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Rainer Maria Rilke; Or, an Open Life

A biography

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The Little Girl René

Sheltered Years 1875–1882

“Ismene stays with dear mother, René is a good-for-nothing”, said the seven-year-old René to his mother after while awaiting his punishment for doing something he was forbidden to do. So goes the family legend, in any case. His mother had deliberately chosen his androgynous, Francophone name. René was standing in front of his mother, his rolled-up sleeves revealing his delicate arms, his long locks done up in a braid. She liked him best as a girl who went by the name of Ismene, and he knew that all too well.

Ismene affected an air of utter innocence and sided with her mother against the ‘wicked boy-self’ René. If the family anecdotes can be believed, this gender switching served a simple purpose, and the early realisation that deception could be an effective means of

achieve a goal led to his manipulative talent: from an early age, Rilke had a charismatic effect on people – a fact that due to a lack of sources has rarely received any attention.

The young boy's roleplaying was preceded by a tragic event: one year before his birth on 4 December 1875, his parents lost a little girl, "Zesa". Barely a week old, she had been the child her mother had dreamt of. René came second, and to her mind, he arrived with the wrong gender. Despite his father's protests, his mother made him into a little girl, let his hair grow into long curls and gave him dolls to play with, put him in dresses – a fate shared by few boys of his generation, because back then, a son and heir was viewed as more valuable than a daughter. But women like Rilke's mother rebelled against the hierarchy of the sexes. She took advantage of customs such as the fact that up to the age of six, boys could wear practical, dress-like smocks, and his long locks meant they could save them trips to the hairdresser. Through these actions, Rilke's mother could fashion for herself a child with the gender she desired. It is said that René Rilke happily assumed his role as a girl, combing the hair of his dolls and asking his parents for a bed and a kitchen for his beloved playthings.

In his partly autofictional *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* from 1910, Rilke describes this dual gender of early childhood as a kind of splitting of the personality into a boy and a girl. Malte almost melds entirely with the figure of "Maman"; he recognises her desires, and instead of calling himself Ismene, he goes by "Sophie", after Rilke's mother. When he knocks on the door in his house frock with sleeves rolled up, he speaks in a high-pitched voice and laments the wickedness of boys in general and of Malte in particular. This girlish character becomes such a second skin to him, an alter ego, that even as an adolescent, he doesn't want to let her die. She not only allows him direct access to the world of his mother, not only protects him from punishment, but allows him to engage in activities that would otherwise be impermissible.

However, when this role was foisted upon him, when his mother played with him like he was “a big doll” and he was expected to mechanically perform for her, Rilke resisted this gender switching. In 1914, after seeing the filigree wax dolls made by artist Lotte Pritzel, he found a succinct explanation of his act of refusal. Unlike Pritzel’s beautiful dolls, when simple children’s dolls in their drab, wan colours opened their fluttering eyes, they stared into the void as if they were dead. In a passionate tirade, Rilke denounces these dolls, which stand in for his mother, who had made her son into a doll; to him, they become symbols of soulless life, or what he calls the “heart pause”, which leaves the individual rudderless and lost. Pritzel’s dolls, on the other hand – dolls for adults, delicate figures that seemed to be able to see and feel –, Rilke called “angel dolls”. And he found their producer so angelic that he invited her to his modest hotel room for an afternoon. Meanwhile, his mother appeared to him in a dream as a doll, he held her by silken threads and was able to control her, with all her sayings and hysterical outbursts.

In *Malte Laurids Brigge*, Rilke delves even deeper into his exploration of the doll-like, depicting this dynamic in a vibrant fashion. A striking dress-up scene illustrates the emotional experiences and role-playing of the young René: fascinated by the old uniforms of the Danish Order of the Elephant, by women’s skirts, pierrots, Turkish trousers, Persian fezzes, scarves and shawls, Malte tries on one article of clothing after the other in front of a narrow, cloudy trumeau mirror. He moves about like an actor, speaks as if in foreign tongues, gesticulates, sure of himself, his audacity growing, and dives into unknown worlds, intoxicated by extraordinary forms, colours, and fabrics. But with his energetic movements and pirouettes – his hand having taken on a life of its own – a flacon is shattered, and the magic evaporates in an instant. He no longer understands his mental state, he gets tangled up in a web of strings, feels as if the mirror that had seduced him is laughing in his face. The plethora of possible worlds overwhelms Malte: “I lost all knowledge of myself, I simply ceased to exist.” The butler has to help him out of the mantle, he lies “prostrate in all those clothes, like a bundle of

something”, as if all the life had drained out of him. Malte wants to do away with the masks that have been forced upon him; choked with fear, he lies on the floor, ready to die.

“It is as if the paths on which she awaits me are in a mirror”, inaccessible, unreal, Rilke complained of his mother. “In her imagination of me, she looks into such a gaping hole, such a void, that nothing retains its validity under her gaze”. The fluttering gender identity of Ismene, Sophie, or René corresponds to a maternal world that presents itself to the young René as a brightly coloured kaleidoscope of possibilities. I is always already an other, and the young boy is able to pick and choose like in a confectionary store. For the young René, that was an inspiring and formative experience, but looking back, he realised that too much masquerade corroded his sense of self.

This is why Lou Andreas-Salome framed the mirror scene as part of a story of abuse and claimed that his mother and the family’s living situations in Prague had made of Rilke a vulnerable individual, had made him into a girl, into “a little Renée”. But things were not so simple. Rilke’s relationship to his mother and to his gender was more complex, ambivalent, and loving, and despite his vulnerability, he ultimately developed into an individual who was able to assert himself in the world.

At the age of around five, though, Rilke’s life as a girl came to a visible end, with his long locks being cut off in preparation for his entry to school. An experience Rilke shared with the central character of another well-known Austrian author: in his *Confusions of Young Törless* of 1906 (some four years before Rilke’s *Malte* was published), Robert Musil depicted Törless’s discomfort with the binary regime of gender. “When he was quite small ... when he was still in pinafores and had not yet begun to go to kindergarten, there had been times when he had a quite unspeakable longing to be a little girl.” He felt this longing “in his skin, all over his body”. Like Rilke, before beginning school, Törless is confronted by the norms and expectations of the world of boys. The story goes that Rilke went off to military school at the

age of ten still wearing frilly underwear, provoking the scorn of his superiors and classmates alike, and a sergeant tore off the medallion he wore on a chain around his neck. Musil's character – Törless is older than Rilke – doesn't want to fall in line with the sociobiological sequence of events. Rilke accepted things more casually, as did his Malte, incidentally. Both of them accepted their existence as boys. Ultimately, it was one of the options available to them, and physically speaking, it was the most logical one.

Rilke's childhood was not a difficult one, but one burdened with baggage; he was no wunderkind, rather, he was "a spoilt child and a sentimental adolescent", according to the exacting judgment of his son-in-law, Carl Sieber. This verdict contains probably the same degree of half-truth as the denunciation that Andreas-Salomé levelled against Rilke's mother.