

# BRIDGES TO SCANDINAVIA

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di/egni

Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Straniere

Facoltà di Studi Umanistici

Università degli Studi di Milano

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e Camilla Storskog per l'insieme del volume  
ISBN 978-88-6705-412-1

ILLUSTRAZIONE DI COPERTINA:  
*The Øresund Bridge*  
Elaborazione grafica su fotografia di Flora Cusi

n° 15  
Collana sottoposta a double blind peer review  
ISSN: 2282-2097

**Grafica:**  
Raúl Díaz Rosales

**Composizione:**  
Ledizioni

**Disegno del logo:**  
Paola Turino

STAMPATO A MILANO  
NEL MESE DI GIUGNO 2016

www.ledizioni.it  
www.ledipublishing.com  
info@ledizioni.it  
Via Alamanni 11 – 20141 Milano

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THE TEMPTATION OF A 'NORDIC CONSCIOUSNESS'.  
ON RAINER MARIA RILKE'S APPROACH  
TO SCANDINAVIAN LITERATURE AND SOCIETY

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I. SCANDINAVIA IN RILKE'S EXPERIENCE AND ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT

Rilke's relationship with Scandinavia is a wide and complex subject involving not only his interest in Nordic authors, but also his view of Scandinavian society. Even so, we can point out that his 'Nordic experience' knows its greatest intensity between 1901 and 1906 (Engel and Lauterbach 2004, 116). Scandinavia rightfully belongs to Rilke's spiritual geography in the same way that – for instance – Russia, France and Italy do. Indeed, Rilke was fascinated by different countries (or simply places) in different periods of his life and, when this happened, his curiosity was directed not only towards literature or the arts, but also towards people and landscapes. The way Rilke often idealised the cultures he came in touch with is one of the main aspects we have to consider when reviewing his writings (this is particularly true of those about Russia and Scandinavia), but at the same time his statements and notes can be seen as meaningful examples of the image those countries had acquired in the European context of that time. Furthermore, Rilke sometimes proved himself an acute observer of social trends and in many circumstances a refined critic of both literary and artistic works. He always tried to turn any phenomenon into part of his aesthetic research (see Schoolfield 2009, 199, as far as Scandinavian reviews are concerned); yet, he also showed a genuine desire to become acquainted with new cultures: we know that he read and researched extensively before leaving for a new

place and that he studied several foreign languages, not only French (which would be his second language besides German) or Italian, but even Russian and Danish, all of which he practiced by translating (mainly poems).

In Rilke's artistic development, the culmination of the Scandinavian experience was reached between the Russian and the French periods, which corresponded to the merging into a mystical and popular dimension and the striking and hard acquaintance with modernity, respectively. In his literature, this occurred after the collection of poems *Stundenbuch* (*Book of Hours*, 1905, written between 1899 and 1903) and the *Geschichten vom lieben Gott* (*Tales of the Good God*, 1904) and before the *Neue Gedichte* (*New Poems*, 1907-08) and his only novel *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (*The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, 1910, begun in 1904): in other words between his young and his middle periods. From another perspective, we can consider the first years of the twentieth century as Rilke's fundamental passage from the connection with his origins, perceived in eastern Europe (Rilke was born in Prague, though his family belonged to the German-speaking community), to his attempt to settle down and find his own place in western Europe's modern cities (Vienna, Munich, Berlin, and eventually Paris).

In Rilke's view northern Europe (*der Norden*) represents a vital area, where one's personality has a chance to develop and therefore all the arts enjoy a mature and educated public that can understand them (Engel and Lauterbach 2004, 116). As this short definition may suggest, Rilke's statements about Scandinavia deal on the whole both with literary (or generally aesthetic) and social evaluations. The word 'temptation' in our title is meant to concern two distinct but complementary aspects of the question: on the one hand, Rilke found that the Nordic countries set a very effective cultural and moral example for the rest of Europe and to him, both as a man and as an artist; on the other, while reading and studying Scandinavian literature, he mirrored himself in the contemporary works coming from the North and felt – with pleasure – that he was already gifted with a 'Nordic sensibility' towards life and art: somehow he already had a 'Nordic consciousness', that made him feel at home in Scandinavia. This sentiment becomes evident if we compare the words he uses to define the Nordic authors and works with what he writes about his own art and his idea of art. Indeed, we can notice that Rilke uses both the word *nordisch* and the word *skandinavisch* when writing about that area, though the former is used more frequently (Schoolfield 2009, 220): with *nordisch* he refers to anything related to the whole Scandinavian world, which meant that he perceived the Nordic countries – mainly the continental ones – as a common area (Engel and Lauterbach 2004, 117). In fact, although he visited only Sweden and Denmark, he felt that a Nordic view of life existed somehow. It was, however, Denmark that attracted him most, so much so that he studied Danish and translated from it into German.

## 2. SOME SUITABLE PERSPECTIVES: THE JOURNEY, THE FIRST READINGS, TRANSLATIONS AND ACQUAINTANCES

We can examine Rilke's Scandinavian experience from different points of view. First of all, the most obvious aspect is his journey northwards: Rilke was in Scandinavia from 24 June to 9 December 1904; he arrived in Copenhagen (where he would return on three more occasions), before visiting several Swedish towns: Borgeby (near Lund), Gothenburg, Jonsered and Furuborg. In other words, he became acquainted with the Danish capital and the Swedish countryside (in addition to Gothenburg). There Rilke found nearly everything he was looking for: the Swedish nature corroborated his ideal image of Scandinavia and, while in Copenhagen, he had the chance to meet a number of intellectuals and artists. However, not every plan was successful: if Rilke was helped many times by the people he met during his stay, the chief purpose of the journey – that is to say, his wife Clara Westhoff's project of an artistic career as a sculptress in Copenhagen – proved to be unfeasible. That was probably the main reason why Rilke and Clara travelled back to Germany, even though Rilke's fascination for Scandinavia remained alive. This also turned out to be Rilke's only journey to the North: none of the later plans for another stay, as letters testify, were ever realised.

Rilke's experience of the Nordic culture had actually begun some years earlier and was essentially based on literature: in 1897 he received from his friend Jakob Wassermann some works by Jens Peter Jacobsen in the German translation (Rilke 1996, 4, 651-52). This turned out to be fundamental in Rilke's artistic education, precisely because it happened at a crucial moment in his life: he had recently moved from Prague to Munich to continue his university studies and he had just met Lou Andreas-Salomé, with whom he would make two important journeys to Russia (in 1899 and 1900) and who would make him familiar with Nietzsche's philosophy and Freud's psychoanalysis. Those were also the years in which Rilke was becoming a European artist and intellectual, while he was eager to expand his knowledge and establish new contacts. Jacobsen, as previously mentioned, became his beloved author: Rilke would later read not only his narrative works but also his scientific writings,<sup>1</sup> and Rilke's interest in him, his world and his literature proved to be a lifelong affair, with over sixty statements about the Danish poet in letters and diaries from 1897 to 1925 (Finco 2010, 110-25). Indeed, some of these passages are full-fledged critical essays (e.g., Rilke 1937, 110-12, and [1942] 1973, 277-78). We find a meaningful presence of the Scandinavian atmosphere in *Worpswede* (1902), the monograph

<sup>1</sup> Jacobsen had been an esteemed botanist before fully devoting himself to literature because of health troubles. He contributed to spread Darwin's studies and his theory of evolution in Denmark, even discussing its social implications. About Jacobsen's influence on Rilke's writing and aesthetic education see Kohlschmidt 1948; Kunisch 1975; Stahl 1979; Destro 1987; Potthoff 1987; Sørensen 1988; Unglaub 2002; Finco 2009.

Rilke wrote about five young painters he lived with in a community in Worpswede, near Bremen. At the beginning of the volume Rilke reports a quotation taken from Jacobsen's novel *Niels Lyhne* (1880), but a more interesting aspect is the concept of *nordisch* as a recurring definition of the five painters' style, an idea that is sometimes exemplified by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's and Jacobsen's descriptions of nature and man (Rilke 1996, 4, 305-400). As the favourite subject of those painters was landscape, Rilke's observations help us to understand how northern Germany was for him an anticipation of Scandinavia, which in turn would become complementary to the German landscape and a sort of development of what Rilke already had experienced before leaving for the Nordic countries (Unглаub 2002, 36). This is, moreover, a good example of how Rilke's judgements about Scandinavia are related to different kinds of objects: from the vivid landscape to the paintings, from everyday life to the meeting with intellectuals and artists. It is very hard to distinguish among these levels of experience, as all of them contribute to his overall view of the Nordic world.

But this was just the beginning: in the following years Rilke became very fond of Scandinavian art, literature and society, as is shown by the number of authors whose works he read, commented on, appreciated, suggested to friends and tried to divulge in Germany. In strictly alphabetical order these included: Herman Bang, Carl Michael Bellman, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Georg Brandes, Gustaf Fröding, Gustaf af Geijerstam, Svend Hammershøi (painter), Verner von Heidenstam, Tora Vega Holmström (painter), Henrik Ibsen, Jens Peter Jacobsen, Ellen Key, Søren Kierkegaard, Selma Lagerlöf, Hans Larsson (professor of philosophy), Karin Michaëlis, Edith Nebelong, Ernst Nordlind (painter), Sigbjørn Obstfelder, Amalie Skram, August Strindberg. In his fascination for the North, Rilke undoubtedly followed the fashion of his time (in particular, from 1880 to 1910, Scandinavian personalities rose to the role of masters for the German and European public), but he was able both to make all themes, suggestions, views and styles his own and to become a sort of talent scout, as he was for the young Danish writers Edith Nebelong and, above all, Karin Michaëlis, whose first novels he considered really promising, long before she grew to become an international (literary and humanitarian) figure.

The journey to Scandinavia was the natural consequence of his great commitment, but – as we shall see – also of the effect of Rilke's fame and of the significant contacts he had managed to establish. He began to study Danish in 1904 in Rome, while he was preparing for the journey, and he did it on his own, with the help of a dictionary, a grammar and Jacobsen's works; he would translate some of his poems and some of Kierkegaard's letters to his beloved Regine Olsen (Rilke 1997, 1043-121). This effort allowed him to read Jacobsen's and Bang's works in Danish, though we must bear in mind that nearly all the Scandinavian works he read were in German. His experience of the Danish language provides us with a further perspective to explore his

attitude towards Scandinavia, as we can verify in a letter to Axel Juncker: "Wir haben uns mit Eifer und Freude ans Lesen und Lernen gemacht und finden, daß Ihre Sprache unvergleichlich ist: wie alte, köstliche Seide fühlt sie sich an [...]. Jacobsen hat, das fühlt man gleich, unsägliches aus dieser Sprache gemacht" (Schnack 1975, 186).<sup>2</sup> Statements like this show how sensitive and sensual Rilke's approach to Scandinavian literature was (he uses *fühlen*, 'feel', twice) and prove how he tried to understand the beauty of a culture from different points of views.<sup>3</sup> Danish was without any doubt Rilke's linguistic key to Scandinavia and it probably helped him to become acquainted with Swedish (which he was able to hear during his stay) and to translate a poem by Gustaf Fröding, not quite coincidentally *Narkissos* (Narcissus being an important figure and theme in Rilke's poetry). In addition, Rilke wrote about ten 'Swedish poems' that drew inspiration from the Swedish landscape, especially the Scanian landscape (Fülleborn 1991).

Rilke was invited by his dear friend Ellen Key, whose work he had promoted and whose efforts to reform Swedish (but also European) society he admired and supported. She repaid his interest in her social struggles and her intellectual commitment by organising part of his stay in Scandinavia (she enlisted the help of some friends who hosted him for some weeks), thus attracting him to Sweden while widening his travel horizons. Before his arrival she had also divulged Rilke's poetry in a series of conferences. In Rome he had already met Edith Nebelong, while in Copenhagen he was able to spend some time with the influential literary critic Georg Brandes. Rilke had also wished to meet Herman Bang, but the meeting probably never took place (Schoolfield 2009, 213). Rilke's activity also involved establishing relationships with painters like Svend Hammershøi or Tora Vega Holmström, who was also Rilke's interpreter, and professors like the philosopher Hans Larsson, whose works Rilke helped to publish (Engel and Lauterbach 2004, 118).

### 3. EXPLORING RILKE, SCANDINAVIA AND RILKE'S SCANDINAVIA: HIS REVIEWS AS A PATH TOWARDS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF HIS 'NORDIC CONSCIOUSNESS'

From 1901 to 1905 Rilke's interest in the Nordic culture was fully and cogently expressed in a series of reviews, most of which were written for the

<sup>2</sup> "With zeal and joy we [Rilke and his wife Clara] have devoted ourselves to studying and reading and we find that your language [Axel Juncker's, i.e., Danish] is incomparable: at the touch it feels like ancient and precious silk [...]. Jacobsen, one feels it at once, has made something indescribable out of it." Axel Juncker was a Danish editor (Rilke's, too) who worked in Berlin at that time and who provided Rilke with the works of several Scandinavian authors. All translations are mine.

<sup>3</sup> His reading of Danish literature was of course a passive experience as far as the knowledge of the language is concerned, though we know – for instance – that in Rome he asked Edith Nebelong to read some passages aloud for him (Schnack 1975, 186).

*Bremer Tageblatt*.<sup>4</sup> These peculiar kinds of publications, in which Rilke could, to a certain extent, organise his thoughts on some of his beloved authors while integrating them into his own poetic research, allow us to spell out the principal themes and approaches in Rilke's survey of the Scandinavian world.

### 3.1. CHILDHOOD

One of the main subjects his aesthetic and existential sensibility focuses on is childhood, seen not only as a blessed condition for the human being and a primary source of creativity, but also as an important dimension an artist should recover to expose the most painful aspects of life. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Rilke admires writers, such as Herman Bang, who have conducted this kind of research. About Jacobsen he had written: "Jacobsen hat keine Erfahrungen gehabt, keine Liebe, kein Erlebnis und keine Weisheit, nur eine Kindheit. Eine große, ungeheuer farbige Kindheit, in der er alles fand, was seine Seele brauchte, um sich phantastisch zu verkleiden" (Rilke [1942] 1973, 277).<sup>5</sup> Childhood acquires in some circumstances mythical connotations and, as in *Malte*, it seems to be a privileged world (saved in memories), where an existential quest may be pursued again. This proves to be very helpful when writing, as Rilke remarks in his review on Bang's *Tine* (1889):

aus dem Dunkel der Kindheit kommt er [Herman Bang] zu ihnen [seinen Stoffen] wie aus ihrer eigenen Tiefe; er erlebt sie inniger, gerechter und ernster [...]. Jetzt, da so viele Fragen und Anforderungen gestellt werden, liegt vor diesem Schriftsteller eine einfache, große Aufgabe: er will seiner Kindheit wieder mächtig werden und fähig, mit schlichter Klarheit von ihren Eindrücken und Bildern und Begebenheiten zu erzählen. Er ruft Erinnerungen [...] denn vielleicht ist Schaffen nichts anderes als sich tief erinnern (Rilke 1996, 4, 552).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Edith Nebelong, Mieke Wichmann, Nov. 1901 (Rilke 1996, 4, 188); Herman Bang, *Das weiße Haus*, Apr. 1902 (1996, 4, 259-62); *Das Jahrhundert des Kindes* [on Ellen Key], Jun. 1902 (1996, 4, 262-68); *Zwei nordische Frauenbücher* [on Amalie Skram and Selma Lagerlöf], Aug. 1902 (1996, 4, 278-83); Karin Michaëlis, *Das Schicksal der Ulla Fangel*, Nov. 1902 (1996, 4, 300-02); *Nordische Bücher II* [on Herman Bang and Gustaf af Geijerstam], Feb. 1903 (1996, 4, 549-53); Sigbjørn Obstfelder, *Pilgerfahrten*, Nov. 1904 (1996, 4, 564-68); *Samskola*, Jan. 1905 (1996, 4, 576-82).

<sup>5</sup> "Jacobsen had no experience, no love, no wisdom, just a childhood. A great, immensely colourful childhood in which he found everything his soul needed to disguise himself using his imagination."

<sup>6</sup> "From the darkness of his childhood he [Herman Bang] approaches [his work] as from its own depth. He makes a more intimate, accurate and more serious experience of it [...]. Now that one must face so many questions and many demands, a simple and great task lies before this writer: he wants to have his childhood back and to become able to narrate its impressions, images and events with absolute clarity. He evokes memories [...] since creativity is perhaps

In these last words Rilke hints at a theme that he develops both in his letters to the young poet Franz Xaver Kappus (Rilke 1996, 4, 515-16) and in a chapter of *Malte* (Rilke 1996, 3, 466-67), as a proof of how his analysis of other authors is entwined with his own research. But childhood has even a more concrete, social aspect that Rilke shows he has taken note of: children in modern society are still neglected and their rights are not protected (not even recognised), just like women's. In both cases he welcomes movements that fight for them and that demand emancipation of these minorities. In Rilke's time, one of the most famous and resolute figures in that context was the above mentioned Ellen Key, whose efforts he witnessed and passionately commented on: "Sie ist der Anwalt und der Apostel des Kindes. Sie ist unzufrieden mit der Gegenwart und hofft auf das Kind, welches die Zukunft ist" (Rilke 1996, 4, 263).<sup>7</sup> In his review *Das Jahrhundert des Kindes* (*The Century of the Child*, 1902, about Key's study *Barnets århundrade*, 1900), Rilke acts as Key's spokesman in favour of children, (often) against adults: Key's contribution is rational and presented in her scientific essays, thus constituting (in Rilke's view, at least that is what we can infer) a theoretical reference for Rilke:

Sie will diese Zukunft groß und glücklich [...]. Aber sie hält es für aussichtslos, durch Reformen der gegenwärtigen Zustände, wie sie unter Erwachsenen herrschen, wirkliche Fortschritte zu erzielen. Die Kinder sind der Fortschritt selbst, und, was sie mit ihrem Buche lehren und sagen und raten will, ist immer wieder dieses: vertraut dem Kinde (Rilke 1996, 4, 263).<sup>8</sup>

### 3.2. THE INABILITY TO LIVE

A major theme that many European authors of that time dealt with is the inability to live and all the different strategies characters adopt to change their own situation or, conversely, to pretend to live. Rilke's only novel, featuring a Dane living in Paris as its main character (*Malte Laurids Brigge*), investigates such a typical modern situation through *Malte's* several notes (memories, present experiences, anecdotes and essays). Before writing this work, which would make him famous, Rilke found his models – among oth-

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nothing but remembering oneself vividly." For the role of Bang's view of childhood for the writing of *Malte*, see Aarsleff 1966.

<sup>7</sup> "She is the advocate and the apostle of the child. She is not satisfied with the present and hopes in the child, who is the future." It is no accident that Rilke dedicated his *Geschichten vom lieben Gott* to her: the (somewhat surreal) tales he presents in this book are told to some adults but are addressed to children they know, who should appreciate them more.

<sup>8</sup> "She wants this future to be great and happy [...]. But she does not hope to achieve real improvements through social reforms, as they have been made by adults. Children are the future and what she wants to teach and suggest through her book is always this: trust the child."

ers – in Bang’s *Det hvide Hus* (*The White House*) and Jacobsen’s *Niels Lyhne*, whose protagonist shares some features with Malte’s. What Rilke wrote in 1902 about Bang summarises this question and foreshadows major themes in *Malte*, which Rilke would begin writing two years later:

Diese Hast, diese fieberhafte Tatenlosigkeit, die oft über besonders feinen und empfindsamen Menschen liegt, ist das eigentliche Thema im Werke Herman Bangs [...]. [I]n seinem letzten Buche [hat er] die Aufgabe gestellt, uns eine einzelne Gestalt zu zeigen, an der das Leben vorüberfliegt wie ein Traum und die mit tausend kleinen Liebkosungen, mit süßen mädchenhaften Schmeicheleien sich ihm zu nähern und es festzuhalten sucht; denn darin liegt die Tragik, daß dieser Mensch, dem das Leben mit fremden Lächeln vorbeigehen will, dieses Leben, ohne seiner mächtig zu sein, gerade in seinen starken und kraftvollen Erscheinungen liebt und anerkennt (Rilke 1996, 4, 259).<sup>9</sup>

Rilke perceives the Danish literature of his time as truly contemporary because it deals with those very same questions that affect him. Yet, we cannot overlook the fact that he had a partial knowledge of it, as he was acquainted with the intellectual life of the capital rather than with the tradition kept alive in the rest of the country (where Grundtvig was still the most widely read author; Unglaub 2002, 32).

### 3.3. EDUCATION

In Sweden Rilke had the chance to verify how Key’s dream of a new school had somehow come true in the *högre samskola* (Superior Common School, i.e., both for boys and girls) founded in 1901 in Gothenburg. He was able to visit that school twice and reported his experience in a passionate essay where he compared the new school with the traditional one, which he had harshly criticised in *Das Jahrhundert des Kindes*: “Der Wille in den jungen Leuten wird verwirrt [...]. [S]ie [wissen] nicht mehr, was sie gewollt haben. Ratlos stehen dann die meisten vor dem Leben [und] ergreifen [...] einen jener zufälligen Berufe, die nicht Persönlichkeiten, sondern Maschinen verlangen, um erfüllt zu werden” (Rilke 1996, 4, 265).<sup>10</sup> If this was the ordinary

<sup>9</sup> “This hurry, this feverish lack of activity, often typical of very refined and sensitive people, is the real subject of Bang’s works [...]. In his latest book he has taken it upon himself to show us one character only; life flies over her like a dream and with thousands of small and sweet maiden-like caresses she tries to get closer to it to catch it. The tragedy is that, whereas life passes her by with a stranger’s smile, she loves and recognises just this life, without owning it, in its strong and powerful apparitions.”

<sup>10</sup> “The willpower among young people has become muddled [...]. They no longer [know] what they desire. Facing life ahead, they remain puzzled and grab [...] one of those random jobs that do not require people with personality, but rather machines.”

situation in most schools, in this passage we can read his criticism both about tradition and about modernity: school as an institution has always tried to adapt people to society, but modern society, with all its complexity and its automatic procedures, has probably a particular need for adapted people; machines, not personalities. In the *högre samskola*, by contrast, Rilke witnessed the good effects of learning when it is carried out in freedom:

Die Kinder sind in dieser Schule die Hauptsache [...]. Das Wort Freiheit ist genannt. Es scheint mir, als ob wir, die Erwachsenen, in einer Welt lebten, in der keine Freiheit ist. Freiheit ist bewegtes, steigendes, mit der Menschenseele sich wandelndes Gesetz. Unsere Gesetze sind nicht mehr die unserigen. Sie sind zurückgeblieben, während das Leben lief. Man hat sie zurückgehalten, aus Geiz, aus Habgier, aus Eigennutz; aber vor allem: aus Angst [...]. Aber nun ist sie [die neue Schule] da. Ihre einfache Heiterkeit spielt vor einem Hintergrunde dunkelsten Ernstes [...]. Und es ist gar nicht vom 'Erziehen' die Rede. Es handelt sich gar nicht darum. Denn wer kann erziehen? Wo ist der unter uns, der erziehen dürfte?

Was diese Schule versucht, ist dieses: nichts zu stören (Rilke 1996, 4, 576-78).<sup>11</sup>

#### 3.4. WOMEN (WRITERS)

Rilke shows therefore that he trusts inborn human qualities and their ability to develop themselves. But this process requires courage, which in turn can benefit from particular social conditions. This is just what is happening in Scandinavia: women, for instance, have achieved a sort of independence, which is even more meaningful from a psychological point of view and which is reflected in the condition of women writers. Rilke's view of (prominent) Nordic women, however, must be considered in the light of his overall celebration of women (as human beings and above all as true lovers as against male hypocrisy and meanness), which once again seems to find its completion in the Nordic world. It is therefore crucial to understand the nature of Rilke's fascination for women's status in Scandinavia to trace both

<sup>11</sup> "In this school children are the main thing [...]. The word 'freedom' is known here. It seems to me that we adults lived in a world where there was no freedom. Freedom is a dynamic and progressive law, which changes according to the human soul. Our laws are no longer ours. They have fallen behind, while life has moved forward. We have kept them because of our avarice, our greed, our personal interest; but above all: because of our fear [...]. But now it [the new school] exists. Its simple cheerfulness is played out against a background of grey seriousness [...]. And there is no mention of 'upbringing'. This is beside the question. After all, who can bring someone up? Who among us should be allowed? / What this school strives to do is not upset anything."

its innovative and its conservative features. From a theoretical point of view, Rilke finds a quite suitable reference in Ellen Key's *Missbrukad kvinnokraft* (*Misused Female Power*, 1894):

Sie hat, eben weil sie weiter sah, im Weibe immer das zur Mutterschaft auserwählte Wesen gesehen, dessen Leben dann schön und harmonisch ist wenn es ihm gelingt, seine Tätigkeit mit jener ersten und wichtigsten Aufgabe in Einklang zu sein. [Keys Werk kommt aus] einem reifen, freien und hilfreichen Menschen, der, ganz ohne fremdes Ferment, aus einer Frau entstanden war, aus den Leiden, den Erfahrungen und Freuden einer Frau (Rilke 1996, 4, 263).<sup>12</sup>

Here Rilke shows himself to appreciate the part of Key's thought that had been criticised by the feminist movement, that is to say her observation that a woman's self-realisation should never neglect her fundamental diversity from man: motherhood. Furthermore, Rilke acknowledges a woman's self-sufficiency in intellectual life, even though he refers to this as a sort of purity that women – in Scandinavia better than elsewhere – proudly defend. That is why the review of Amalie Skram and Selma Lagerlöf is introduced by the following passages:

Im skandinavischen Schrifttum spielt die Frau eine andere Rolle als bei uns. Die Frau, welche über die Frauenbewegung so rasch hinausgekommen ist, konnte Schriftsteller sein, ohne Nachahmer oder Nebenbuhler des Mannes zu werden. [...] Sie und der Mann haben in den Kulturen des Nordens ein gemeinsames Ziel, das über die geschlechtliche Trennung hinausgeht, das Ziel auf dem Wege der Persönlichkeit zu erreichen. [...] Schriftstellerinnen wie Ellen Key oder Amalie Skram oder Selma Lagerlöf haben gar nie daran gedacht, dem Manne nachzustreben [...] und Bücher zu schreiben, wie Lie oder Hamsun oder Bang sie geschrieben haben. Der Weg ihrer Entwicklung [...] versuchte aus der Tiefe ihrer Weiblichkeit und aus ihrer Enge in ein weites und großes Menschentum hineinzuführen, in ein stilles Verstehen, ernstes Schauen und wehmütiges Lieben aller Dinge (Rilke 1996, 4, 278).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "Just because she could look beyond, she has seen in the woman the chosen creature for motherhood, whose life is therefore beautiful and harmonious when she succeeds in reconciling her activity with that serious and fundamental task. [Key's work originates from] a mature, free and charitable personality, which, with no interference from anything external, is born of a woman, of a woman's grief, experience and joy."

<sup>13</sup> "In Scandinavian literature women play a different role from what they do here [in Germany]. Women, who have so rapidly come out of the feminist movement, have been able to become writers without imitating or competing with men. [...] Women and men have a

Female freedom from male imposition and conditioning makes women better suited to deal with the female experience of life, thus contributing to the work contemporary male writers are doing. Rilke imagines that such a society will lead to a very fruitful meeting of both genders in their comprehension of life (through literature) and will produce a new real person, not only for Scandinavia but for Europe as a whole: "Eines Tages (wofür jetzt, zumal in den nordischen Ländern, schon zuverlässige Zeichen sprechen und leuchten), eines Tages wird das Mädchen da sein und die Frau, deren Name nicht mehr nur einen Gegensatz zum Männlichen bedeuten wird, sondern etwas für sich [...] der weibliche Mensch" (Rilke 1996, 4, 538; to Franz Xaver Kappus).<sup>14</sup>

### 3.5. STYLISTIC INFLUENCES: LITERATURE AS A FAITHFUL BUT PROUDLY FREE MIRROR OF REALITY

Rilke appreciates Nordic authors not only for their artistic projects and the social questions they raise, but also as models of style. The main features that attract him can be defined by two words which often recur in his writings, i.e., *leise* ('light, faint, soft') and *werden* ('become'). Rilke admires the skilfulness of some Scandinavian writers in lightening things and reducing them to colours and nuances, a process that shows their sensitivity to how life is apt to change and be transformed, mollifying even the hardest situations to delicate tones. We have shown how this aspect of Jacobsen's style<sup>15</sup> might have affected Rilke's writing of *Malte*, probably contributing to his use of hypothesis (Finco 2009, 53-66). Bang, too, seemed to possess a similar ability in shaping characters,<sup>16</sup> but it is in Rilke's review of Sigbjørn Obstfelder's posthumous works that we perhaps have the most charming

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common aim in the Nordic culture, which has nothing to do with difference in gender: to complete the development of their own personality. [...] Writers like Ellen Key or Amalie Skram or Selma Lagerlöf have never wanted to become like men [...] by writing books in the same way as Lie or Hamsun or Bang wrote them. Their own development began from the depth of their womanliness and from its narrow room and tried to reach a wide and great humanity, a silent understanding, a serious look at and a melancholic love for all things."

<sup>14</sup> "One day (there are reliable and promising signs of it above all in the Nordic countries), one day there will be a girl and a woman whose name will no longer signify an opposite of the masculine, but something of its own [...] the feminine human being."

<sup>15</sup> It is significant that in *Worpswede*, just before quoting a passage from Jacobsen's *Niels Lyhne* (as mentioned above), Rilke (1996, 4, 306) remarks: "Die fünf Maler, von denen es handelt, sind werdende" ("The five painters this book is about are evolving").

<sup>16</sup> "Er hat eine Technik, diese Figuren auszusparen, wenn er ihnen einen bewegten und wogenden Hintergrund giebt, er läßt sie weiß, und alle Veränderungen, die an ihnen vor sich gehen [...] sind unter verschiedene Art von Weiß, von blendender Helle bis zu der rätselhaften Unnahbarkeit, die diese Farbe annimmt in der Dämmerung" (Rilke 1996, 4, 551, about *Tine*; italics in the original; "He possesses a technique of sparing these characters: when he provides them with a background in motion, he leaves them *white*, and all the changes that happen before them [...] are realised in different degrees of white, from the blinding clarity to the enigmatic inaccessibility that this colour acquires in the twilight").

and subtle description of the way language can unite, and finally overcome, different forms of art:

Seine Worte *enthalten* nicht, sie *beschwören herauf*. Deshalb dürfen sie so leise sein. Wie Zauberformeln sind sie: man flüstert sie nur, aber die Berge gehn auf [...]. Und wie seine Sprache in dem einen Zustande ihres Wachstums fast Musik wurde, so verwirklichte sie sich in einem anderen bis in die Malerei hinein [...]. [So] stark war die Bewegung in seiner werdenden Sprache, daß sie nach beiden Seiten über die Ufer sprang; aber es ist bezeichnend, daß sie sich schließlich doch ganz in ihrem eigenen Becken klärte und darin zu tiefer, spiegelnder Ruhe kam [...]. Sie reicht bis dorthin, wo die Musik anfängt, und giebt, was die Malerei nicht geben kann: das Leben der Farben, den Farbenwechsel eines Sommerabends von sechs bis zwölf, der Farben Geburt, Kindheit, Verlöbniß, Hochzeit, Verbleichen und Tod (Rilke 1996, 4, 566-67; italics in the original).<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

We have seen how Rilke approached Scandinavian culture to meet his own existential and aesthetic demands: several Nordic authors appeared to him so contemporary because they dealt with the same subjects that engaged him – like childhood, the inability to live, women’s emancipation – and because he became aware of it at an early stage of his education. Rilke perceived the Nordic countries as a completion of the German world, but also as a privileged area for social improvements, where people could understand art better and had more opportunities to develop their own personality. Rilke’s experience of Scandinavia was favoured by meaningful friendships and contacts; it concerned different forms of art and his commitment was best expressed in his love for the language, above all Danish. Denmark attracted Rilke to the North and his interest for Nordic writers (mainly Jacobsen) lasted a lifetime, encouraging new readings and projects, mostly unfinished, as a large amount of evidence testifies. His view of the Nordic world was affected

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<sup>17</sup> “His words do not *contain*, they *enchant*. This is why they may be so soft. They are like magic words: they are just whispered, but the mountains open [...]. And at one stage of its growth his language nearly became music, at another it turned into painting [...]. So strong was the movement of his changing language that it overflowed the banks on both sides, but it would eventually settle back into its bed and turn to a deep, reflecting calm; [...]. It arrives where music begins and gives what painting cannot give: the life of the colours, the changing colours of a summer night from six to midnight, the birth and childhood, the falling in love and getting married, the fading away and dying of the colours.”

by a certain degree of idealisation, which made Scandinavia a part of his inner world as well as a model to aim for, eventually leading to a remarkable combination of innovative and conservative features. The reviews on Nordic authors and events Rilke wrote in the first few years of the twentieth century may be seen as an informed view of and enlightened attitude towards Scandinavia, while showing how deeply the artistic side is linked with the social aspect in his 'Nordic' thoughts.

We may wonder how deeply this Nordic experience influenced Rilke's works and what the main consequences of this influence were. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the most evident Nordic elements are to be found in Rilke's novel, not only through its protagonist Malte, but also in the atmosphere of some passages, in the characterisation of some figures and even in the description of some places. We know that Rilke could probably read Danish sources, such as *Efterladte Papirer fra den Rewentlowske Familienkreds i Tidsrummet 1770-1827* (*Documents Left by the Rewentlow Family in the Period 1770-1827*, 7 vols., 1895-1906) and *Danske Malede Portrætter* (*Danish Painted Portraits*, 10 vols., 1895-1914) by Emil Ferdinand Svitzer Lund. In the novel we also find two passages (notebooks 14 and 26; Rilke 1996, 3, 467-68, 510-13) that are clearly, even though not explicitly, connected to Geijerstam and Ibsen, respectively. Two meaningful questions are dealt with here: first, the hypocrisy implied in the need of a third character as the underlying cause in the crisis between husband and wife (both in plays and in novels), this way concealing the disagreement between the two, and the modernity of authors who can do without it; second, the hard task modern dramatists undertake in showing reality on the stage while life is in fact withdrawing into the invisible. Furthermore, the characterisation of Obstfelder can be read as a work that prefigures the project of Malte.

As regards female characters, their deeper sensibility and Rilke's worship of the female nature, the apodictic statements reported above should not, however, let us forget that this is too complex a subject to be linked to one kind of source only. The question becomes even thornier if we consider other works, mainly because Rilke's Nordic period rapidly merged into the French one – which certainly was more important in his artistic development – and in general into all the other influences from different cultures Rilke had been and would be exposed to. While single instances of his connecting with Scandinavian culture can be charted, we suggest considering the situation in a converse perspective, i.e., to see how deeply Rilke's Scandinavian experience was influenced by his idea of art and society and, above all, by the aspects he was inclined to feel fascinated by or even caught up in. We could thus look upon Rilke's approach to Scandinavia as a successful attempt (one of many) to find an existing complement to his feelings and inclinations. To a certain extent – and at the risk of sounding pretentious – Rilke enrolled Nordic 'soldiers' in the 'army' of his view of the

world. This does not reduce in any way his contribution to a better understanding and spreading of Scandinavian culture, thus highlighting the role of the Nordic countries as the avant-garde in Europe at that time. As stated at the beginning of this paper, Scandinavia had an important place in Rilke's spiritual geography; now we can add that the contribution was mutual and that his commitment provided a fascinating way to connect and unify some Nordic peculiarities across his own cultural landscape and present them to the world in a faithful yet literary form, thus acting both as a journalist and a poet.

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