

a review of

‘Verwandt-Verwandelt’.

*Nietzsche’s Presence in Rilke*

by Angela C. Holzer, Princeton

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**'Verwandt-Verwandelt'. Nietzsche's Presence in Rilke**

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This study on *Nietzsche's Presence in Rilke* focuses on the relationship between the artist-philosopher and the poet that has not yet been fully explored—despite its importance for literary and philosophical history as well as for Nietzsche studies and Rilke scholarship. “Indeed, misconceptions abound about the actual amount of work on this topic” (22). Brunkhorst identifies merely 40 contributions on Nietzsche and Rilke in 70 years, some of which are obscure and unavailable or rely on each other and do not present new material. There is only one monograph on this topic (Detsch, 2003).

In addition, the theoretical complications that many such studies, beginning with Fritz Dehn's in 1936, have been confronted with consist not only in Rilke's own denial of a Nietzschean influence<sup>1</sup> or even knowledge of Nietzsche's works, reported by von Salis,<sup>2</sup> but also in inadequate theoretical frameworks that could be usefully brought to bear on such a complicated type of influence. In this special case, the relationship is ultimately composed of motivic, rhetorical, thematic, philosophical, personal, *zeitgeistliche* and psychological aspects. Thus, assumptions of a Nietzschean influence on Rilke have often run the risk of being merely speculative and have resorted to metaphors—such as intellectual “heir” (Margot Fleischer), in order to describe Rilke's position vis-à-vis the German philosopher.

The themes of spiritual *Verwandtschaft* (affinity) and *Verwandlung* (transformation), taken from a Nietzsche poem, also apply to the relationship between Nietzsche and Rilke. Katja Brunkhorst's study not only engages these two thinkers and artists, but the general problem of philosophical and poetic influence at the turn of the century, complicated by Nietzsche's own paradoxical advice in *Zarathustra*, namely that his disciples should turn away from him. “Hence, the question of influence is itself partly the object of this study, and its guiding spirit the ‘Antichrist’s very own definition of philology, in his eponymous work, as ,die Kunst, gut zu lesen [...], Thatsachen ablesen zu können, [...] ohne im Verlangen nach Verständnis die Vorsicht, die Geduld, die Feinheit zu verlieren’ (KSA 6, 233).”<sup>3</sup> The question of influence however, is also part of a methodological challenge this study faces, as I will discuss below.

Prior studies have been restricted to claiming either no Nietzschean influence or an influence for only parts of Rilke's corpus and life, variably for the early (notably Walter Seifert) or the later period (Hillebrand), more or less excluding the middle phase. Thus far, there is consensus that Rilke read the second *Untimely Meditation*, *The Birth of Tragedy* (on which he wrote *Marginalien zu Friedrich Nietzsche. Die Geburt der Tragödie* in 1900),<sup>4</sup> as well as the

<sup>1</sup> Brunkhorst considers this denial a “carefully manufactured myth” (p. 40) that Rilke maintained for a number of reasons and to which scholarship has adhered to blindly (11). Material indicating an influence of Nietzsche on Rilke was until now “virtually non-existent” (9).

<sup>2</sup> p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> Brunkhorst, p.10.

<sup>4</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke:  
*Marginalien zu Friedrich Nietzsche. Die Geburt der Tragödie*, in: Rainer Maria Rilke: *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 6, Frankfurt am Main 1966, p. 1163-1177.

<sup>5</sup> Scholars such as Alberto Destro, Detsch, Engel, Fleischer, Frowen, Görner, Hawes, Kaufmann, Mason, May, Meyer, Szabó, and Heller have also argued for this position. However, the “arguments of those these thirteen scholars are mostly based on textual analysis, as evidence of Rilke’s reading of Nietzsche was largely unavailable until very recently,” (27). Qualifications such as mostly and largely, however, are problematic in this context, not clearly stating the situation. If there are other indications and arguments, they should be made clear, otherwise the originality of the present study might be, implicitly, jeopardized.

<sup>6</sup> Brunkhorst notes in the text that also “Das trunkne Lied” (today: “Das Nachtwandler-Lied”) was marked in the table of contents (43), but she does not mention this fact in the appendix containing the marks of Z2.

correspondence between Friedrich Overbeck and Nietzsche, which he probably became familiar with in 1911 (73). He also knew a letter written by Nietzsche to Rohde containing his self-assessment as “Dichter bis zu jeder Grenze dieses Begriffs,” printed in the *Insel-Almanach auf das Jahr 1912* (19). It is unclear if Rilke knew parts of *Ecce homo* that appeared in French translation in 1909 (39). A copy of *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1887) is existent in the Rilke archive, and Rilke read parts of it in 1902 (39).

Due to Brunkhorst’s research, it is an indubitable advance in scholarship that it can now be stated with a certain degree of likeliness that some passages of *Zarathustra* might have influenced Rilke’s works. Brunkhorst not only presents new evidence on which to ground accounts of Nietzsche’s presence in Rilke, namely the reading traces found in two copies of *Also sprach Zarathustra* in the Rilke estate in Gernsbach. She also suggests, based on the analysis of Nietzsche passages marked by Rilke, a constant influence of Nietzsche on Rilke, thereby corroborating various prior theses of continuous influence.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, she also argues for a philosophical perspective on Rilke that would shed the remainders of a Heideggerian mystification. She additionally argues against the division of Rilke’s corpus into three different phases. By analyzing the reading traces, “Nietzschean themes which preoccupied the poet must emerge almost automatically, and his ‘Wahlverwandtschaft’ with the philosopher in its continuity throughout his literary career is brought to light. Thereby, this study hopes to make a contribution not only to the assumption of the continuity of the Rilkean oeuvre still debated within scholarship, but also to the re-discovery of Rilke’s philosophical radicality . . . ” (11).

The marked passages from the two copies in the Rilke archive, one probably from the possession of Lou-Andreas Salomé, the other definitely read and marked by Rilke, are appended to and commented on in the book. Not only the circled and marked parts of *Zarathustra* are transcribed (according to the KSA), but the handwritten comments, by either Salomé or Rilke, are available to a wider audience for the first time here as well. These passages also form the material on which the third part of the study relies, containing the major bulk of interpretative work. This material is limited; seven pages in the book reproduce text from *Zarathustra* that was singled out in the Rilke copy (Z 2); these pages of *Zarathustra* bear hardly any reading traces but appear to have been mainly marked through the insertion of either a drawing, a photo, or dried cyclamen, although the latter could also have been pressed between the pages arbitrarily. All in all, there are few pencil marks of any decisive intention in this copy: either underlined chapters in the table of contents (*Von Kind und Ehe; Vor Sonnenaufgang; Vom Vorübergehen*),<sup>6</sup> or a couple of underlined lines (in: *Vom Vorübergehen* (three underlined sentences), *Vor Sonnenaufgang* (one marked passage)). Strictly speaking, these are the only indubitable signs of Rilke’s reception of parts of *Zarathustra*, although Brunkhorst calls them “surprisingly many, very neatly executed pencil underlinings” (43).

The other copy of *Zarathustra* (Z 1) found in Rilke's estate was probably marked by Lou Andreas-Salomé during her work on *Friedrich Nietzsche in seinen Werken*, which Rilke also owned (there is only the cover left today). It remains thus unclear, although possible, that Rilke had any contact, directly or through Salomé, with these passages. Salomé's copy, however, is fragmented, consisting only of parts one and two in the 1883 edition by Schmeitzner. The Rilke copy (Z 2) is complete, comprising all four books (1899 edition, Naumann). This copy was most likely given to Rilke by Clara Westhoff in 1901, according to a dedication in the book. Although Brunkhorst bases her analysis on the copy owned by Rilke, she also considers Salomé's copy when relevant. This is reasonable, given their personal contact. It is also risky, since ultimate evidence of the way he became familiar, if he did, with this copy remains unattainable. As Brunkhorst focuses increasingly on "textual analysis" when considering Rilke's work and the marked passages in *Zarathustra*, she has to admit the insecurity of such an undertaking and resort to metaphors of affinity or modes of reminiscence and similarity in order to qualify the type of relationship between ideas, phrases and passages occurring in both corpora. These metaphors increasingly abound,<sup>7</sup> but at times tend to obfuscate rather than clarify the approach to the questions and modes of influence: "In following the marked Nietzsche passages with interpretations of Rilke's works pertinent to them, such textual analysis has automatically led to a thematic structure which makes visible Rilke's relation to, and transformation of, Nietzsche during the course of his development as a poet. Whether due to a direct influence or not, the most important point remains that Rilke's thought is often reminiscent of Nietzsche's sentiments..." (46). It might be important to remind of Nietzsche's "indifference to the question of influence" (46) in this context, but this does not necessarily solve the theoretical complications. Problematic here is not only the implicit assumption that Nietzschean sentiments are expressed in Nietzsche's works, most of all in the case of *Zarathustra*; it is also the difficulty in dealing with an influence that manifests itself both textually and through rhetorical transformation—due to the fact that Rilke "soon began to transform Nietzschean ideas rather than merely resounding them, as he had done in many of his earlier writings" (66). Thus, an emphasis on extra-textual factors especially influencing this case of artistic and personal influence is clearly in order.

Brunkhorst exhaustively discusses the scholarship on the connection between Rilke and Nietzsche, and devotes a complete chapter to establishing the literary and personal circumstances of Rilke's reception of Nietzsche and Nietzsche's psychological and personal situation during the composition of *Zarathustra*. Her attempt to grasp the importance of Nietzsche as a poet and philosopher of art for Rilke as well as their psychological affinity and the comparable circumstances in their social and erotic life during the production and reception of *Zarathustra*, however, at crucial points resorts again to

<sup>7</sup> She speaks of the relationship in terms of 'kindred spirit' (13), 'Wahlverwandtschaft' (11) Familienähnlichkeit (10), "intellectual and artistic proximity" (20), 'Wahlverwandtschaft' that is often rather subconscious (20).

Nietzsche's own assessment, in this case his mentioning of *Zarathustra* as *dionysischem Unhold* in the 1886 edition of the *Birth of Tragedy*. *Zarathustra* might have served, according to Brunkhorst, "as a possible projection screen for the young Rilke, who may have had aspirations to being that chosen *Dichter* himself, and the most obvious reason for him, as a reader of *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, to revisit the Persian prophet, whose prophecies, unlike those made in the earlier book, are never fulfilled, but keep on pointing into the future forever" (72). This suggests that Dionysos and *Zarathustra* were interesting to Rilke as figures of artistic hope. However, Rilke's contact with *Zarathustra* did not come about through his own impetus. Both copies of *Zarathustra* were given to him. It remains unclear why Salomé and Westhoff should have considered this book of Nietzsche's most suitable for Rilke: is it because it "comes closest to 'Dichtung'" (72)?

Brunkhorst suggests that Rilke was not only interested in the poetic and stylistic aspects of *Zarathustra* but also in what she calls Zarathustra's "main message" (72)—insinuating despite the authoritative and didactic tone that to follow him means not to follow him. This is the paradoxical crux around which Brunkhorst structures her argument about influence; it then necessarily has to consider the complexities, absences, and denials as part of this reception history.

Thus, psychological factors of the reception and its specific aspects are of crucial importance. Nietzsche might have been, not only in personal terms with regard to Salomé, but also in intellectual terms, an adversary to Rilke. This might explain, according to Brunkhorst, that the *Birth of Tragedy* was "in its flaws, comparatively less threatening to a budding artist than other, more stylistically accomplished Nietzsche works" (71). Even though Brunkhorst runs the risk of accepting Nietzsche's statements and self-assessments also in the psychological parts of the interpretation, these psychological aspects of the reception history are the most speculative of the whole study. "Yet, one can imagine the young Rilke, still constantly in search of an artistic identity and voice of his own, to be in awe of such firm authority and self-assuredness in advertising individualism at all costs" (73). "Thus, it may have been Nietzsche who helped to give Rilke the right to be true" as a poet, referring to Rilke's own poem from 1921. Nietzsche here takes on the function of a therapist, in addition to being a projection screen, mouthpiece, and motor for Rilke's own artistic coming of age as a poet. Nietzsche also served, Brunkhorst suggests, as social consolation: "Here was a fellow artist and thinker about human existence who did not fit into perceivedly 'normal' bourgeois Wilhelmine society, either" (73). Although these psychological speculations can be supported by textual evidence, they might run the risk of generalizing and banalizing the situation. Other problematic generalizations, like "An inherent poetics imbues his entire philosophy" (17) with regard to Nietzsche, or descriptions of Nietzsche at the time of writing *The Gay Science* as "most

balanced and psychologically ‘healthy’” (80) also do not necessarily lead to a better understanding of the topic at hand. Ultimately, they tend to lead away from a possible quest for direct textual evidence, as Brunkhorst intends it: “A feeling of affinity must have connected him to Nietzsche, a consciousness of belonging to the same ‘monumental’ lineage of those whom the latter, in his second *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtung*, pathetically refers to as the great ones, the lonely ones of history.” (75).

Brunkhorst however acknowledges these problems in proving direct textual influence, especially considering the nature and difficulty of *Also sprach Zarathustra*, and adapts her inquiry to this problem. She thus also considers similarities during the process of production and reception of the work, ultimately pivoting on the role of Salomé. Psychological and biographical speculation is moreover problematically, but then again necessarily, advanced in order to explain Nietzschean ideas like the “Übermensch (92f).”

The themes considered, in which Rilke was most interested in are: friendship, Fernsten-Liebe as opposed to Nächstenliebe, love, religion, and loneliness. Brunkhorst circumscribes their function and her methodological choice thus:

“ ”

Most obviously, as I have argued above, those passages may have functioned as projection screens or sounding boards, merely triggering or mirroring what was already there within him, unfinished and dormant until then. The experience of some of those *Zarathustra* passages may also have added genuinely new impulses to the psychic material out of which Rilke went on to create his poetry. A neat separation of these themes and topics from one another however proves almost impossible...Therefore, rather than progressing by topic, I shall examine selected passages (as representative of the respective *Zarathustra* book they belong to) singled out by Rilke as natural vantage points from which to embark on analyses of Rilke and Nietzsche’s treatments of their respective topics; for Rilke was of course not merely an interpreter as much as a productive transformer of Nietzsche’s thought. (76).

This comparison of themes is undertaken in the third part of the study. These thematic discussions are apt and, as important, also engage the female points of view in biographical—but also in thematic—contexts (Rilke’s marriage; Clara Modersohn-Becker’s comments; Salomé’s role and position). The question of influence however, it seems to me, is not confronted theoretically throughout the study, according to the methodological “reader-response”

approach. Brunkhorst discusses similarities and differences of ideas and vocabulary. If one looks for explications of modes of *Verwandtschaft* and *Verwandlung*, one ends up with formulations like “directly inspire” (104) or “testify to the kindredness in spirit of the two writers” (104).

It must be stated that the possibility to claim a direct influence, as Brunkhorst is able to do due to the copies of *Zarathustra* in Rilke’s estate, is already a crucial step forward in the scholarship on the relation between Rilke and Nietzsche. There remains work to do with regard to the explications of how this specific and complicated type of influence could be theorized. Motivic “reminiscence” (105), “analogies” (108), “proximity” (110), and semantic “correspondence” (105) are here the ultimate instances of influence.

Sometimes, Nietzsche is considered to “anticipate” or “preempt” Rilke. Rilkean ideas on the contrary “recall” Nietzsche or “resound” (78) in Rilke.

The major indecision, or theoretical tension resulting from the attempt to prove direct textual influence as well as the modes of its adaptation while also acknowledging the need to consider biographical, psychological, and other contextual factors, i.e., the well argued fact that absence of Nietzsche’s name in Rilke’s correspondence with Salomé “is potentially more telling than silent” (66) in the context of the current intellectual and personal climate, is present throughout the remainder of the study. While sharpening our understanding of the existential and philosophical themes Rilke confronted poetically, the study sometimes runs the risk of essentializing Nietzsche’s work as well as of following Nietzsche’s assessments very closely. Finally, it should be noted that the book, while it is written in English, contains large parts of German quotations and German appendices.

The book is certainly an indispensable contribution to scholarship. It presents valuable new material and carefully discusses the possible psychological, biographical, and artistic correlations—*influences*—between Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* and Rilke’s *œuvre*. With regard to a clear methodological choice in order to confront the various modes of influence and textual transformation as crucial moments in the relationship between Nietzsche and Rilke, this study opens a fertile field for subsequent theoretical discussions.