

Self-Transformation as *Trans*-formation: Rilke on Gender in the Art of Living

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Abstract: *Central to the projects of somaesthetics and philosophy as an art of living is the idea of self-transformation by transcending the limits of one's given identity or current self. Among the very different ways of pursuing self-transformation, this essay explores the idea of gender transformation that seeks to transcend the conventional male/female gender binary, a transformational transcendence to something trans. We explore this idea through a close reading of Rilke's famous poem "Archaic Torso of Apollo" and his Letters to a Young Poet in which Rilke seems to gesture toward such transformation.*

Keywords: : *Rilke, art of living, gender, sculpture, self-transformation, sex, somaesthetics, transgender.*

I.

The famous Rilke sonnet "Archaic Torso of Apollo," which opens his 1908 book of *New Poems: The Other Part*, concludes dramatically with the imperative "You must change your life."¹ This strikingly blunt demand for self-transformation powerfully implies the task of self-cultivation and related notions of self-examination and *askesis* that are central to the idea of philosophy as an art of living. It is therefore not surprising that philosophers cite the poem in exploring the idea of philosophy as a way of life. Peter Sloterdijk takes the poem's final line as the title of his 2009 book, published in English in 2013 as *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics*.² The book describes how contemporary Western culture has embraced the ancient Greek idea of self-cultivation and developed it into a model of rigorous, disciplined practice, which he calls "the practicing life" (Sloterdijk, 2013, pp. 4, 11, 13, 14), and its first chapter appropriately begins with Rilke's sonnet.

There are significant affinities between Sloterdijk's idea of anthropotechnics and the project of somaesthetics that I have been elaborating since the late 1990s in connection with my views

1 The poem's German title is "Archaischer Torso Apollos" (Rilke 1976, p.83). I should note that Rilke also has a less famous Apollo poem, "Früher Apollo," based on a different statue that depicts the head of a youth.

2 The Viennese-born philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, without mentioning Rilke (probably because the connection was obvious), echoes the famous command in his notebooks, writing "Du mußt dann dein Leben verändern" (Wittgenstein 1980, p. 27).

on pragmatism and philosophy as an art of living, which have been published in a variety of texts, including my German books, *Vor der Interpretation* (1996), *Philosophie als Lebenspraxis* (2001), and *Leibliche Erfahrung in Kunst und Lebensstil* (2009). Although the affinities and differences between my somaesthetics and Sloterdijk's anthropotechnics are worth exploring, I shall not pursue them here. Instead, I focus on Rilke's famous Apollo poem along with some of his letters in order to elaborate a distinctive, somewhat unconventional way of understanding transformative self-cultivation in the philosophical art of living: an option that highlights the relevance of gender transformation. I should begin, however, by presenting both the sonnet (in its original German) and an image of the sculpture it describes, because its original language and inspiring artwork are key in interpreting it, especially since the poem's English translations vary widely and are deficient in different ways.

“Archaischer Torso Apollos”

*Wir kannten nicht sein unerhörtes Haupt,
darin die Augenäpfel reiften. Aber
sein Torso glüht noch wie ein Kandelaber,
in dem sein Schauen, nur zurückgeschraubt,*

*sich hält und glänzt. Sonst könnte nicht der Bug
der Brust dich blenden, und im leisen Drehen
der Lenden könnte nicht ein Lächeln gehen
zu jener Mitte, die die Zeugung trug.*

*Sonst stünde dieser Stein entstellt und kurz
unter der Schultern durchsichtigem Sturz
und flimmerte nicht so wie Raubtierfelle*

*und bräche nicht aus allen seinen Rändern
aus wie ein Stern: denn da ist keine Stelle,
die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern.*



Figure 1 *Marble torso from Miletus, Musée du Louvre, Paris*

“Archaic Torso of Apollo”

*We never knew his head and all the light
that ripened in his fabled eyes. But
his torso still glows like a gas lamp dimmed
in which his gaze, lit long ago,*

*holds fast and shines. Otherwise the surge
of the breast could not blind you, nor a smile
run through the slight twist of the loins
toward that centre where procreation thrived.*

*Otherwise this stone would stand deformed and curt
under the shoulders' transparent plunge
and not glisten just like wild beasts' fur*

*and not burst forth from all its contours
like a star: for there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.³*

³ Translation by Edward Snow (see Rilke, 2010).

II.

The basic meaning of this sonnet (one of Rilke's famous *Dingedichte* or "object poems") is unquestionably clear and direct. The poet finds that this sculptural form, despite being an eyeless, headless, limbless, lifeless stone, exudes a strange artistic perfection that makes the poet feel he is being scrutinized by that object and judged somehow deficient in regard to it, so that he must change his life. The demand for self-transformation is the strict, peremptory, and urgent "*mussen*" rather than the weaker obligation of "*sollen*." The poem presents art as having the power to *demand* that one change one's life, while also implying that art might provide a model for such change by providing a model of beauty in which even broken fragments (like the headless, limbless torso) can express perfection. Rilke's sonnet therefore fits nicely into what I've advocated as the aesthetic model of philosophical life. This aesthetic version is in contrast (though not in conflict) with the therapeutic vision of philosophical life by offering a positive model of attractive, virtuous flourishing rather than mere healing of ills or diminishing negativities.⁴ We know that Rilke indeed viewed his life in artistic terms; he was "a poet who contrived an existence exclusively dedicated to his art, who made indeed a work of his life," trying by extensive efforts of "self-stylization" to create a unity of artistic work and life (Prater, 1986, p. ix, 16). Rejecting the notion "that art is just something for leisure hours after coming home from the office or whatever," Rilke insisted in a letter "that he who does not devote himself to art with all his desires and everything in him... is simply not an artist" (Prater, 1986, p. 34).

Beyond the sonnet's basic message of self-transformation, however, the question arises as to what direction such self-transformation should take. What kind of attractive metamorphosis does the poem suggest? Sloterdijk reads its paean to the sculpted torso of the god Apollo as recommending a transformative self-cultivation toward the muscular beauty of divine, athletic masculinity. "The somatic, or, more precisely, the auto-erotic and masculine-athletic, impressions of the sculpture ... must have provoked in the poet (who, in the language of his time, was a neurasthenic and a weak-bodied introvert) an empathetic experience of the antipodal mode of being that is native to strong 'body people'" (Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 26). Rilke, according to Sloterdijk, simply draws on "the immeasurably rich statue culture of the ancient Greeks... [with its] dominant system of physical and mental kinship between gods and athletes in which resemblance could reach the level of identity" (Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 26). Because "the sportsman... was always also a god of sorts," Sloterdijk construes Rilke's poem as the recognition of a divine injunction expressed by the exemplary aura of the sculpted stone toward masculine athleticism. "The authoritative body of the god-athlete has an immediate effect on the viewer through its exemplarity. It too says concisely: 'You must change your life!'; and in so doing simultaneously shows what model this change should follow" (Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 26).

I believe that Sloterdijk is wrong to read Rilke (in this poem and elsewhere) as affirming a model of hypermasculinity, characteristic of "the sport cult phenomenon that appeared after 1900" (Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 29). Such a narrow, conventional reading limits the distinctive scope, polysemy, and power of the poem. Of course, this conventional reading can draw on the fact that Rilke's early years were troubled by feelings of athletic inadequacy and issues regarding manliness. We learn from Rilke himself that "until [he] went to school," his mother "dressed [him] as a girl" and treated him "as a big doll" (Prater, 1986, p. 5). At the military school he attended, he was very unhappy and was remembered as being "like a girl in uniform" and "below par" in athletics (Prater, 1986, p. 8-9). However, by the time he wrote the Apollo poem,

⁴ See Shusterman 1997, 2023, 2024.

those childhood issues were long over, as he gained assurance through his literary success while affirming his masculinity through women lovers, marriage, and fathering a child.

In reading the poem as urging transformation toward more athletic manliness, Sloterdijk connects its message to “the athletic and somatic renaissance” that Nietzsche introduced through his critique of Christianity’s anti-somatic bias (Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 38). Connecting Nietzsche and Rilke is certainly apt, as both advocated the importance of self-stylization in the art of living. Moreover, both had been deeply in love with Lou Andreas-Salome, the captivatingly attractive and daringly progressive Russian-born intellectual. Sixteen years older than the 21-year-old Rilke when they met, she remained a cherished confidant and powerful influence throughout his life. If she first caused him to change his first name from “René” to the more masculine-sounding “Rainer,” she also convinced him of the exceptional, creative power embodied in the female.⁵ Recognition of this power suggests the creative ideal of a new gender identity that transcends the limits of the traditional binary male and female identities perhaps by mixing the best of both in a trans synthesis. We can see hints of such a synthesis in the Apollo poem if we look carefully at its language and the sculptural form that inspired it.

We should not be put off by the use of “his” throughout the poem’s English translation, not only because that pronoun is often used by trans individuals but also because the German “*sein*” which it translates is also used as the neuter possessive pronoun. Moreover “*sein*” also serves as the possessive pronoun for *der Stein* (the stone) whose sculptural form is the focus of the poem and whose grammatical gender is masculine. We thus should not read “his” here as simply referring to Apollo but rather more directly to the sculpted stone torso that is assumed to represent that of the god. We should next note the description of the torso in the second quatrain: the blinding surge or curve of the protruding breast “*der Bug der Brust*” (*Bug* is a term for the protruding, curving bow of a boat or nose of an airplane). The hint of surging feminine curves of the breast is followed by its gentle or soft turn of the loins (*leisen Drehen der Lenden*) that leads “toward that centre where procreation thrived” (*zu jener Mitte, die die Zeugung trug*). This bodily middle that carries procreation (*trug* is the past tense of *tragen*, which means to carry or bear) is more suggestive of the female body than the male, of her inner reproductive organs rather than the external male phallus and scrotum. And when we look at the torso, we find no phallus or scrotum, only a slightly protruding pubic triangle suggestive of the *mons pubis*, which is typically more prominent in females than males. In short, the description of the torso has distinct suggestions of androgyny or transgender character. Hence, the exemplarity of the torso and its authoritative injunction to change one’s life suggests not the conventional model of macho, muscular masculinity but rather provides an exemplar that combines, blends, or blurs masculine and feminine qualities to suggest an androgynous or transgender ideal.⁶

The suggestion that such an ideal can be perceived through and inspired by the sculptured form of Apollo is not a radically new invention of Rilke. It has an influential precedent in Johan Winckelmann’s famous account of the Belvedere Apollo, which Winckelmann celebrates as “the highest ideal of art among all the works of antiquity that have escaped...destruction” and that is “formed ...completely according to the ideal,... [taking] from the material world only as much

5 See Andreas-Salome, 2017, first published in German in 1910, thus several years after Rilke wrote his *Letters*, though she may have long held these views and shared them with Rilke. If she claims that through motherhood and its power of passive creativity, “the woman [is] high above ... [the man regarding a] value that is essential for life,” she also insists that ultimately the two genders present a “unity in the form of duality” that serves creativity. She concludes that this “is why we so readily observe the relative frequency of bisexuality in artists, as, more generally, in any manifestation of genius” (pp. 40, 42).

6 I should note that I do not identify the concepts of androgynous and transgender, which often differ widely in usage. I connect these notions here because both share a core resistance to the traditional gender binaries.

as was necessary” for the artist to “make [this ideal] visible” (Winckelmann, 2006, p. 333).⁷ Befitting Winckelmann’s notion of ideal beauty as an idealized synthesis of beautiful features found in natural human bodies, Apollo is a blend not only of youthful and mature good looks but also of both male and female splendor. “An eternal springtime, like that of the blissful Elysian Fields, clothes the alluring virility of mature years with a pleasing youth and plays with soft tenderness upon the lofty structure of his limbs” (Winckelmann, 2006, p. 333). Comparing the sculptured Apollo to the paradigm first woman, Winckelmann notes how the many “individual beauties of the other gods are here mingled together, as they were in Pandora. A brow of Jupiter, gravid with the goddess of wisdom, and eyebrows whose motions declare his will; eyes of the queen of the gods, arched with grandeur, and a mouth whose shape infused desire in the beloved Branchos,” while “soft hair plays about this divine head like the tender, waving tendrils of the noble grapevine stirred, as it were, by a gentle breeze” (Winckelmann, 2006, p. 334).⁸

Winckelmann’s Apollo experience also anticipates Rilke’s in noting how the vision of this statue exerts an authoritative power demanding self-transformation. Winckelmann expresses this in strongly somatic terms of inspiring uplift. “In gazing upon this masterpiece of art, I forget all else, and I myself adopt an elevated stance, in order to be worthy of gazing at it. My chest seems to expand with veneration and to heave like those I have seen swollen as if by the spirit of prophecy” (Winckelmann, 2006, p. 334). Here again we find a divine model inspiring meliorative metamorphosis toward an ideal beyond the divisive gender binary of male and female. This is not surprising, not only because the Greek gods were masters of transformative metamorphosis, performing it on themselves and on others, but also because Greek culture displayed a plurality of gender identities and sexual relations.⁹

Although heroism is a common topos for the philosophical life (whether one’s heroic model is Socrates, Diogenes the Cynic, Augustine the saint, or Nietzsche the rebel), Rilke’s famous Apollo sonnet is richer in meaning and originality when we read it not as recommending meliorative self-transformation to heroic masculinity but instead as suggesting a very different ideal of personhood that is nonetheless heroic in challenging deeply held prejudices and norms. The injunction to change one’s life here means pursuing a new identity that transcends the rigid, restrictive polarities of male and female; it urges a self-transformation that might be described as a *trans*-formation. This reading finds confirmation in Rilke’s prose writings, particularly in his *Letters to a Young Poet*, where he expounds key ideas that are central to the traditional project of the philosophical life as meliorative self-knowledge and self-cultivation.¹⁰ Before addressing the trans issue (a distinctively radical aspect of Rilke’s vision of self-cultivation), I should briefly note how the *Letters* affirm conventional themes of the philosophical life.

7 For my analysis of Winckelmann’s art theory with particular focus on its somaesthetic, social, and educative dimensions, see Shusterman, 2018, 2019.

8 Walter Pater’s (1912) famous essay on “Winckelmann” problematically construes the androgynous nature of Winckelmann’s Greek ideal of sculpted divine beauty as instead “a sexless beauty,” exuding “a moral sexlessness, a kind of impotence, an ineffectual wholeness of nature, yet with a divine beauty and significance of its own” (p. 233).

9 I explore this polymorphic sexuality and diversity of gender roles in the chapter on Greco-Roman erotic culture in Shusterman, 2021a, pp. 30-97.

10 I sometimes modify the translation of the letters based on the original German, see Rilke, 1954 and 1958.

III.

The first theme is the classical demand to know oneself by carefully examining oneself through introspection and analysis. The letters repeatedly insist on the importance of “inner searching” to find one’s creative sources and life direction. “Go into yourself” and “search... in the deepest places of your heart” to find your direction. “Delve into yourself for a deep answer..., then build your life according to this” (Rilke, 1954, pp. 18–19). Recognizing that the individual is always also a product of nature, Rilke echoes a theme central to Stoic and Epicurean versions of the philosophical life -- the need to respect nature and be guided by it. One should “draw near to Nature” and “find everything in himself and in Nature to which he has attached himself” (Rilke, 1954, pp. 19, 21). We must accept the cosmos which is grander than us and be patient in enduring what it brings us. We must trust Nature and accept the verdict of life: “Let life happen to you. Life is right, in all cases [*auf alle Fälle*]” (Rilke, 1954, p. 74; 1958, p. 52). To trust in nature you must also “trust the natural growth of your inner life...and await with deep humility and patience the birth hour of a new clarity...Patience is everything!” (Rilke, 1954, pp. 29–30).

But patience means not simply to wait lazily for enlightenment and achievement to occur, one must cultivate one self based on what nature has given you and that you have learned from rigorous self-examination, including probing one’s feelings and one’s doubts. In this perfectionist path, the “feelings that concentrate you [*Sie zusammenfassen*] and lift you up are pure... Everything that makes *more* of you than you have heretofore been in your best hours is right.” Even “your doubt may become a good quality if you train it. It must become *knowing*, it must become critical...and watchful” (Rilke, 1954, pp. 74–75; 1958, p. 52).

The art of living philosophically is to study and learn the answers through living and facing the questions of life, not by taking readymade answers from texts offering wisdom. “*Live* the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer” (Rilke, 1954, p. 35, emphasis original). In going deeply into oneself, in attending carefully and critically to one’s feelings, and in living the questions of how to live, one must face the challenges of solitude and the risks of loneliness that come from questioning the conventional ways of life, of experiencing deeply one’s distinctive being and difference. “The necessary thing is after all but this: solitude, great inner solitude. Going-into-oneself and for hours meeting no one” (Rilke, 1954, pp. 45–46). One should not fear such trials but embrace them as part of the necessary *askesis* or training in the art of living, so “it is good to be solitary for solitude is difficult; that something is difficult must be a reason the more for us to do it” (Rilke, 1954, p. 53). Dealing with challenging new experiences that place us “in the middle of a transition [*Übergang*] where we cannot remain standing” is also difficult and good (Rilke, 1954, p. 64). As solitude helps us experience things with greater care, depth, and attention, so encountering the difficulties of new experiences helps us to grow. Hence, “to have courage for the most strange, most singular, the most inexplicable that we may encounter” is needed to realize one’s life to the fullest and develop a “greater” self, which, because it will not cease to live the difficult, “will not cease to grow” (Rilke, 1954, p. 64, 72).

In advocating this life of careful, patient, self-examination, self-cultivation to bring one’s inner nature in harmony with nature and transform the self through difficult transitions that make for ripening growth, Rilke does not describe it as a philosophical life. Although Rilke studied philosophy as one of his core university subjects (which also included art history), the word philosophy does not appear in these letters. Yet any perceptive student of philosophy as a way of life will read these letters as recommending a version of such life, a version constituted in terms of a life of self-examining, meliorative self-transformation through artistic creation.

Foucault, in his study of modern heirs or versions of the classical philosophical life, cites artists as key exemplars (Foucault, 2011, pp. 187-189). Because the letters are addressed to an aspiring young poet rather than to an aspiring young philosopher, there is no need to mention philosophy. But when Rilke writes “Art, too, is only a way of living” (Rilke, 1954, p. 78), one can read the “too” as implying that if philosophy is most truly a way of life, so is art; and Rilke speaks explicitly of “living the artist’s life” (Rilke, 1954, p. 30). Similarly, we should read the “only” not in the dismissive sense of “merely,” but instead as suggesting that what is essential in art is the ripening growth of the person through attentively, richly lived experience rather than the external institutions of the artworld and the material objects identified as artworks, which are merely external expressions of the artist’s art of living and inner growth. This, of course, is an echo of the idea of philosophy as more essentially a way of life than a collection of philosophical texts or institutions of professional philosophers.

Having noted the affinities between Rilke’s exhortations and the typical ancient counsels of philosophy as a way of life, we should now consider some important differences. The first, perhaps only nuanced difference, is his insistence on the centrality of love. Of course, philosophy by its very name puts love at its core. But the love Rilke speaks of is not love of wisdom but the love of other another person, which we typically identify as romantic, sexual love. Like solitude, “love is good, too: love being difficult. For one human being to love another: that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation” (Rilke, 1954, p. 53-4). Important Stoic and Epicurean versions of philosophical life warn against erotic love, including its connection with marriage and children, as dangers for the tranquility and focus believed necessary for the philosophical life (Shusterman, 2021a, pp. 30-97). For Rilke what is particularly valuable in such love is not the conventional ideal of merging with the other but the way that love inspires the lover toward meliorative self-knowledge, self-critique, and self-cultivation in order to make oneself worthy of the beloved. Rather than relinquishing one’s separate individuality by “uniting with another,” love “is a high inducement to the individual to ripen, to become something in himself, to become world, to become world for himself for another’s sake” (Rilke, 1954, p. 54). This Rilkean view of love as inspiring meliorative, elevating self-cultivation may recall Plato’s *Symposium*’s account of philosophical life as beginning with the desiring love for the beauty of a particular boy’s body that then stimulates the lover to seek higher beauties in the spiritual realm through self-cultivation. However, the two views are ultimately very different, as Rilke makes no transcendental appeal to an ideal Form of beauty and does not jettison the love of an individual person for the love of abstract ideals.

What strikes me as the most distinctive and radical feature of Rilke’s vision of life, love, and self-cultivation is its focus on gender complexity and transition. He makes the concept of gender key to his account of the ideals of love and self-transformation, while connecting both these ideals to his ideal of art as a way of life. Although the established English translations of the *Letters* never employ the term “gender” but instead use “sex” to translate the German “*Geschlecht*” (which can mean both gender and sex), it is the concept of gender that is most crucial for Rilke’s ideal of self-transformation. In his third letter he criticizes the poetry of Richard Dehmel for being too masculine in their expression of love’s desires. Its erotic expression, though often beautiful, is not “thoroughly mature” because it is one-sidedly masculine in gender, representing the male gender rather than the human person, *der Mann* rather than *der Mensch*. The problem in Dehmel’s work is that its erotic world “is not sufficiently *human (menschlich)*, that it is only male (*männlich*) ...and laden with the old prejudices and arrogances with which men have disfigured

and burdened love” (Rilke, 1954, p. 31; 1958, p. 20). Dehmel’s problem is that his gender does not encompass the female along with the male to achieve the full human expression that crosses narrow gender lines. “Because he loves as *Mann* (man) *only*, not as *Mensch*” (the human person in general that comprises both male and female sex and gender), his erotic perception or “sexual feeling” is one-sided and “something narrow...that diminishes his art” (Rilke, 1954, p. 31; 1958, p. 20).

Rilke strikingly connects sex and art as forms of creation. In discussing Dehmel, he claims: “artistic expression lies so incredibly close to that of sex, to its pain and ecstasy, that the two manifestations are indeed but different forms of one and the same yearning and delight” (Rilke, 1954, p. 30). He later affirms that our creative “fruitfulness...is but one, whether it seems mental or physical; for intellectual creation too springs from the physical, is of one nature with it and only like a gentler, more ecstatic and more everlasting repetition of physical delight” (Rilke, 1954, p. 37). Rilke affirms the feminine gender or principle as dominant in creation. Most obviously through motherhood, the feminine plays the leading role in patiently carrying and nursing the physical offspring, but the virginal and elder female also embody the creative principle through the promise and memory of motherhood. Moreover, because the gendered principle of motherhood connotes the crucial role of receptivity, nourishment, and patient carrying in intellectual creation, Rilke claims “even in the man there is motherhood,” which is both “physical and spiritual; his procreating is also a kind of giving birth...when he creates out of inmost fullness,” deeper than his superficial genital marking where he differs from the female (Rilke, 1954, p. 38).

Love and creation will be better, Rilke then argues, when men and women transcend the gender identities traditionally assigned to them at birth according to their sexual parts and instead transition to a higher transgender identity that expresses the caring human person rather than the traditional narrower male and female identities. Such a transition, in which “a new human being rises up [*ein neuer Mensch erhebt sich*]” could positively transform the world and end the painful misunderstandings, struggles, and casualties of the familiar war between the oppositional sexes (Rilke, 1954, p. 38; 1958, p. 25). For Rilke, “the great renewal of the world will perhaps consist in this, that man and maid, freed of all false feelings and reluctances [formed by traditional binary gender identities] will seek each other not as opposites ... and will come together as *human beings* [*Menschen*], in order to simply, seriously, and patiently bear in common the difficult sex that has been laid upon them” (Rilke, 1954, pp. 37–38; 1958, pp. 25–26).¹¹ Rilke sees this change of gender identity as not requiring a change of sexual organs but as overcoming the gender roles, feelings, and behaviors that those sexual organs, blindly given, at birth falsely imply. We should understand the trans in Rilke’s transformation of gender identity not as a male transitioning into a female or vice versa, but instead as a transformation that breaks with the false binarism and recognizes transgender as truly a new gender identity, and indeed a superior one holding promise for a new social world that is more tolerant, more just, and more creative. It is interesting that the German word Rilke uses for “transition” is *Übergang*, which suggests an over-coming or meliorative elevation, as in Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*.¹²

11 The emphasizing italics are in the original.

12 The word *Übergang* also means a bridge or passageway that goes over something difficult or dangerous (a river, road, or gorge). This notion of transition as a perilous passage over something problematically uncertain could also recall Nietzsche’s notion of the human being as a transitional phase from something less to something better, a bridge [Brücke] between the animal and the *Übermensch* who is superior to the current, conventional human being. “*Der Mensch ist ein Seil, geknüpft zwischen Thier und Übermensch, — ein Seil über einem Abgrunde. Ein gefährliches Hinüber, ein gefährliches Auf-dem-Wege*” (Nietzsche, 1999, p.16). “The human is a rope, tied between beast and *Übermensch* — a rope over an abyss. A dangerous crossing over, a dangerous on-the-way” (my translation). If Nietzsche’s remarks might suggest humanity’s transition to some new, unforeseen, posthuman condition (which some might associate with our increasing cyborg existence), Rilke’s

Affirming that before this meliorative gender metamorphosis becomes shared by many, “the solitary individual can now prepare and build” for it, Rilke finds in womankind the most promising signs of such gender transition, just as he sees in the female more openness, fertility, and patience for creative birth (Rilke, 1954, p. 39). “Women, in whom life lingers and dwells more immediately, more fruitfully, and more confidently must surely have become fundamentally riper people [*reifere Menschen*], more human people [*menschlichere Menschen*] than the lightweight man, who is not pulled down below the surface of life by the weight of any fruit of his body, and who, presumptuous and hasty, undervalues what he thinks he loves” (Rilke, 1954, p. 58; 1958, p. 41). Aware of how the female gender identity was already beginning to change in his time, he perceives how this transformation begins by women adopting aspects of masculine gender but will not stop there. “The girl and the woman, in their new, their own unfolding, will but in passing be imitators of masculine ways, good and bad, and repeaters of masculine professions” (Rilke, 1954, p. 58; 1958, p. 41). However, they will go beyond those ultimately false directions of traditional male identity which they adopt merely to free themselves of their bondage to traditional feminine gender norms. “After the uncertainty of such transitions, it will become apparent that women were only going through... those (often ridiculous) disguises in order to cleanse their own most characteristic nature of the distorting influence of the other sex” (Rilke, 1954, p. 58; 1958, p. 41). Rilke sees confident signs of this evolution (particularly in “the northern countries” of Europe), believing that “Some day there will be girls and women whose name will no longer signify merely an opposite of the masculine, but something in itself, something that makes one think, not of any complement and limit, but only of life and existence: the feminine human being [*der weibliche Mensch*]” (Rilke, 1954, p. 59; 1958, p. 41).

IV.

That Rilke describes this new gender identity through troubled old binary terms like “feminine,” is likely because the language of his time did not provide him with an acceptable human gender designation outside the binary grid. We still struggle linguistically, socially, psychologically, medically, and legally with properly recognizing trans as something that cannot be reduced in some way to the familiar binaries (for example, in direction of transition from male to female or vice versa or in combination of binary gender or sexual traits). Binarism runs extremely deep in our thought, dualism being the easiest form of classificatory distinction. It belongs to our most fundamental logical principles, the famous law of the excluded middle that underlies the view that propositions are either true or false but not something in between. Its Latin expression, *tertium non datur*, means “no third [option] is given.” As traditional logic countenanced no third value between true and false, so traditional thought countenanced no third option besides male and female. It is clear why sexual and gender binaries were traditionally regarded as essential for societies because their duality promoted heteronormativity that in turn promoted genital heterosexual lovemaking, which was physically necessary for generating children and thus sustaining social life. Contemporary biotechnology has successfully challenged this necessity, thus opening a path to greater social appreciation of experimentations in nonbinary gender expressions and identities.¹³ But that broad social recognition has been too slow in coming, partly because the binarism of our language and our logic is so deeply entrenched.

transformation seems more concretely aimed at transitioning from the traditional binary gendered human being to a superior humanity liberated from the limits of that binary.

¹³ I explore how the pragmatics of progeny supports traditional heteronormativity in a variety of Western and non-Western cultures in Shusterman 2021a, 2021b.

Perhaps this difficulty of expressing new transgender ideas through conventional language so severely marked by traditional gender binarism was what compelled Rilke to express them through artistic suggestion in sculpture and in poetry: hence his sonnet on the alleged torso of Apollo (who is not a manly man but rather a god). The fact that after celebrating *der weibliche Mensch* Rilke refuses to posit a parallel ideal for men—namely, the masculine human being or *der männliche Mensch*—shows how far Rilke’s ideal is from Sloterdijk’s vision of athletic manliness. It also indicates Rilke’s drive to transcend the traditional logic of gender binaries in imagining a new, more fully human, transgender identity and its expression in love.

Rilke knows that the struggle to realize such love and gain its social recognition will be difficult, and he sees women’s liberational advance as its vanguard.¹⁴ “This advance will (at first much against the will of the outstripped men) change the love-experience, which is now full of error, will alter it from the ground up, reshape it into a relation that is meant to be of one human being to another, no longer of man to woman” (Rilke, 1954, p. 59). Freed from the restrictive gender binaries that serve oppressive patriarchy, “this more human love...will fulfill itself, infinitely considerate and gentle, and kind and clear in binding and releasing” because it will be based on more mature, more confident and tolerant human identities that are self-assured in their individual independence (Rilke, 1954, p. 59). Such love, Rilke concludes, “consists in this, that two solitudes protect and border and salute each other” (Rilke, 1954, p. 59).

Convinced that the society of his time was saturated with antiquated rigid rules and repressive norms that stifled individual independence and creative expression, Rilke insisted on solitude as necessary for the self-examination and self-transformation needed to bring us beyond gender binarism so that we can better desire and love each other as humans rather than as males and females. Whether today’s more open and permissive society makes solitude less necessary and whether we also need significantly intimate others to find our way beyond our birth-assigned genders are questions worth asking. Asking such questions is not to challenge the importance of spaces of solitude for critical introspection that has always been a key element of the philosophical life. But dialogical encounter with a significant other has also been central to philosophical living, and Rilke powerfully exemplifies the value of such encounters not only in the letters to his young follower but in his dialogical poetic encounter with the sculptural stone, a nonhuman significant other that expands somaesthetic dialogue in ways that blur the boundaries between persons and things.

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¹⁴ In identifying woman as the uplifting vanguard of progress toward a promising but still unformulable future of gender and love, Rilke reminds me of the famous final lines Goethe’s *Faust* about the feminine pulling us onward and up: “*Das Unbeschreibliche, hier ist’s getan/Das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hinan.*”

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