There was a greater expectation that historical narrative should provide the unity and coherence of the epic, with its clear beginning and end and single perspective, a task for which "histories" were unsuited. In a discursive shift, two central, coeval differences are produced, which, while distinguishable, overlap: 1) "history itself" becomes a history of institutional alterations; 2) events recounted are now required to take on a full order of meaning that no simple report of sequential events can attain. In the old history, events and their recounting amount to either one or a series of individual and completed events ranging from volcanic eruptions to battles to the sudden death of a powerful monarch.⁵ Natural and social events were regarded to be equally historic. "History itself," which should enclose events within a unified entirety in the manner of epic representation, is one of the formation, dissolution, and transformation of social institutions. The "real" events, natural or cultural, were no longer history, rather the institutions that arose and disappeared or modified themselves and gave meaning to these "real" events, amounted to history. In Nietzsche's terms, history became the indefinable matter of interpretation. According to his phrase, "definierbar ist nur Das, was keine Geschichte hat" [only That which has no history can be defined],⁶ only the natural or technical remain within the realm of the definable.

If the old histories were instructive, they were so in an exemplary fashion; but "history itself," as Otto Ranke put it, has the "task of judging the past for the benefit of future

generations."⁷ Here events must be accounted for in such a way that a paradigm of meaning emerges that goes beyond a mere recounting of sequential events. Even though the old accounts in the form of annals and chronicles did not offer narrative closure, the events that they presented amounted to finished products: reports of what had occurred. Indeed, even a history of these histories restricted itself to a presentation of such chronicles. By contrast, history after 1780 does not consist of mere examples that can be repeated, but of a unique event or a universal relation of many events.⁸ About the shift, Koselleck concludes: "It made possible the attribution to history of the latent power of human events and suffering, a power that connected and motivated everything in accordance with a secret or evident plan to which one could feel responsible, or in whose name one could believe oneself to be acting."⁹

The historiographic genres that produced the old history were the annals and the chronicle. Essentially a list of events placed in a loose chronological sequence, the early medieval annals form is devoid of any sense of narrative closure. The form of annals was, as Hayden White points out, determined by its author's "apparent refusal, inability, or unwillingness to transform the set of events ordered vertically as a file of annual markers into the elements of a linear/horizontal process."¹⁰ Indeed, the annalist lacks a "social center" which would secure ethical or moral significance. This oldest genre contained "no central subject, no well-marked beginning, middle, and end, no *peripeteia*, and no identifiable narrative voice" (White, 6). Furthermore, annals do not conclude, in fact, it is incorrect to call them unfinished; for they never claim that they will or can be finished – they just stop.

In contradistinction to the annals form, the later chronicle represents things "as if real events appeared to human consciousness in the form of unfinished stories" (White 5). The chronicle interrupts itself in the middle of its story and of its teller's present. Conflicts are left

unreconciled; loose strands left hanging. Possessing a "central subject – the life of an individual, town, or region; some great undertaking, such as a war or crusade; or some institution, such as a monarchy," the chronicle aims for a focus that could lead to conclusiveness (White 16). Yet, while the chronicle contains a central organizing principle, unlike the annals form, and while it typically follows the calendrical temporal order or chronology, it does not aspire to summarize and complete its chain of events. It does not attempt to secure its tale with an undisputed beginning and end. In contrast to the 19th-century history, which, as does a narrative, "strains for the effect of having filled in all the gaps, of having put an image of continuity, coherence, and meaning in place of the fantasies of emptiness, need, and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time" (White 11) – the chronicle displays no such desire or frustration.

III.

It is not an advanced consciousness of history that Malte aims to attain, if by history we mean the Koselleck's post-1780 history. Yet it is because of this history – at once anonymous and institutional – that Malte constantly confronts the need to redevelop a self. The interpretive changes at work in such discourses as economy, psychology, gender, childhood, love, and art, as well as the uses of technology at the center of the new urban experience – all registered through Malte's experiences in the modern metropolis – point to the presence and effects of this new institutional history as a hidden force. Andreas Huyssen has argued that attempts to interpret the status of Malte's self must take into consideration the constellation of Malte's childhood and the city. Malte is confronted with "a childhood trauma of the fragmented body with the shattering and unavoidable fragmentary experience of the metropolis. The absence of an adequate *Reizschutz*, resulting from a deficiently developed ego, characterizes" Malte's consciousness.¹¹

Indeed, the novel consists of Malte's effort to survive fragmentation and achieve cohesion. Yet, through his novel's "chroniclistic" ending – which does not conclude but just stops – Rilke stages Malte's desire for reconciliation and the abandonment of this desire's fulfillment. The frame and the objects of history after the late 18th century, as well as modernity broadly understood, are located in the modern metropolis. And as this history turns its attention to institutional reinterpretations – in a further key distinction occasioned by the late 18th-century conceptual shift – it does so anonymously.¹² As it is articulated, Koselleck's new history occurs in a field of antagonistic interests, discourses, and powers, discourses that produce and interpret technologies which are then freed up to be used and abused. Big cities become increasingly the arenas for these conflicts and modifications, with the modernity's faceless crowds providing the experiential equivalent to the anonymous history. Malte thus turns to the opposite of the anonymous history to survive the onslaught on the self by the anonymous forces of the metropolis. In its place, he finds *histories*, which assert the presence and effects of personality.

While I wish to point out the ways in which Rilke's novel shares a family resemblance to the chronicle, I stress that there are limits to this resemblance. I argue for the resemblance so as to better display Rilke's departure from all established forms of historical discourse. Indeed, historical language embedded in Rilke's novel contrasts with all those historical genres from which he borrows. Annalistic history figured reality as a series of unconnected natural and cultural events with no beginning, middle, or end, and no focus on central actors. Chronicled history represented reality as a loose-knit central story, which, while displaying no clear ending, recounted the key events in the life of a central figure, family, or place. What White terms "history proper,"¹³ aims to depict reality objectively but with the formal coherence and fullness of meaning of an epic story. It should appear as a broad seamless tapestry of events laid out in

linear chronological outline with a defined beginning and end. *Malte* avoids the bare sequencing and confusion of the cultural with the natural of the annals form; unlike the traditional chronicle, it mixes past and present and eschews the spotlighting of central subject. Against "history proper" – the genre with which it is most at odds – *Malte's* historical elements tend toward the open ended and relentlessly perspectival, where social and philosophical concerns appear as infinite questions. *Malte* is analogous to premodern historical language – its open-endedness, inconsistencies, and fragmentariness. Yet Rilke's novel displays fundamental differences. The novel's central figure is himself decentered through a cacophony of language games and textual forms. *Malte* becomes a new type of literary and historical fusion – a gesture toward "histories" for the 20th century.

By and large Rilke's historical figures belong to the age of the chronicle. Figures such as the Avignon pope John XXII (1244-1334), the 14th-century king Charles VI (1368-92), Jeanne d'arc (1412-1431), the 15th-century Duke of Burgundy, Charles "the Bold" (1433-77), the Swedish king Christian IV (1671-1730), and Grischa Otrepjow, the "false" Demetrius – an early 17th-century pretender to the Russian throne (ca. 1582-1606) – each inhabits the late medieval, renaissance, or early modern periods. This is no coincidence, for unlike the new anonymous frames of interpretation, the older histories placed subjects at their center. Yet these subjects functioned not as active agents, but as characters in a play or figures in an artistically rendered scene. There are three crucial moments in the novel where historical scenes are recited as such. These involve monarchs or would be monarchs: Otrepjow, Charles the Bold, and Charles VI. Rilke emphasizes the downfall of these three figures. Demetrius's claims that he is Russia's true czar are finally rejected and he is shot by a mob and mutilated. Charles the Bold, in an attempt to regain power after a series of defeats, forces a battle that he loses, his disfigured body found on

the battlefield. Charles VI, whose first attack of insanity came early in life, gradually declines into extreme psychological debilitation.

The histories make their way into Rilke's novel via Malte's memories about his childhood reading habits, in sections 54-55 and 61-62 of the novel. There Malte refers to the little green book that he had as a child, in which the first two episodes of these figures were narrated. In fact, Rilke found these episodes, as he drew nearly all his history, from 15th-, 16th-, and 17th-century chronicles, as well as 19th-century encyclopedias.¹⁴ Before retelling their stories, Malte writes that from the little green book of histories, "Ich erinnere nur noch zwei. Ich will sagen, welche: Das Ende des Grischa Otrepjow und Karls des Kühnen Untergang" (882).¹⁵

Grischa Otrepjow, "the false Demetrius," a pretender to the Russia throne, claimed to be the youngest son of Ivan the Terrible. The true Demetrius, born in 1583, had been sent with his mother to live in a convent, so that his relative Feodor could be crowned czar, with Boris Godunov in charge of the government's practical operation. Eight years later, the real Demetrius was assassinated, and with Feodor's death in 1598, Godunov ascended the throne. Soon after, Otrepjow, claiming to be Demetrius, attempted to take the throne by force. Although initially repulsed, the false Demetrius returned upon the death of Godunov in 1605 at the head of a Polish-Cossack-Muscovite army and with the help of the real Demetrius's mother, now recalled from the convent to the Kremlin, was recognized and legitimized. However, soon after, a plot against him led to his violent death and he was exposed as an imposter.¹⁶ Malte stresses two key elements of the account: Otrepjow's belief that he was indeed the true czar, and the element of bodily mutilation and "masking" in his death:

ich bin sogar überzeugt, daß er zu jener Zeit so stark an sich glaubte, daß er in der Tat seine Mutter zu berufen meinte. Und diese Marie Nagoi, die in schnellen

Tagreisen aus ihrem dürftigen Kloster kam, gewann ja auch alles, wenn sie zustimmte. Ob aber seine Unsicherheit nicht gerade damit begann, daß sie ihn anerkannte? Ich bin nicht abgeneigt zu glauben, die Kraft seiner Verwandlung hätte darin beruht, niemandes Sohn mehr zu sein.

(Das ist schließlich die Kraft aller jungen Leute, die fortgegangen sind.) (VI 882/Engl, 188-89)

Anticipating Rilke's parable of the "des verlorenen Sohnes," this passage asserts that the power no longer to be a son, to be unrecognizable, is the power of all those who, like Malte, have left home.¹⁷ One leaves home, where others can name and order one, to transform one's identity, or in Malte's case, to craft a self.

The drive to fashion and transform the ego, which Rilke wishes to locate in historical accounts of Otrepjow and Charles, poses the greatest danger to all. For even though Otrepjow is mortally wounded, as Rilke emphasizes, the conspirators take care to dismember his body – a mirror for the final ego-dismemberment that Malte aims to avoid. Whereas Otrepjow is mutilated, Charles, the duke of Burgundy, is haunted by anxieties of physical dismemberment – "Oft ängstigte es ihn, daß es [his blood] ihn im Schläfe anfallen könnte und zerreißen" (885/192) – which echo Malte's own phobias of body-fragmentation. Rilke locates this effort to craft a self in the old history's textual materiality. In the sources from which Rilke drew the accounts of Otrepjow, this is mentioned with one sentence: "Nun wurde der falsche Dimitrij durch einen Pistolenschuß getödtet, dann sein Körper durch viele Stiche und Hiebe mishandelt."¹⁸ Rilke uses this "historeme" to sketch out a notion of a nascent "potentialized self" – one with the potential to be everything, and thus constituting an unacceptable threat to others – which is then dismembered:

daß zwischen Stimme und Pistolenschuß, unendlich zusammengedrängt, noch einmal Wille und Macht in ihm war, alles zu sein. Sonst versteht man nicht, wie glänzend konsequent es ist, daß sie sein Nachtkleid durchbohrten und in ihm herumstachen, ob sie auf das Harte einer Person stoßen würden. Und daß er im Tode doch noch die Maske trug, drei Tage lang, auf die er fast schon verzichtet hatte. (VI 884/191)

Whereas the texts from the historical discourse describe the maltreatment (*mishandeln*) of the body, Rilke translates this into an attempt at both verifying the materiality of the self and eradicating its potentiality. The conspirators cast about with their weapons to find and destroy "the hard core of a personality." After Otrepjow's death, a mask is placed over his face – what in historical accounts is only placed near his body to elicit demonic connections on the part of observers. By having Otrepjow wear the mask in death, Rilke highlights the way in which its theatricality functions. It establishes a self; it provides an exterior image by which a potential self is projected.¹⁹ By preventing recognition of the unmasked self, which in Rilke's interpretation makes Otrepjow vulnerable, the mask supports the self's potential to be everything. But by concealing Otrepjow behind it, it also protects those who would be exposed to the self's power. Finally, the projected masquerading self leads to Otrepjow's destruction.

That dual power of the mask – to produce and destroy personality – is intensified in Rilke's account of Charles, the duke of Burgundy (1432-77). For the figures from the French historical discourse, Rilke turned to medieval chronicles.²⁰ The two figures from Malte's green book share key traits. Both were doubted: Otrepjow by all who could not believe he was the true Czar, finally by himself; Charles who must convince his inner self and his natural inclinations, located in the metaphor of the "blood," that he is France's king. Charles "wanted to persuade his

blood that he was emperor and there was nothing above him: so that it would fear him. But his blood didn't believe it" ("Denn er wollte seinem Blut einreden, daß er Kaiser sei und nichts über ihm: damit es ihn fürchte. Aber sein Blut glaubte ihm nicht") (193/886). Both wanted to be more than what their current positions allowed: Charles, to be Emperor of France, while Otrepjow goes momentarily from being an unknown in Poland to being the Czar of Russia. Both are deeply uncertain of their position: they seek to accomplish their identities by creating authorities around themselves whose recognition should conclusively confirm their ego-images. So Otrepjow has brought to him the real mother of the dead Czarevitch, whose parental recognition is supposed to establish his mask and identity.

For Charles, it is the diamonds, stones, tapestries, artwork, and four hundred tents that he hauls around into battle, including his entourage, the Prince of Taranto, the Duke of Cleves and so on –all the proofs in material and people that should reinforce, from without, a personality. Finally, both die violent deaths. Otrepjow is stabbed by the mob and thrown to the street, mutilated, left lying for days, whereas Charles, separated from his army, is later found dead in a frozen pond, his body stripped and his face deformed by the ice. Indeed, most telling, and the reason why these two historical figures and episodes are recounted, Rilke emphasizes the face as a metonym for the ego, or rather face's erasure and masking. In the case of Charles the Bold, he is literally de-faced. His entourage finds him in snow and ice with other corpses, and turning him over, sees that "das Ganze war von einer großen Wunde gespalten, die am Ohr begann, so daß von einem Gesicht keine Rede sein konnte" (889) [the whole thing had been split by a large wound that began at the ear, so that you could hardly speak of a face at all] (196). In the history of the false Demetrius, his body cast to the street and "dalag drei Tage, zerfetzt und zerstoehen und eine Maske vor dem Gesicht" [a mask before his face] (191).

That Malte investigates the double movement in this attempt both to seek out as proof and to destroy "personality" is significant. For it is this final destruction of the nascent material for the yet to be established self that Malte wants to evade. He wants both to avoid this destruction and, through masks, produce a full self. Rilke's "histories" of Malte Laurids Brigge aim to project and form an ego. By framing his reinterpretation and re-narration of historical texts with his own efforts to construct the self, Malte displays how history as interpretation will emerge within an effort of self-fashioning. In the most extended historical sequence Rilke begins with a juxtaposition from Malte's *I* to the *he* of the insane medieval French king Charles the VI (1368-1442):

Ich weiß, wenn ich zum Äußersten bestimmt bin, so wird es mir nichts helfen, daß ich mich verstelle in meinen besseren Kleidern. Glitt er nicht mitten im Königtum unter die Letzten? Er, der statt aufzusteigen hinabsank bis auf den Grund. [...] wir haben nie etwas Längeres gesehen als das Elend. Der König aber soll dauern.
(905-06; 214-15)

Malte wishes to be like this king, who, like the novel's *Fortgeworfenen*, though economically and spiritually broken, shall endure alongside wretchedness. Unlike the Duke of Burgundy and Grischa, whose faces are wiped away, the King persists in a state of blissful decline. But if the historical king shall endure, he does so only because Malte makes use of him so as to construct a personality and to survive the identity-fragmentation that the modern history – through its focus on discourses and institutions – brings about. Thus Malte's remark about the king's longevity is not constative but rather performative: the desire for ego-formation produces the king.

History thus appears in Rilke's novel as an interpretive use of events, whereas the events themselves are history's raw material. In Malte's case, ego-formation defines this use. Because

the story of the mad king is told as a re-telling – as a story the reader should already know – it is marked by the absence of any reference to what one traditionally would call "historical context." As such, the figures evoked are no longer to be firmly anchored in the real. Their socio-ethical character has been circumscribed by Malte's use of them in the projection of an ego that will survive alongside history's institutional modifications through the mechanism of identification. Demonstrated in Malte's re-narration of premodern historical accounts is less the content of the figures than the form of their re-inscriptions. The chronicles make available the material through which Malte will design a self, and as such, they display Malte's notion of historiography. They are intertwined, determined, and framed by his implicit effort to construct a personality that will survive modernization.

Malte and the historical texts that Rilke reinterprets are far from the annals form. Uninflected by ethical registers, the annals form displays no organizing subject, no minimal traces of standard narrative coordinates such as beginning, center, and conclusion, no narrative voice. But in Rilke's novelistic discourse has absorbed the forms of premodern historical discourse, whose historical-formal elements seep into the structure of Rilke's novel. Indeed, rather than the content of the historically narrated figures in the chronicles, it is their discursive assumptions and textual form that attract both Malte and Rilke. As in chronicles, in *Malte* a central narrative voice is present, though interrupted and repeatedly crowded out; as in chronicles, events appear as "unfinished stories," which, from the first to the last, break off inconclusively (the final muted line, with its "noch nicht" connoting an open future that will not be told: "Der aber wollte noch nicht" 946). As in chronicles, Rilke's novel does not strain to fill in narrative gaps, to provide the illusion of total coherence and continuity.

The fragmentariness of the novel's narrative discourse echoes the chronicle's unconcern for demonstrable explanation. Malte stresses that precisely what is missing in these histories, in his own recitation of them, is the imaginary fullness of *Erzählen*, "which will transcend every contradiction" [which would be "über jeden Widerspruch hinaus"] (Eng 191/GW 884). Malte writes: "Daß man erzählte, wirklich erzählte, das muß vor meiner Zeit gewesen sein" (GW 844/146). Walter Benjamin noted that "the story" (*Erzählung*) is to fiction what the chronicle is to history: "The chronicler is the history-teller" [Der Chronist ist der Geschichts-Erzähler].²¹ In the place of "explanation," as Benjamin contends, which takes center stage for the "history itself," the chronicler – here Malte – pursues "interpretation." Yet Benjamin's dictum that the novel takes no step beyond its putative end while every story can entertain the question, *what happens next*, does not apply to Rilke's novel, which concludes in a storylike manner. Rilke's return to the chronicle is an attempt, through mourning the loss of narration/storytelling, to reinvent the historical tale structure, yet without its claim to a divine plan of salvation. *Malte* recovers the story through early history, which allows Rilke to merge the story-chronicle with the novel form.

IV.

Rilke's novel stages these three crucial scenes, positioned strategically near the end of the novel, in which Malte turns to the figures of broken kings and popes and the genre of the chronicle to imaginatively form a self. History is no longer an objective fantasy of the real, but rather a series of images and figures of attraction and repulsion. After Rilke, there is the realization in the discourse of the novel that there will be no historical events without an accompanying inscription of their use. Thus Rilke foregrounds not the event – the "false" Demetrius's rise and violent end, Charles the Bold's insecurities and brutal effacement, Charles

the VI and the madness that destroys and enchants him, and Pope John XXII – but rather Malte's interpretation of them. These interpretations are motivated, powered, and organized by the drives of desire and identification. They are made necessary by the relentless transformations to society's guiding institutions and concepts that history since the late 18th-century brings with it. Without use there can be no event.

Rilke's novel turns to the discursive genres of the old history, prior to the 18th-century shift to an institutional history, to establish "personality," the very property that Malte must posit and retain if he is to survive modernity. Ultimately, Malte will survive, but not because he succeeds at constructing an enduring self with which to defend himself against urban modernity's intellectual and material onslaughts. Malte will survive because his incessant recitations and reinterpretations of textual figures amount to an obsessive form of archiving, a superabundance of language characteristic of modernity. In the place of an enduring self – the novel's unrealized desire – he has the discourse of the novel and its dialectics of ego-formation and destruction. Early historical discourse, with its "sequences of beginnings that only terminate and never conclude," is the discourse least caught up in imaginary fantasies of an assumed *telos* and unified subjectivity. And the genre of the chronicle, which Rilke's novel valorizes for its temporal yet non-teleological assumptions and for its concatenation of past events along with their account, provides the raw material for this work of novelistic discourse as personality-making.

Out of this, one can see how *Malte* not only rejects the teleological assumptions of "history itself" inherent in Hegelian and Marxist notions, it is also antagonistic toward its emphasis on anonymous forces. Curiously, before about 1780 "histories," despite their frequent focus on monarchs and individuals, were not considered "makeable" by them.²² The new historiography, on the other hand, outlines history as makeable, yet anonymously so: to

paraphrase Marx, humans make history, but not freely, rather under historically given circumstances.²³ To be sure, Rilke was drawn to nostalgic and sentimental identification with the medieval combination of complex allegories of mysticism and a reconciled life-world. Yet Rilke's interest in premodern figures is not exclusively a romantic attachment. Through them, Rilke rediscovers the early genres as alternatives to 19th-century teleological and anonymous historiography and its focus on institutional forces that circumscribe the limits to history's "makeability." Rilke's novel opposes that 19th-century thought, in which history is the manifestation of formal laws that unfold and reproduce themselves in the development of nations. There, the age is thought to outweigh completely the power of an individual personality, which can only work along socially-conditioned tendencies and overarching developments. In premodern history, Rilke finds a precursor of his early 20th-century opposition to mechanistic anonymity. Thus in this discursive rediscovery, one sees an attempt to respond to the insights gained by the history after 1780. Rilke's archaeologies of fragile subjects amount to a valorization of personality, an attempt to articulate a self that is appropriate and respondent to the decentered terrain of urban modernity. Rilke's notion of "der eigene Tod" thus functions as the only moment where the self can come into its undisputed authentic own – there, in the instant of its dissolution.

Into this framework Rilke's novel introduces a new presentation of history, subjective experience, and fiction. Premodern historical genres provided heterogeneous and inconclusive forms of memory in *Malte*, which absorbed their textual contours into its body. Yet while borrowing much from the chronicle, Rilke's novel markedly departs from it in its mixing near with distant time and the way in which it replaces a central subject with a consciousness that dissolves into a fragmented textual memory.

V.

The nature of Rilke's interaction with historiography is located in the position that *Malte* carves out between three models: 1) The premodern "orthodox" chronicle, with its paratactic structure and focus on individuals, powerful yet ultimately powerless against time; 2) History as an anonymous and contingent interpretation based on power (Nietzsche and Koselleck's "history," in different ways); 3) Teleological models, from Hegel to Marx, including Spengler's concept of history as decadence, a prophetic, determined and fated course, in which great individuals enter and leave the stage.

Rilke's history differs from all of these models. Despite its privileging of medieval historical forms, *Malte* does not merely reproduce them. Unlike the chronicle, there is no premodern concentration on a single strong individual or a powerful dynasty. For not only are the figures that Malte selects from medieval chronicles the marginalized and broken, the correspondents to the *Fortgeworfenen* seen in Paris' streets, these figures are uprooted from their given context and juxtaposed with other figures, creating a disconcerting plurality of displaced characters. In contrast, the chronicle attempts to represent reality as a single linear narrative strand. Malte recites the textuality of Demetrius, the Duke, Charles VI, and the Pope but does not attempt to narrate their lives as if either historiography or the novel could fulfill the fantasy to represent the totality of a life lived.

Indeed, Rilke shares this antagonism toward articulating history as a series of central well-knitted events with both Nietzsche and Koselleck's "history itself." Yet Rilke returns to the individual that modern history ignores in favor of institutional forces. Rather than reviving from historical accounts the fully formed classical individual, Malte turns to fragile, traumatized figures whose constructedness is laid bare, who lose their armored selves in their efforts to assert

them. As such, they function as precursors of the modern self under attack in the urban landscape. One might expect that an ego such as Malte's, haunted by childhood memories and exposed to the threateningly chaotic stimuli of the technological metropolis, would turn to imagined fully developed heroic figures of a nostalgic past with which to identify. Heroic figures gleaned from classical accounts would seemingly supply the desired models to valorize. Instead, Malte famously investigates these fragile selves attempting to survive, and in the process reveals how the self is constructed and undone – both in what is represented and how. While Rilke avoids the exclusive focus on the "event" of the chronicle; while he skirts the historical avoidance of the self, he also does not succumb to the temptation of a grand Spenglerian decadence narrative.

By jettisoning their linear narrative and exclusive focus on a single individual, locality, event, or family, Rilke ultimately departs from all established forms of historical inscription. Where 19th-century models of historiography find their literary correspondence in the realist narrative, which portrays both a total social sphere and a fully formed and integrated consciousness, *Malte*, by contrast, answers this model with an open-ended, tentative, and contingent form that waited for the orthodox discourse of historiography to integrate its insights. This left Rilke free to witness to a discursive shift and anticipate a form of historical memory less entangled in imaginary fantasies of closure and fated quality. It recovers a focus on the individual in history, yet without defining that individual as a person who, through initiative and free productivity, assimilates the forces of his environment and surmounts them. This history in personality is rather an imaginative model from which the self borrows in order to look ahead and articulate a personality, a work that must finally be done through fiction.

Notes

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben," *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 1, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999) 319-20. Nietzsche writes of the masses that they appear in history "sodann als Widerstand gegen die Grossen und endlich als Werkzeuge der Grossen." See also Gustav Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (Georgia: Norman S. Berg, 1968). See also Georg Simmel, *Philosophie des Geldes, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. VI, ed. Otthein Rammstedt (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1989) 648. Simmel observes the animosity of those who bitterly observe, "daß das Bedeutende in der gegenwärtigen Epoche nicht mehr durch die Individuen, sondern durch die Massen geschehe." Simmel confirms that the 19th-century hypothesis of the mass forces of history had become a commonplace assertion by the early 20th century.

² The question of Rilke's notion of history has gone largely unexamined in any explicit sense. Poems such as "Venezianischer Morgen" (Venetian Morning) and "San Marco," evoke history as layers of aesthetic and cultural sediment. However the poems are devoid of particular historical ciphers. For a discussion of "San Marco," see Judith Ryan, *Rilke, Modernism and the Poetic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 90-97. There is one exemplary effort to document Rilke's historical sources, albeit without an attempt to theorize Rilke's notion of history: Brigitte von Witzleben, *Untersuchungen zu Rainer Maria Rilkes "Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge."* *Studien zu den Quellen und zur Textüberlieferung* (Vaasa: Oy Fram Ab Vaasa, 1996).

³ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, vol. VI, ed. Ruth Sieber Rilke (Frankfurt/Main: Insel, 1987) 727.

⁴ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantic of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985) 27.

⁵ "Social events are apparently as incomprehensible as natural events." Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP: 1987) 7.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 5, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999) 317.

⁷ Quoted in Koselleck, 31. This is not to cite Ranke as a historian of social institutions. Ranke entitled his text *Die Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker*, yet he nonetheless distinguished his "histories" from "history itself."

⁸ Koselleck, 28-9.

⁹ Koselleck, 31.

¹⁰ White, 6.

¹¹ Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (London: Routledge, 1995) 123.

¹² See Fritz Breithaupt, "Anonymous Forces of History: The Case of Infanticide in the Sturm and Drang," *New German Critique*, 2000 Winter, 79: 157-76.

¹³ White, 4.

¹⁴ Amable-Guillaume-Prosper Brugière, baron de Barant, *Histoire de la Maison de Valois, avec des remarques par le Baron de Reiffenberg*. Vols I-IX, 6th ed. (Bruxelles: 1835-36); *Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denys contenant la règne de Charles VI, 1380 à 1422*, vol. I-VI, ed. M. L. Bellaguet (Paris: 1839-52); Jean Froissart, *Les Chroniques de Sire Jean Froissart*, ed. J. A. C. Buchon (Paris: A. Desrez, 1835); Jean Juvenal des Ursins, *Histoire de Charles VI, Roy de France, et des chose mémorables advenues Durant quarante-deux années de son règne, depuis 1380 jusques à 1422* (Paris: 1836); J.S. Ersch and J.G. Gruber, ed., *Allgemeine Encyclopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste in alphabetischer Folge*, vol I (Leipzig: Gleiditsch Brockhaus, 1818). In addition, Rilke was said to have also consulted Russian histories. For an overview of such sources, see Witzleben.

¹⁵ "I only remember two of them" (188).

¹⁶ William Small, *Rilke – Kommentar zu den Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1983) 132-35.

¹⁷ The episodes of Otrepjow and Karl have been discussed in association with each other, but their historicity neglected. Helmut Naumann, *Malte-Studien: Untersuchungen zu Aufbau und Aussagegehalt der "Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge" von Rainer Maria Rilke* (Rheinfelden: Schäuble, 1983) 36-38

¹⁸ Ersch und Gruber 210-211.

¹⁹ The mask figures as an early and central motif in the novel (734, 738, and 741). Later, it is Malte who wears the mask (805-808). In the key childhood scene, the other, masked, projected self begins to dominate and erase the unmasked self. There the effort to conceal becomes a splitting of the self and the unmasked self is nearly destroyed.

²⁰ Rilke also made use of Barant's late *Histoire*. Witzleben, 113.

²¹ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol II-2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1991) 451. Benjamin's essay and Rilke's novel share more than this interest in the linkage between the chronicle and *Erzählen*: their mutual concern with the modernization of death: "Heute sind die Bürger in Räumen, welche rein vom Sterben geblieben sind, Trockenwohner der Ewigkeit, und sie werden, wenn es mit ihnen zu Ende geht, von den Erben in Sanatorien oder in Krankenhäusern verstaut." Benjamin, 449. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans., Harry Zohn (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1955) 95. Benjamin's essay and Rilke's novel share more than this interest in the linkage between the chronicle and *Erzählen*: their mutual concern with the modernization of death: "Today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death, dry dwellers of eternity, and when their end approaches they are stowed away in sanatoria or hospitals by their heirs." Benjamin, 94.

²² Koselleck, eng 200/G 262.

²³ "Die Menschen machen ihre eigene Geschichte, aber sie machen sie nicht aus freien Stücken, nicht unter selbstgewählten, sondern unter unmittelbar vorgefundenen, gegebenen und überlieferten Umständen." Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, vol. 8, Dietz: Berlin, 1967) 115.