

Death and Heterotopias: Representations of Modernity in Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*

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Muerte y heterotopías: representaciones de la Modernidad en los *Cuadernos de Malte Laurids Brigge*, de Rilke

La mort et l'hétérotopie: représentations de la modernité dans *Les Cahiers de Malte Laurids Brigge* de Rilke

Morte ed eterotopia: rappresentazioni della modernità nei *Quaderni di Malte Laurids Brigge* di Rilke

Abstract / Resumen / Résumé / Riassunto

This essay explores the thematization of death and modernity in Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* through a framework of Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia. Described as spaces that are simultaneously mythic and real, heterotopias are special spaces embedded with more than one apparent layer of meaning. The special qualities of heterotopias open up a space that is not bound by normal laws of geometry and instead becomes an intersection or point of view between the mythic and real. This essay's main focus is on an integrative examination of scenes from *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* and Foucault's concept of heterotopia. After outlining the overlap between the prevalence of images of death strewn throughout the novel and the cultural pressure exerted by modernity on the metropolis, I suggest that it is possible to understand the protagonist's quest for self-realization by examining his encounters with diverse heterotopic spaces.

Este ensayo explora la tematización de la muerte y la modernidad en *Los Cuadernos de Malte Laurids Brigge*, de Rilke, a través de un marco del concepto de heterotopía de Michel Foucault. Descritos como espacios que son a la vez míticos y reales, las heterotopías son espacios especiales integrados con más de una capa aparente de significado. Las cualidades especiales de las heterotopías abren un espacio que no está sujeto a las leyes normales de la geometría y en su lugar se convierte en una intersección o punto de vista entre lo mítico y lo real. El enfoque principal de este ensayo es un examen integrador de escenas de *Los Cuadernos de Malte Laurids Brigge* y del concepto de heterotopía de Foucault. Después de delinear la superposición entre el predominio de imágenes de la muerte esparcidas a lo largo de la novela y la presión cultural ejercida por la modernidad sobre la metrópoli, sugiero que es posible comprender la búsqueda del protagonista por la autorrealización examinando sus encuentros con diversos espacios heterotópicos.

Cet essai explore la thématisation de la mort et de la modernité dans *Les Cahiers de Malte Laurids Brigge* de Rilke à travers un cadre du concept d'hétérotopie de Michel Foucault. Décrits comme des espaces à la fois mythiques et réels, les hétérotopies sont des espaces spéciaux qui comportent plus d'une couche de signification apparente. Les qualités spéciales des hétérotopies ouvrent un espace qui n'est pas lié aux lois normales de la géométrie et devient au contraire une intersection ou un point de vue entre le mythique et le réel. Cet essai porte principalement sur un examen intégratif de scènes tirées des *Carnets de Malte Laurids Brigge* et du concept d'hétérotopie de Foucault. Après avoir souligné le chevauchement entre la prédominance des images de mort éparpillées dans le roman et la pression culturelle exercée par la modernité sur la métropole, je suggère qu'il est possible de comprendre la quête d'autoréalisation du protagoniste en examinant ses rencontres avec divers espaces hétérotopiques.

Questo saggio esplora la tematizzazione della morte e della modernità nei *Quaderni di Malte Laurids Brigge* di Rilke, alla luce del concetto foucaultiano di eterotopia. Descritta come spazio simultaneamente mitico e reale, l'eterotopia è uno spazio reale dotato di più strati di significato. Lo spazio reso possibile dalle particolari caratteristiche dell'eterotopia è slegato dalle leggi consuete della geometria, e diventa invece un'intersezione o punto di vista a metà tra il mito e la realtà. Questo saggio si sofferma soprattutto sull'analisi incrociata di alcuni episodi dei *Quaderni di Malte Laurids Brigge* da una parte, e del concetto di eterotopia dall'altra. Dopo aver sottolineato il rapporto fra la prevalenza di immagini di morte nel romanzo e la pressione culturale esercitata dalla modernità sulla metropoli, suggerisco come la ricerca di realizzazione da parte del protagonista possa essere interpretata attraverso l'analisi dei suoi incontri con una serie di luoghi eterotopici.

Keywords / Palabras clave / Mots-clé / Parole chiave

Rilke, Foucault, death, heterotopia

Rilke, Foucault, muerte, heterotopía

Rilke, Foucault, mort, hétérotopie

Rilke, Foucault, morte, eterotopia

Introduction: Experience and the modern city

Rainer Maria Rilke's only novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910), endures as a testament to the modernist fascination with the metropolis in early 20th-century Europe. The novel's themes resonate with the philosophical treatment of the concepts of suffering, death, and modern city that are characteristic of the writings of Charles Baudelaire and Friedrich Nietzsche. The impact that these writers had on Rilke's own ruminations has been widely documented, and it is readily apparent in *The Notebooks*, in which the narrative centers on a young poet named Malte and his arrival in Paris to write poetry. In Malte one can sense the similar mental impetus that seemed to push Baudelaire and Nietzsche to engage with the new condition of the individual living in the metropolis: an internal struggle to wrestle order out of the shifting structure of experience. In the case of Baudelaire, it appeared almost second nature to observe the effect that the crowds had upon the individual during his countless strolls through the streets of Paris. He found inspiration in objects and people who embodied the quintessential mark of modernity – new figures of the crowd such as the ragpicker: a visible, revolting social type living in isolation and facing a precarious future, whose only means of survival was recycling the refuse of the city (Eiland and Jennings, 2016: 612). In such figures, he saw alienation and ruination: two equally terrifying fates that often befell inhabitants of the modern city. For Nietzsche, on the other hand, the position of the individual in the modern city helped develop his belief that any worthwhile activity of living was bound to entail suffering. He analyzed many degrees of this suffering and purported that part of the source of suffering was man's inability to live “*unhistorically*... [like the animal which] goes into the present like a number without leaving a curious fraction” (Nietzsche, 1980: 10). He believed that happiness eluded man because man was unable to live exclusively in the present due to the burdens imposed on him by the past:

to forget everything was an impossibility in the experience of living. Baudelaire's and Nietzsche's thoughts on the experience of modernity help frame *The Notebooks* as a work with an urgency to situate the individual and the metropolis in opposition to one another in order to confront and surmount the depersonalization of the soul. In the following, I will argue that it is precisely at this juncture between the individual and the experience of modernity that Malte's fixation on death, suffering, and existence can be seen as an attempt to bring order to his life through *heterotopias*. The relationship between death and heterotopias (a term first introduced by Michel Foucault in a 1966 radio lecture) will be discussed through associations between modernist representations of the metropolis and the individual's experience in the urban environment.

Since its first publication in 1910, *The Notebooks* has often been considered as a reflection on the social experience of urban modernity: fragmented, uncertain, and anonymous. The modern city was a place where individuals' desire for freedom, self-reliance and progress was matched by technologies of standardization. The urban environment, with modernity as the pacemaker to its pulse, was in a state of flux and sustained renewal that proved to men and women that they could change the world that was changing them (Berman, 2010: 33). In European cities such as Paris, an important force driving the whole process of capitalist industrialization was a new system of interaction among its participants, which transformed the public sphere into a place of exchange among strangers; and the new social ordering that emerged roused feelings of both optimism and social anxiety. It is in this regard that young Malte, the poet-protagonist of *The Notebooks*, arrived in Paris to write: setting himself up for a very particular kind of metropolitan experience in which mental agitation was an inherent part of living. The struggle underpinning his life reflected a crisis of reconciling external impressions of the city with his inner sensibilities: a crisis that can be traced to the ideas developed by German sociologist Georg Simmel in his extremely influential essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, first published in 1903. For Simmel, the new condition of the modern

man living in the metropolis was one characterized by sensory overdrive. The urban setting was a place where the traditional, personal, and emotional ties that existed in rural communities were threatened by the anonymity of the masses. Simmel saw the predicament of the city dweller as an uncomfortable psychological state in which the persistent disruption of the psyche due to external stimuli required individuals to erect a “protective organ for itself” such as a blasé disposition, which often severed emotional ties with other individuals (1971: 325-26).

The connection between Simmel, Malte and Rilke plays a crucial role in the development of Neil Donahue’s study of *The Notebooks*: He asserts that in “the imaginative depiction of [Malte’s] experience in Paris Rilke enacts Simmel’s thesis on the psychological effects of city life on the individual” (1992: 198). In the study, Donahue establishes a link between the poet’s determination to fulfil his artistic vocation and the psychological symptoms that afflict him, namely anxiety, loneliness, and disorientation. In Donahue’s view, the poet’s vocation demands a subjective internalization of experience in order to create art. Yet this sensitivity tends to clash with the external objectivity inherent in the harsh city, thus resulting in distressing experiences that are, in fact, necessary for self-realization. “Malte’s life in Paris”, writes Donahue, “is an experiment in exposure and recovery, in confronting the shocks of the city and the changes they engender in him, and then in discovering a new order of integration commensurate with his entirely different ‘conception of things’” (1992: 206). From this vantage point, the city furnishes, somewhat paradoxically, the terrible solitude and suffering that pushes the poet towards “learning to see” (Rilke, 2009: 4).

Furthermore, the relation between Simmel’s characterization of the city dweller and Malte is also alluded to in Frederick Garber’s study of *The Notebooks* which, although mainly focusing on Malte’s preoccupation with the flux of time, modes of seeing, and ordering of objects in the world, also looks at the city and individual life. Garber actually takes the relationship between the individual and the city a step farther and establishes a specific connection between Malte and death, affirming

that “the city images the condition of the modern urbanized soul [...] a world not of the dead [...] but of the nearly dead, those approaching extinction through some grotesque sickness which takes no account of their perishing individuality” (1970: 327). For Garber, Malte’s frequent fixation on death is significant because it is a mode of organizing the poet’s frustrating life in Paris. He views it as part of Malte’s attempt to make sense of his modern life by connecting images of death in the city with those recalled from his childhood in the countryside. When the studies of both Donahue and Graber are taken together, it is possible to discern a link between the prospect of death and Malte’s mental agitation. They seem to offer the opportunity to approach Malte’s fascination with death and his recurring anguish in Paris as the result of fear of the unknown. This fear is similar to that which is described by the French writer and philosopher Maurice Blanchot, upon a rereading of Heidegger: “the fear of being unable to die completely, of being a ‘disappearing consciousness’ rather than ‘complete consciousness of disappearing’” (Gregg, 1988: 55). According to Blanchot, the human desire to fully comprehend death is an impossibility, since consciousness – along with the ability to cogitate – is extinguished before death finally occurs. Therefore, it is possible to view the poet’s primary quest as a deep desire to reconcile his contemplation of life with the impossibility of truly understanding death. Under these circumstances, Malte’s calling as a poet (and the measure of his success) hinges on his ability to pierce the veil of these enduring mysteries. In the case of *The Notebooks*, it must be explored through the “other spaces” of heterotopias.

Heterotopic Spaces: A framework for *The Notebooks*

Heterotopia is a term introduced by French philosopher Michel Foucault in his text *Of Other Spaces*.¹ For

¹ Foucault first introduced the term in a radio lecture in 1966. The radio

Foucault, heterotopias are to be defined in relation to utopias, thus to spaces that “present society itself in a perfected form”, idealized spaces unlocalizable in reality (1986: 24). A heterotopia, in turn, is “a kind of effectively enacted utopia,” but at the same time a real place that can be discerned within a culture (1986: 24). This juxtaposition is significant because it is a prerequisite for understanding heterotopias as real places with utilitarian functions, which are, however, also imbued with certain qualities of an imagined world – perhaps a space of imaginative involvement – where the mind is allowed to indulge in alternate impressions of existence. Thus, heterotopias, with their distinctive ability to determine places that are both “here” (real) and “there” (unreal), can be regarded as a “sort of mixed, joint experience” like the mirror which provides a point of passage between two separate ways of ordering perceptions (Foucault, 1986: 24).

Spaces of Alternate Ordering in *The Notebooks*

a) Hôtel-Dieu – Factory of death

In an attempt to accommodate the spatial (physical) and mythical (idealized) properties of heterotopias, Kevin Hetherington, in his book *The Badlands of Modernity*, suggests that a useful interpretation of heterotopias is as spaces of alternate ordering. In this sense, he contends that heterotopias “do exist, but they only exist in this space-between, in this relationship between spaces” (1997: ix), where “they are set up to fascinate and to horrify, to try and make use of the limits of our imagination, our desires, our fears, and our sense of power/powerlessness” (1997: 40). Based on this definition, heterotopias must be understood as places of convergence offering alternative perceptions between two dis-

broadcast was transcribed and published in French in 1984 and subsequently translated into English as *Of Other Spaces* in 1986. For this contribution, I use a republication of the 1986 English translation.

parate set of relations. Hetherington goes on to identify several of the themes that these places delineate, such as “those associated with the freedom of madness, sexual desire and death in which humans experience the limits of their existence and are confronted by its sublime terror” (1997: 46). By invoking the contemplation of death as a factor relevant to the heterotopic space, Hetherington indirectly furnishes a link to the philosophical ruminations of Malte, the poet-protagonist of *The Notebooks*, who at its opening scene is found writing in a room in the heart of the city.

After commenting on the streets of Paris, Malte introduces the Hôtel-Dieu, the first place in the city:

This excellent Hotel goes back a long way. In the days of King Clovis, people were already dying in some of the beds. Now they die in five hundred and fifty-nine of them. It is a factory production line, of course, and with such an immense output the quality of individual deaths may vary. (Rilke, 2009: 6)

On the surface, the Hotel-Dieu is presented as a site with utilitarian value for the city: a place where the sick and dying can be committed. However, its recasting as a heterotopic space is first implied by the reader’s realization that the Hôtel-Dieu was not a hotel but in fact a well-known hospital. It was a functional space designed to serve as an organized body of institutional care. But the way Malte portrays it, it rather appears as a place for prescribing death, for interment rather than care. The inverted function of the hospital is compared to a pseudo-factory/-hotel – a place that produces and houses the dying. The duality of this new space is significant: the factory denotes a machinery of homogeneous production and the hotel a temporary situation. In redefining the Hôtel-Dieu in this manner, the poet is able to see beyond the mere structure of the hospital, and to detect in the hidden figures dying in their beds the mark of death and depersonalization of the individual’s soul. For Malte, this process of levelling is a symptom of modern life that looms over the city more threateningly than death or disease.

Rilke’s Malte was not the first solitary figure to take on the rumination of death in the modern city. In fact, the link between death and the experience of the city has

been a defining concern in modernist writings. Charles Baudelaire was a pioneer in the exploration of the link between the individual, the city, and death. As noted by Elissa Marder in her book *Dead Time: Temporal Disorders in the Wake of Modernity* (2001), the beauty in Baudelaire's poem "La Masque" "weeps over an unlivable present and an unbearable future" and "the incessant shock of endless life with no relief in death" (37). Moreover, in his poem *The Death of the Poor*, Baudelaire jolts: "It's Death that comforts us, alas! / And makes us live," and thus emphasizes the paradoxical and almost ineffable experience of the convergence of these opposite poles (Baudelaire, 1954: 122). For writers such as Baudelaire and Rilke, the attraction to the modern city was, as John Jarvis points out in *Exploring the Modern*, "the sense of novelty itself, and the difficulty, the challenge, of pinning it down" (1998: 66). Hence the vocation of the artist became the arduous task of capturing the most profound meaning of things in the surrounding environment.

In Paris, the streets were the organic arteries of the city, and despite being filled with vitality in a constant cycle of renewal, this city was also mired by destitution, and death was omnipresent. Malte imagines death everywhere, indefatigably. He imagines it coming for him if he were ever to fall ill at the hospital, at "death's door," – he dramatises –, "I should indubitable die there" (Rilke, 2009: 6). Malte's imagining of death includes the rooms of the hospital which in turn cease to be static. No longer does the hospital merely exist for the purpose of providing treatment to the ill, but instead it flares up into a space for pondering the meaning of death. It transforms into a space animated by the dying, who threaten to pour out and permeate into all nooks of the city. "The dying will have their way," says Malte, "and the whole Paris stops in its tracks" (Rilke, 2009: 6).

Even if this quasi-apocalyptic scene were to manifest itself, the most menacing aspect of death on the streets would not be the interruption of life, but the lack of individuality in face of it. This point is made explicit when Malte expresses disenchantment about the newly acquired blasé attitude towards death:

Who cares about a well-made death these days? No one. Even the rich, who can afford to die with well-appointed style, are lowering their standards and growing indifferent: the wish for a death of one's own is becoming ever more infrequent. Before long it will be just as uncommon as a life of one's own. (Rilke, 2009: 6)

The hospital is reminiscent of the tension between standardisation and individuality. It reflects changing times and becomes a place where, metaphorically speaking, a similar death can be prescribed to five hundred and fifty-nine individuals at the same time. And yet, while its standardisation is brazenly forced upon vulnerable bodies through top-down systemisation, it still stands, like the counterpoint of a mirror, as a sanctuary for a sympathetic poet searching for residues of the human spirit.

b) *Bibliothèque Nationale* – An imaginary boundary

Bibliothèque Nationale – the only subheading of the book – transports Malte into another heterotopia: the library. Applying Foucault's theory, the library can be seen as "the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages" (Foucault, 1986: 26). The collection of books represents a gathering of all history and knowledge made up of real and imagined narratives; in Foucault's words, the library is "a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time" (1986: 26). The pieces of knowledge embedded in the pages of each book are located physically in the present, but of greater importance is their capacity to contain the past. The library is a conceived place designed with the function of study and learning in mind; it is a place to find some physical object like a book or manuscript. However, it does not merely fulfil this small role because in effect a book represents much more: it is "a portal to something or somewhere else, the virtual space inherent in the heterotopia" (Radford, Radford, and Lingel, 2015: 743). When Malte seeks refuge from the untouchables in the library, it becomes a line of separation. Historically, there was

a factual element to this boundary, since libraries were privately owned and exclusive in character. Hence public access was nonexistent, and laws had to be passed to open libraries. For this reason, a person required a card to use certain parts of the facilities, and Malte describes his relief to be in possession of such a tool:

But here, my dears, here I am safe from you. One needs a special card to gain access to the reading room. I do have a card, and with it an advantage over you. I walk the streets somewhat warily, as may be imagined, but at length there I stand, at a glass door, open it as if I were home, show my card at the next door [...] and then I am among these books, beyond your reach as though I were dead, and sit here reading a poet. (Rilke, 2009: 27)

With Malte's words resonating, one can see how the library's duality is portrayed. It is transformed into a sanctuary whose purpose is no longer to preserve all history, instead it must safeguard Malte's own life from what lies beyond the glass door: the horde of people on the streets. No longer is the function of this space concerned with the "indefinitely accumulating time," but instead it is refocused on the survival of the individual (Foucault, 1986: 26). Thus the danger the poet senses is the obliteration of the self by the city. The depersonalizing effect of the city upon artistic endeavor is a predicament which the German philosopher Walter Benjamin alludes to throughout his work: "In the crowded streets of the metropolis, the individual is not merely absorbed into the masses; all traces of individual existence are effectively effaced" (Eiland and Jennings, 2016: 614). This sentiment is exemplified when Malte enters the library; he is in blithe spirits and put at ease by its peace:

And if you happen to jostle against the next man as you get up, and apologize, he nods in the direction of your voice, with his face turned towards you but not seeing you, and his hair is like the hair of someone sleeping. How pleasant that is. And I am sitting here and have a poet. What good fortune. There are some three hundred people in the room right now, all reading. (Rilke, 2009: 25)

Moments later, going outside and realizing that it was nothing but glass doors which separated him from

the untouchables lurking outside, Malte abruptly feels agitated:

What on earth did that old woman want of me [...]? Why did she keep walking by my side, watching me? As if she were trying to recognize me with those bleary eyes of hers, which looked as if someone of disease had spat green phlegm in her bloody eyelids. (Rilke, 2009: 26)

For Malte, the library is the point of passage shielding him from the masses on the streets of Paris and shunning away the untouchables, the "human refuse, the husk of men, spate out by fate" (Rilke, 2009: 26), those auguries of stagnation, homogeneity, and death. He is aware of what the masses represent. He is apprehensive of their detachment, a paradigm introduced in Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*:

They have no egos, ids, their souls are devoid of inner tension or dynamism: their ideas, their needs, even their dreams, 'are not their own'; their inner lives are 'totally administered', programmed to produce exactly those desires that the social system can satisfy, and no more. (Berman, 2010: 28)

The library thus becomes a place of suspended time. The heterotopic nature of the interior is brought to life as Malte sits and reads a poet:

There are a large number of people in the room, but one is unaware of them. They are in the books. At times they move among the pages, like sleepers turning over between two dreams. Ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading. Why are they not always like this? (Rilke, 2009: 25)

The act of reading has become a portal into the virtual world of the books. An experience so imaginative that the readers are not aware if they are actually still physically in the room. Like sleepers dreaming, they waft in their subconscious, perhaps in a simpler time, in a break from modern tribulations. In this idealized space, Malte gathers relief and strength to go back outside and face the crowds. In the following entry, while contemplating death in his room at Rue Toullier, he is confessional about the contradictory relations between the individual and the crowds:

At such times, my last hope was always the window. I imagined that outside there might yet be something that was mine, even now in this sudden destitution of dying. But scarcely had I looked than I wished the window had been barricaded shut, as closed up as the wall. For now I knew out there, too, things took their indifferent course. (Rilke, 2009: 107)

His distress arises from the indifference of the city's inhabitants and from their purposeless homogeneity epitomized by the untouchables. Georg Simmel comes to mind, whose analysis almost sounds as if he had Malte in mind: "[The individual] becomes a single cog as over against the vast overwhelming organization of things and forces which gradually take out of his hands everything connected with progress, spirituality and value" (1971: 337). The individual's spirit dangles in the street threatened by death, to be crushed not by the hooves of horse-drawn carriages, but by the soles of humanity.

c) The Schulin's Manor – A séance for death

Towards the middle of *The Notebooks*, Malte wanders in his childhood memories and finds himself sitting in carriage on the way to visit the Schulin's old manor house. This is one of the many episodes that marks a break with Malte's current existence in Paris. Malte describes that years ago, the Schulin's manor caught fire. A part had burnt down, and now the family lived in only two cramped wings. However, Malte's family seems to have forgotten about this tragedy entirely:

Georg had completely forgotten that the house was not there, and for all of us it was there at the moment. We ascended the flight of steps that led up to the old terrace, and merely thought it odd that all was in darkness. All at once a door opened, below and behind us to the left, and someone called 'Over here!' and raised a dim lantern and swung it. [...] he helped us back down the steps. 'But there was a house there just now,' said Maman, finding it hard to adjust so quickly to Viera Schulin. (Rilke, 2009: 90)

The passage is indicative of a place that is thought to be real but in fact is no longer there. Once again, Foucault's defining concept of the mirror as a heterotopia

comes to mind, since in this episode, Malte sees himself where he is not "in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface" (Foucault, 1986: 24). The real Schulin Manor house is immersed into the phantasmagoria of the burnt down house of the past. Imaginatively, the objects of the old house which have been reordered in the new house appear haunted: "Behind the people in the room, the huge objects from the old house were thrusting upon the scene far too close" (Rilke, 2009: 92), and in a state of obstinate delirium, he is unable to conciliate the real with these figments of his imagination.

Echoes of the force of this haunted heterotopia will also resonate later in the novel, when Malte encounters the wall of a partially ruined building in Paris that captivates him: It appears not to be there, and yet in it hangs "[t]he stubborn life of those rooms [that] had refused to be stamped out" (Rilke, 2009: 30). Taken together, these two episodes imply the fascination with the way in which the past impinges on life. Through the imagination, one travels to the past, enters haunted houses, and meets ghostly figures such as Christine Brahe. One visits the death beds of one's father, mother and grandfather. Relentlessly, death is portrayed as the eternal fixation of the living – as a haunting return of repressed imagination. Throughout the course of the novel, "Malte appears engaged in a sort of quest to come to terms with the changed conditions of his existence, both externally and psychologically" (Donahue, 1992: 206), and two major aspects of this quest are the search for meaning in modern life and the coming to terms with the impossibility of *seeing* the total image of death. In this pursuit, the haunted spaces might function as coping mechanisms for confronting the forthcoming trauma that entails growing into modernity and the impossible burden of entirely forgetting the past. These heterotopic spaces seem to provide an access to an unlocatable experience that has been dislocated between the past and present. In the foreword to Francesco Orlando's *Obsolete Objects in the Literary Imagination* (2006), David Quint alludes to this impossible breakdown between past and present (which is explored in depth by Orlando in the framework of the Freudian

psychoanalytical process of repression). Quint credits literature, “whose own cultural function is to remind us of what we have lost and are constantly losing in our rush into the future,” as the redeemer (xi). Poetry, but more precisely the act of writing, thus becomes somewhat akin to heterotopias, and by mimicking their special properties, it allows Malte to confront the city’s homogenizing forces and to prevail.

Conclusion

Spread across seventy-one fictional diary entries in *The Notebooks*, Malte’s experiences are laid bare like a lone ship, that “heterotopia par excellence” (Foucault, 1986: 27), floating in and out of the city, going from one harbour to the next, charting his past and present, searching for precious meaning hidden in the essence of all he encounters. The spaces that are revealed in the form of heterotopias are in fact spaces of hope and havens for the poet. The episodes set in the hospital, the library or the Schulin’s house do not stand alone; they are accompanied by other heterotopic spaces including the attic in Malte’s childhood house, the Musée de Cluny in Paris, the Salpêtrière Hospital, his bedroom at Rue Toullier, and even the very notebook in which he is recording his existence. What makes these places special is their ability to allow individual to inhabit them and, at the same time, to convey a sense of a spatial “outside” (Foucault, 1986: 24). The portal-like quality of each of these regions allows for the poet to channel his bleak urban predicament into something of meaning. In a letter to his former lover Lou Andreas-Salomé, Rilke depicts a grim feeling he had upon the completion of *The Notebooks*: “Can you understand that in the wake of this book I have been left behind like a survivor, stranded high and dry in the inmost being, doing nothing, never to be occupied again?” (Rilke and Salomé, 2014: 174). Rilke’s own mental and emotional distress was real, and his future hung precariously in the balance. While Malte in *The Notebooks* is not Rilke in real life, he is neither entirely unreal. He is a young man, twenty-eight years

old, besieged by a past filled with death and the present that shows no signs of altering its harrowing course. His ruminations and self-awareness have become so dreadful that he must take flight and disperse into alternative realms. From the eerie opening line, “This, then, is where people come to live; I’d have thought it more of a place to die” (Rilke, 2009: 1), the reader is introduced to the theme of death, and is then drawn into the winding narrative caught in the throes of the streets of Paris. And in this city of deathly imaginings, the reader is blown from start to end with no compass, through the real and imaginary spaces, fragmented between the past and the present, and hurled into a poet’s dizzying struggle for existence. It is under the shade of death that young Malte casts himself into heterotopic harbours, like an anchor into the water, waiting guardedly, to see just how deep it will go.

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