

Selected Rainer Maria Rilke's Poems: Mirrors of the Integral Structure of Consciousness

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Rainer Maria Rilke is considered one of the three outstanding poets of the twentieth century along with Yeats and Eliot (Leese 4). From his emergence as “child prodigy,” he became a poet of depth and maturity. His development as a person is parallel to the progress or improvement his body of works took (Ryan 7). Rilke, in his five poems— “*Archaic Torso of Apollo*,” “*Memory*,” “*What Survives*,” and “*The Swan*”—provides a richer understanding of the nature of things. The said poems known for their depth and maturity are mirror of the Integral Structure of Consciousness.

This theory on the structure of consciousness, developed by Jean Gebser, is synthesized by Ed Mahood whose essay has been an important reference of this paper (“*The Primordial Leap and the Present*”). In this theory, there are three interacting fields, namely: literature, psychology and science. In his study of Gebser, Mahood describes four mutations, or evolutionary surges of consciousness that have occurred in the history of man. The last and highest stage of the development of human consciousness, the Integral Structure of Consciousness is characterized by being fully present and philosophically open to all that exist. A person who has developed at the highest level is able to fully realize his highest potential, while at the same time contributes to the full realization of universal consciousness (“*The Primordial Leap and the Present*”).

This last stage of development is highly evident in some poems of Rilke. The said poems manifest the hallmarks of Integral Structure of Consciousness, which include transcendence on what is present, integration of past events, and emphasis on the tensions and relations of objects. Rather than focusing on the things themselves as individual and isolated objects, Rilke incorporates these *parts* into a *whole* wherein their true nature can be shown and perceived clearly, and results in self-cultivation

Archaic Torso of Apollo

As mentioned, one of the characteristics of integral consciousness is *transcendence* or *transparency*. According to Gebser as quoted in Mahood, this does not mean “not seeing anything” as when one looks through a pane of glass; rather, it is looking through things and perceiving its nature (“*The Primordial Leap and the Present*”). This is exemplified in the poem “*Archaic Torso of Apollo*.”

This poem is about a person who is looking at the statue of Apollo, presumably Rilke, and starts to describe what he sees. However, the way he describes the artwork is quite different. Instead of describing how he feels or how the statue actually looks to give his reader the “feel” of the artwork, he goes on by stating what the sculpture is not. He enumerates statements of truth—what it lacks. He says that it does not have his “legendary head” (line 1), but he can still see, its “eyes

like ripening fruit” (line 2). He states that this statue is “like a lamp” (line 4), but proceeds by describing how it might look like without this “brilliance from the inside” (line 3) that “gleams in all its power” (line 5). These are quite confusing when read haphazardly because the lines are in constant contradiction. However, upon inspection, these statements actually manifest the transcendent stance of the poem wherein it does not just settle on what can be seen spatially. It goes beyond the limitations of the surfaces of this piece of art of a Greek god, Apollo.

The moment the persona is able to say what it is not, is also the moment when he is able to portray a deeper kind of looking at the thing in front of him. Because of this inclination to go beyond what is physically present, the persona is able to have a deeper grasp of what the artwork really is. He acknowledges the incomplete state, but he also realizes in the end that it emits an untamable and holistic power as signified by the use of the phrase “wild beast” in line 11 that even demands him to change his life.

However, it must be noted, too, that this transcendence or transparency shown in the poem by Rilke does not lead the persona to rationalize the confusion or awe he is feeling because really, the mystery remains, it is not explained. The act of giving out multiple metaphors—likening the torso to a lamp (line 4); the whole statue to the glistening wild beast’s fur (line 11) and star that bursts (line 13)—is like an act of inquiry that is aimed at a certain understanding. What he has arrived at in the end is a kind of self-cultivation, or the care for the soul that can spark or inspire changes in his life (Carlson).

Memory

In “Memory,” a person waits for his good times, and then suddenly realizes that the best things have already gone past without him noticing it:

And then suddenly you know: it was then.
You rise, and before you
stands the fear and prayer and shape
of a vanished year (lines 11-13).

As one can see, this is a moment of enlightenment for having understood what was not previously known, even noticed. This is another attribute of integral consciousness.

The poem deals with the tension within the self as the persona arrives at the illumination in the end that the good days have already happened and been taken for granted. Rather than just acknowledging the presence of that tension, emphasis is given on how the persona developed it. This is done by the integration of past experiences as effective elements of the mentation—a characteristic of the integral consciousness.

Rilke does not give descriptions about the truth; he provides statements of truths which are anchored on actual life experiences, the process called *concretion* by Gebser. The first ten lines explicitly state actual events of waiting and longing that have impeded the perception and appreciation of the best thing:

And you wait for that one thing
that will infinitely enlarge your life;
the gigantic, the stupendous,

the awakening of stones,
depths turned round toward you (1-5),

.....

and you think of lands travelled across
of paintings, of clothes of
women found and lost (8-10).

After Rilke has successfully joined these parts—waiting, longing, and realizing—into their integrality, or in other words their merging into a whole thought process, he presents an integral understanding or perception of reality. Aside from being able to tell readers that it is important to seize every moment, he is able to emphasize the role of what has passed, even the most regretful ones, in one's present life. Through this, the poem has achieved an understanding that there are relations between these things, and that these contribute to the whole thought process of the persona in the poem as of the moment.

Another distinctive characteristic of this poem is the use of second person point of view, which seems to directly address the reader. Because of this, another dimension is added: the poem seems to warn the reader of what will happen if he does not awaken to live fully in the present. In this poem, what is evident is a process, a *progress*. As Gebser puts it -- again as quoted in Mahood -- it is in integral consciousness that the person is able to realize that progress is also a progression away, a distancing and withdrawal from something, namely, from origin ("The Primordial Leap and the Present").

What Survives

Just like in other poems, Rilke acknowledges the value of past experiences in this poem. He still employs *concretion*, the act of anchoring abstract propositions on actual life past events, and then successfully concretizing his own structure. The structure in this poem is that gestures, those that evoke sadness or happiness, should be appreciated because these have shaped the development of a person's life. The poem shows how the integrator, the person who possesses the integral consciousness, in this case the persona, actually thinks and looks at his life and destiny.

The first stanza shows the person as a part of a certain whole or group. He acknowledges his existence among others as he declares there are people whom he "wound[ed]" (line 3), and others who "caress[ed]" him (5). Additionally, he expresses his being by-and-with-others in this stanza as he recognizes the truth that he may be the doer or object of certain gestures. Again, like in the previous poem, Rilke does not use descriptions that would make this experience real to the readers; he uses statements that are truths in themselves— in other words, experiences.

Because of this integration of past experiences into the present mentation, an integral perception that these gestures affect the persona's life and destiny is arrived at, as expressed in the last stanza of the poem which reads:

It isn't the gesture that lasts,
but it dresses you again in gold
armor – from breast to knees –

and the battle was so pure
and Angel wears it after you (6-10).

These gestures, no matter how hurtful or joyful, whether small or big, have a bearing on the person, thus implying that we have to appreciate them in one way or another.

This exemplifies the tendency of integral consciousness to focus on the interconnections of events and people. Indeed, it is because of this that the persona in the poem is able to make an integrating mode of realization and liberation. It is through this that he becomes more perceptible to an open world.

The Swan

Like the previous poems, “The Swan” also reflects the integral consciousness which is characterized by the transparent recognition of the whole, not just the parts, through the use of statements of truth instead of statements about truth. Rilke, in likening humans’ living and dying to that of the swan’s changing of habitats, portrays the importance not only of being one with the environment to achieve its fullest being, but also of the completion of life in death.

The poet first portrays living as not a state where the person is in its fullest being, stating that living is like the lumbering movement of a swan in land, as if “in ropes through what is not done” (line 2). However, in dying, Rilke claims that the water, to which the swan swam after walking awkwardly on the land, receives him gladly. It could be understood as a transition to idealization when put in perfect surroundings or circumstances. This part of the poem is not just expressing the inherent or isolated importance of the water as a habitat and of the swan as an organism, but the relationship these two parts have as parts of a whole. Lines 6-13 express this harmonious connection of the organism and its natural environment.

into the water, which receives him gaily
and which flows joyfully under
and after him, wave after wave,

while the swan, unmoving and marvelously calm,
is pleased to be carried, each moment more fully grown,

more like a king, further and further on.

Established by Rilke that this swan is a metaphor for the living and dying of humans, he is able to capture the essence of the water in relation to the swan, which has deeper implications than just being itself. This picture demonstrates how the individual and the collective can enhance each other and reach higher levels of consciousness.

Rilke has successfully concretized the appearance of life and death, and has also concretized his own structure. Humanity’s life and death, symbolized by the swan and the water, become transparent and conscious to the persona, and to the readers as well. He has perceived their effect on his life and destiny. There is now an illumination.

Conclusion

From all the poems discussed, what is dominant is the freedom from space and time. These poems show how Rainer Maria Rilke has surpassed boundaries of physical appearances and single occasions of some events. All these characteristics of the pieces are key features of Jean Gebser's Integral Structure of Consciousness.

Past experiences are not considered unimportant and useless in the poems. They are, in fact, incorporated into the present thinking process or mentation of the persona as effective elements.

Another attribute found in the poems is the use of *veritions*, which are statements of truth through *concretion*. Rather than merely describing the event per se or the feeling that goes with it, Rilke provides actual happenings which are truths in themselves. Aside from these statements of truth, he also gives more emphasis on the relationships of things, the tensions most especially. Furthermore, he shows in his poems how these relationships develop overtime – an idea taking precedence over mere acknowledgment that these relationships exist.

This structure which is time-and-space-free introduces a further dimension to the ability in perceiving and stating things. Through transcendence, integration of past events, clear emphasis on the tensions or relations of objects, what are otherwise abstract concepts become conceivable, and thus the poems are understood more deeply.

Works Cited

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APPENDIX

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.

Memory

And you wait, you wait for that one thing
that will infinitely enlarge your life;
the gigantic, the stupendous,
the awakening of stones,
depths turned round toward you.

The volumes bound in rust and gold
flicker dimly on the shelves;
and you think of lands traveled across,
of paintings, of the clothes of
women found and lost.

And then suddenly you know: it was *then*.
You rise, and before you
stands the fear and prayer and shape
of a vanished year.

What Survives

Who says that all must vanish?
Who knows, perhaps the flight
of the bird you wound remains,
and perhaps flowers survive
caresses in us, in their ground.

It isn't the gesture that lasts,
but it dresses you again in gold
armor --from breast to knees--
and the battle was so pure
an Angel wears it after you.

The Swan

This clumsy living that moves lumbering
as if in ropes through what is not done,
reminds us of the awkward way the swan walks.

And to die, which is the letting go
of the ground we stand on and cling to every day,
is like the swan, when he nervously lets himself down

into the water, which receives him gaily
and which flows joyfully under
and after him, wave after wave,
while the swan, unmoving and marvelously calm,
is please to be carried, each moment more fully grown,
more like a king, further and further on.