“To Lie Beside a Leper”

Dirt, Disease, and Defilement in Rainer Maria Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*

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—Et pourtant vous serez semblable à cette odure,
À cette horrible infection,
Etoile de mes yeux, soleil de ma nature,
Vous, mon ange et ma passion!

—Charles Baudelaire, “Une Charogne”

Modernity sought to make the world its patient. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman employs this metaphor to describe the modern “therapeutic/surgical” state’s imposition of order on chaotic, meaningless reality. Those in a position to legislate social and cultural structures “set the standard of ‘normality’ and thus drew the borderline between the acceptable and the intolerable, between health and disease” (Bauman, 179). Liberated from divine or supernatural regulation, human reason strived to tame nature and render the world orderly, predictable, and secure. As Bauman states, this perception of society as a passive body in need of constant monitoring for signs of abnormality resulted from the realization that civilization is “vulnerable, contingent, and devoid of reliable foundations.” (xi). The modern artist, struggling to gain a vantage point from which to legislate reality, must likewise engage with the darkness surrounding society’s lamplight, and it is such a process of acknowledging the horrific that the writer Malte Laurids Brigge (and arguably, the writer Rainer Maria Rilke) details in his *Notebooks*. In examining the course of Brigge’s developing relationship to what Julia Kristeva terms the “abject”, the importance of “that which revolts” to modern literary expression will be explored.

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1 Bauman uses the terms “legislators” and “interpreters” to describe modern and postmodern mentalities respectively.
Within the first few pages of the novel, Brigge/Rilke announces that he is “learning to see.” (Rilke, 5). Prior to this he bombards us with the rapid succession of images, sounds, and sensations that have just assailed him on the Paris streets, and already we rather wish he had averted his gaze: “A child in a baby-carriage standing on the sidewalk: it was fat, greenish, and had a clearly visible rash on its forehead.” (4). The streets smell of “iodoform, the grease of pommes frites, fear.” (4). Unlike the blasé modern urbanite, Brigge is becoming increasingly hypersensitive to the city’s constant stimulus: “I don’t know why it is, but everything enters me more deeply and doesn’t stop where it once used to. I have an interior that I never knew of. Everything passes into it now. I don’t know what happens there.” (5). Crucially, it is largely the unpleasant that finds its way into Brigge’s consciousness. The first half of the novel is dense with sickeningly vivid descriptions of death, illness, and squalor. The buildings he describes for us are not the celebrated sights of Paris that an ordinary visitor might remark upon; Brigge instead absorbs the cadaverous interiors of ruined homes:

You could see its inside. You could see, at its various stories, bedroom walls with wallpaper still sticking to them; and here and there a piece of floor or ceiling. Near these bedroom walls there remained, along the entire length of the outer wall, a dirty-white space through which in unspeakably nauseating worm-soft digestive movements, the open, rust-spotted channel of the toilet pipe crawled. (46).

The indelible filth of humanity also lingers there for Brigge to take in: “the stale breath of mouths, and the oily smell of sweltering feet. There the pungent odor of urine lingered … and the stuffiness from the beds of pubescent boys.” (47).

Through his engagement with Kristeva’s abject, Brigge gains both a heightened self awareness and the conviction that he is experiencing actual reality “even when that is awful.”” (73). Just as the modern mentality excludes the abnormal from the social order, so the individual psyche “jettisons” the unspeakable beyond the borders of meaning (Kristeva, 2). The abject is intolerable within the self, as it is that which “disturbs identity, system, order.” (4). Ambiguous matter, belonging neither wholly within nor without the self is typical of the abject: excreta, blood, spit, and shed hair (as described by the anthropologist Mary Douglas, whom Kristeva references). More powerfully, the incongruous diseased or dead body transgresses boundaries that separate life from death. For Kristeva, the physical reflex act of rejecting such offensive matter defines the individual self: “I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit.” (3). The encounter with that which lurks at the very edges of life forcibly confronts the self-with its own being: “refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death.” (3).

Kristeva notes that since the abject is denied the status of an object in the world of acceptable things, these borders do not constitute a solid division between self and non-self. Like modernity’s ever-vigilant doctor/legislator, the “deject” (the self that has removed itself from the abject) must constantly define and redefine itself acting as a “tireless builder” (8). The abject, whilst repulsive simultaneously fascinates the self, “crying out to its master” for the response of banishment (2). Brigge’s scrutiny of the abject develops to an almost aesthetic level, evident for example in his description of an old woman’s eyes “which looked as though some diseased person had spat a greenish phlegm under her
bloody lids.” (Rilke, 40). He is aware that this uncommon sensitivity alienates him from others (72) and that his observations are gained “only at the price of solitude.” (73). By this point, Brigge is aware of “[t]he existence of the horrible in every atom of air” (73) and struggles with the vastness of the abject that he is compelled to breathe in. Overwhelmed by the colossal weight of accumulated horror, his self is eventually imperiled:

But outside—outside there is no limit to it; and when it rises out there, it fills up inside you as well, not in the vessels that are partly in your control or in the phlegm of your most impassive organs; it rises in your capillaries, sucked up in the outermost branches of your infinitely ramified being. … Like a beetle that someone has stepped on, you gush out of yourself (74).

With characteristically modern egotism, Brigge has already realized that after learning to see, he must then learn to act/write: “for the sake of everything in the world, something must be done. The first comer, the one who has had these alarming thoughts, must begin to do some of the things that have been neglected” (24). Episodes from Brigge’s childhood intersperse his meditations on various historical personages as the novel progresses, yet the writer’s enmeshment with the abject persists despite the shift of focus away from his immediate surroundings. Recalling a youthful dressing-up game, Brigge describes the horror of watching himself attempt to struggle free from a mask and costume in front of a mirror. The ambiguous non-face instigates a double dislocation of self (mask/reflection) that terrifies the young Malte:

While I, with a boundlessly growing anguish, kept trying to somehow squeeze out of my disguise, it forced me, I don’t know how, to look up, and dictated to me an image, no a reality, a strange, incomprehensible, monstrous reality that permeated me against my will: for now it was the stronger one, and I was the mirror. (107).

The disturbing aspect of the mask (a headless, bodiless, inanimate face) echoes Brigge’s earlier vision of a woman with her face “left in her two hands” displaying its interior and her “bare flayed head” (7). Brigge’s historical reflections also reveal a continuing preoccupation with defilement, particularly his depiction of Charles VI of France, insane and festering, an iron amulet sunk “deep in his flesh, horribly precious in a pearly border of pus” (215).

Having successfully engaged the abject, why does Brigge/Rilke persist in picking at the wound? The writer has intensified his perception of reality by wading through its peripheries, and come close to self-annihilation as he stares into the very face of the appalling. Kristeva’s discussion of twentieth-century “abject literature” is startlingly applicable to the Notebooks. When narrative undergoes violations of boundary between subject and object, interior and exterior,

Its linearity is shattered, it proceeds by flashes, enigmas, short cuts, incompletion, tangles, and cuts. At a later stage, the unbearable identity of the narrator and of the surroundings that are supposed to sustain him can no longer be narrated but cries out or is described with maximal stylistic intensity (Kristeva, 141).

This is exactly how Rilke’s novel progresses—increasingly disjointed and perplexing, a kaleidoscope of images from history, Brigge’s own past, and the mind of a narrator whose identity is Brigge yet

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2 The translator identifies the king in the note to page 214.
simultaneously Brigge-as-Other. The figure of Brigge-as-Prodigal-Son remains as foul as “the filth to which he had been abandoned” (Rilke, 255), even as he undergoes his next developmental transformation: learning to love by turning away from love. Rilke’s depiction of the Prodigal, “ulcers br[eking] out all over his body like emergency eyes against the blackness of tribulation” (255) exemplifies Kristeva’s characterization of the abject narrative / as “the crying-out theme of suffering-horror” (Kristeva, 141).

Is then, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* anything more than the anguished howl of an oversensitized modern self? Kristeva concludes that literature that embraces the full horror of the abject, describing and revealing the loathsome, may act as a “discharge, and a hollowing / out of abjection” (208). Modernity’s attempt to purify and order reality can, Kristeva states, only be “a work of disappointment, of frustration and hollowing—probably the only counterweight to abjection.” (210). Early in the novel, Brigge recalls Baudelaire’s “Une Charogne” in which stumbling across a decomposing body, the poet recognizes his beloved’s ultimate destiny. Brigge/Rilke understands that this is every being’s fate and that the horror of death and corruption must be embraced, not repressed: “This it seems to me, is the test: whether you can bring yourself to lie beside a leper and warm him with the warmth of your own heart” (Rilke, 72). Brigge achieves this symbolically when he stops placing his handkerchief between his hair and the “certain greasy-gray hollow in [the armchair’s] green slipcover, which all heads seem to fit into.” (49). At this point, he accepts humanity’s communal filth. Yet the unremitting weight of the abject demands a far greater tribute.

In his introduction to the *Notebooks*, William H. Gass depicts Rilke as “the pale speck of a fly’s egg in spoiling meat” (ix) as the author, like Brigge, experiences the squalid backstreets of Paris. We see Brigge/Rilke emerge maggot-like from this egg as he begins to explore the rot that surrounds him, and follow his metamorphosis through various stages of engagement with dirt and decay. Recalling flies reviving in the warmth of an autumn day, Brigge describes how

They were strangely dried up and were terrified at their own buzzing; I could see that they no longer really knew what they were doing. They stayed motionless for hours and let themselves be, until it occurred to them that they were still alive; then they flung themselves blindly in every direction and didn’t know what to do when they got there (165).

Rather than denying or legislating against the abject, the fly that Brigge develops into acknowledges the horror of being a fly.

**Works Cited**

