# THE RILKE ALPHABET

*translated by Andrew Hamilton*

*Ulrich Baer*

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ULRICH BAER
*Translated by Andrew Hamilton*

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# ABBREVIATIONS

All works are by Rainer Maria Rilke unless otherwise noted.

AAP *Ahead of All Parting: The Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke*
ALT *Briefe* (1980)
ANI Rilke and Anita Forrer, *Briefwechsel*
BOI *The Book of Images*
BSF *Briefe an die Schweizer Freunde*
BZP *Briefe zur Politik*
GB *Gesammelte Briefe*
HAT Rilke and Magda von Hattingberg, *Briefwechsel mit Magda von Hattingberg*
NAL *Briefe* (1991)
JBL *Selected Works, Volume 2: Poetry*
KA *Werke*
LOL *Letters on Life*
LOU Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Briefwechsel*
LYP *Letters to a Young Poet*
MLB *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*
NP *New Poems*
POR *The Poetry of Rilke*
SID *Briefe an Sidonie Nádherný von Borutin*
SIZ *Briefe an Gräfin Sizzo*
SW *Sämtliche Werke*

TAX Rilke and Marie von Thurn und Taxis, *Briefwechsel*
UP *Uncollected Poems*
WUN *Briefe an Nanny Wunderly-Volkart*

# PREFACE: "THE WHOLE DICTATION OF EXISTENCE"

## "Diktat des Daseins"

> The longer I live, the more urgent it seems to me to endure and transcribe the whole dictation of existence [*das ganze Diktat des Daseins*] up to its end, for it might just be the case that only the very last sentence contains that small and possibly inconspicuous word which transforms into magnificent sense everything we had struggled to learn and everything we had failed to understand.[1]

Rilke wrote these words to Ilse Erdmann on December 21, 1913, close to the end of a year during which he had met Sigmund Freud in person, spent more time with Lou Andreas-Salomé, and drafted a poem that he would not complete for another decade as the first of the Duino elegies. By writing down "the whole dictation of existence," Rilke hopes to register those experiences that we normally go through without noticing. Do not overlook anything, pay attention to everything, spell it all out up to the most minuscule and negligible word and letter: That is Rilke's aesthetic motto and his guide for life. In order not to miss anything or get distracted in the task of living mindfully and honestly, the poet must not decide in advance between important and unimportant things. He has to write in the conviction that each experience and every word possesses a value all its own.

Rilke's ambition to copy down the entire "dictation of existence" rests in an animistic thought, as if the greater universe finds in us humans its diligent secretaries, whose lowly service can find the key to the universe's hidden meaning as long as we don't miss a word. Poetry becomes the record of the universe, and one of the countless words in this great and faithful transcription might reveal the universe's hidden meaning to us. The language of poetry does not turn away from the world toward a greater, transcendent Meaning but opens up the world, and opens us *to* the immanence of the world, in which we live. This is Rilke's ambition: to write attentively about the world in the hope that our lives, as we are already living them, might be transformed "into magnificent sense."

This book honors Rilke's call to copy down the dictation of existence. *The Rilke Alphabet* presents twenty-six words that cast new light on Rilke's oeuvre (including his poetry, prose, and letters) from unexpected angles. Some of the chapters examine what scholars and critics have "struggled to learn," to adapt Rilke's term for our often reflexive tendency to resolve any challenge by relying on secondhand opinions and commonplaces, while other chapters open our eyes and ears to what many readers have "failed to understand."[2] Many readers have not yet grasped Rilke's poetry because they have elevated his poetry above life and search for "a magnificent sense" and inspiration in books of Rilke's verses instead of grasping that Rilke's poetry, even when addressing flamingos, angels, and hydrangeas, presses us *more deeply into life*. Rilke copies down the dictation of existence as "the secretary of the invisible" (in his own memorable phrase), yet each one of the words examined here shows that this secretary knows us humans to be physical, mortal beings at once blessed and trapped in our human bodies with desires, longings, and fears.

This work takes its origin in many years of study and in a deeply *sensory* experience of reading Rilke. It shows but two things. First, it shows that Rilke, the poet who among modern poets most insistently and convincingly promises salvation and even redemption *within* our disenchanted, secular modernity (and not in another religion or ideology, not even that of "art"), had a body. Second, it also demonstrates that when it comes to poetry and life, a single word may change everything. One word may upend your sense of yourself and end your world in its entirety. One single word. That is poetry's insistence, and it is the reason why we tend to turn to poetry, Rilke's in many cases, at moments of transition, or when due to a calamity or loss it seems that one way of being in the world has ended

for us. But a single word may also console and provide salvation, and turn everything "we had struggled to learn and everything we had failed to understand" into "magnificent sense."

The twenty-six words that were taken from Rilke's writings open up the veins of Rilke's work, from which existence pours out, fierce and fervid, red and pulsing. They challenge the prevalent picture of Rilke as a poet of transcendence (also often called, simplistically, "love," "romanticism," "mysticism," "belief," or "art," or what some critics define as poetic language referring to itself). Not all of these twenty-six words are commonly discussed in critical works on Rilke. (Some have been repressed by scholars and critics for years; others have been sanitized or willfully misunderstood.) Some of them may make us cringe. Cringe we must—Rilke used these words to "transcribe the whole dictation" for *all* of existence and to mine each word's potential to transform into sense those parts of our lives we tend to overlook by relying on social conventions that define how we love and live, or on systems of belief that promise to bestow transcendent meaning (a greater cause; an ideal) on our actions. These twenty-six words attest to Rilke's bold balancing of our euphoria for the radical openness and immanence of life (as we may experience it, if we are blessed, in love, which for Rilke always includes physical love) with our despair in the face of the equally radical openness that defines our relationship to death. Each of these words reminds us that we are suspended in life between two radically open moments: for Rilke the experience of being reborn in love and the capacity to know death as part of life.

The following chapters trace and explain the strange logic by which poetry wrests from ordinary language, from the words we all use all the time, extraordinary meaning. That meaning is shaped in its relation to other words found in Rilke's work, including his prose and letters, which I consider here as much an essential part of his oeuvre as his poetry, following Rilke's own instructions in his last will and testament. Like small coves or tiny shells sheltering another sense amid the vast sea that is Rilke's language, these words deepen the meaning of Rilke's oeuvre for us today. They have resisted Rilke's drive toward sublimation (an ultimately failed attempt to turn desire into art, as outlined in several of the chapters here). They mark the places where his work bears witness to those haunting and hallucinatory, sublime and devastating experiences and sensations in life for which there are no words. They are motes of

reality embedded in a lyrical work that throw into relief nothing less than the possibility of living fully under modern conditions with all of our world's often very entertaining distractions and temptations to be inauthentic. Even when we think we know so much about it, life constantly surprises us with the richness of its highs and the devastation of its losses. The words examined here remind us that life cannot be grasped or fully understood but that life can be experienced only as the interruption of what we, with the aid of science, religion, reason, faith, and politics, call "life." Paradoxically, life seems impossible to grasp at these moments of its interruptions even though we also feel *most* alive during those apparently timeless, ex-static, and abyssal moments of bliss and loss. The twenty-six words examined here stand in relation to Rilke's oeuvre in the same way as such experiences stand in relation to our daily lives. They interrupt Rilke's work with the force that is the unique capacity of poetry to turn words against themselves and make them speak for more than what they refer to. Misfits, truants, outliers: That is what those words are. They are the stuff of poetry.

Some of the words selected here seem to disturb the Rilkean "completeness" and "perfection," which Robert Musil identified as a rare, distinguishing trait of Rilke's work in his eulogy in January 1927, a few short weeks after Rilke's exceedingly painful death from complications from too-late-diagnosed leukemia on December 29, 1926.[3] The later critic Paul de Man, as editor of Rilke's poetry in French translation, considered Rilke's capacity for turning words against their literal meaning without letting them slip fully into metaphor the great, if paradoxical, "promise" of Rilke's poetry.[4] In his assertion of Rilke's perfection, Musil also recognized to what a remarkable degree Rilke devoted himself to the irritating factors in our existence: "And there is one great poem that cannot forget the unrest, inconsistency, and fragmentary nature of life [. . .] That is Rilke's poem."[5] The words examined here disrupt the surface perfection of Rilke's poetry. They promise not transcendence but immanence unrivaled in modern poetry, real toads, à la Marianne Moore, notwithstanding. A few of the words examined here offer new insight into Rilke's (sometimes short-lived) political commitments and personal predilections. True to Rilke's imperative not to divide life a priori, before living, into what's important and what's insignificant, these words chronicle the eruption of the contingencies of life into his work. Some of these words simply document what scholars pointedly and fastidiously overlooked for

decades, and what even many fans of Rilke's poetry occasionally forget: that Rilke had a body. They attest to Rilke's commitment to endure in the face of life, in order to copy it all down.

I encountered these twenty-six words during a period of two years spent reading all of Rilke's works—all of his poems, all of his prose, and as many as possible of his boundless correspondence totaling more than fourteen thousand letters.[6] These words struck me, during a difficult personal time triggered by a loss I couldn't put into words, as keys to Rilke's insistence that we can be *pressed into* life more deeply, and that poetry, far from being an esoteric commentary *on* life, is one of the paths *into* a life that we often forget in the business of living. These words are placed into the largest possible context that I explored with students in teaching Rilke for many years at New York University, following the methods of philology. I examine these words in the belief that each entry elucidates a distinct and valuable direction in Rilke's thought, a particular structure of his poetic method, a different way of dealing with a motif, or a controversy sparked by Rilke's work. The chapters function as free-standing essays. They revise commonly held notions about Rilke by explaining that he is a poet of immanence—a poet of life as it is lived, not as it is reflected philosophically or as art.

By "immanence" in this context I mean Rilke's insistence that we do not accept or reject existence, we *live* it. To put it differently: Life lives us, and whatever we think of it comes only later and at an inevitable remove. In Rilke's only novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, the narrator confesses that he places life above knowledge, experience above reading, even when our hard-gained knowledge would shelter us from suffering: "I am sometimes surprised at how readily I give up everything that was expected in favor of the real, even when it is terrible."[7] *The Rilke Alphabet* follows the sequence of the European alphabet, where no single letter is more important than any other. It makes the claim of elucidating, adumbrating, deepening Rilke's writing in twenty-six words by cataloging those splinters of language that refract our existence like prisms through which we can for a moment grasp "the real," which we are after all.

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# a
# for Ashanti

How do Africans feature and fare in Rilke's work? A group of men, women, and children from West Africa (most likely today's Ghana) were put on display like animals in the Jardin d'Acclimatation in Paris, where Rilke saw (or, as it turns out, didn't see) them in the spring of 1902. Before that there had been similar shows of individuals and groups of people from the African continent in 1896 in Vienna and shortly afterward in Budapest: A village full of Africans from the Gold Coast (today's Ghana) alongside antelopes, parrots, and flamingos, put on show for predominantly white Europeans. These wildly popular human exhibitions, which toured Europe from around 1875 until the third decade of the twentieth century (and also occurred in the United States, including at the Bronx Zoo), were also a fashionable topic in literary circles. Prior to Rilke, another Austrian writer named Peter Altenberg—whom Rilke praised as "the first herald of modern Vienna"[1] in 1898—published a book of prose poems dedicated to the "African men of paradise" titled *Ashantee*.[2] With abyssal irony Altenberg, whose love affair with an African woman had been thoroughly caricatured and ridiculed, with racist overtones, in the Viennese press, exposed his own weaknesses as well as the racism and bigotry of his milieu.

Rilke's "The Ashanti" is more subdued than Altenberg's charged prose. But this poem is as problematic (and "disconcertingly obtuse"[3]) as it is

important in his oeuvre. The fact that it is so rarely discussed in the boundless secondary literature leads one to suspect that most critics would prefer to disavow this racist moment in Rilke altogether. But ignoring "The Ashanti" will not solve the problem. "The Ashanti" represents an important point in Rilke's body of work because it deals with the poet's—and thus our—ability and willingness to perceive another person on his or her own terms. It is also a link between the sentimental poems in *The Book of Images,* where it first appeared in 1902, and the "objective" thing poems in *New Poems* of 1907 and 1908 for which Rilke is so rightly renowned. I consider "The Ashanti" here in light of Rilke's wish to approach the world as a poet, honestly and without judgment.

In a letter dated October 19, 1907, Rilke explains that to pick and choose from what is given (that is, in this case, to excuse "The Ashanti" as an embarrassing and youthful faux pas, since this poem doesn't fit with our image of Rilke) would constitute a sin for any artist:

> First, artistic contemplation must have so thoroughly conditioned itself to see what is there, even in the ugly and the seemingly repulsive, which, like everything that exists, counts. It is not permitted for the artist to pick and choose, nor to turn away from any part of existence: a single rejection at any time expels him from the condition of grace, makes him a sinner, through and through. [. . .] To turn yourself towards the leper and share the warmth of your body with him, down to the warmth of the heart in a night of love: this must be a part of the artist's existence, as the striving for a new blessedness.[4]

Blessed is the artist who refuses to turn away from "existence." Yet this is just what Rilke does in "The Ashanti" (and what the critics have done in turn): He turns away, he fails to look, he privileges the animals and hardly leaves room in his text for the humans right in front of him. The poem piles up seven consecutive negations, whose objects are born of Europe's racist images that attribute to the Africans a lascivious sexuality, a raw violence, an authentic nature.

> No vision of far-off countries,
> no feeling of brown women who
> dance out of their falling garments.

No wild unheard-of melodies.
No songs which issued from the blood,
and no blood which screamed out from the depths.

No brown girls who stretched out
velvety in tropical exhaustion;
no eyes which blazed like weapons,

and the mouth broad with laughter.
And a bizarre agreement
with the light-skinned humans' vanity.[5]

Keine Vision von fremden Ländern,
kein Gefühl von braunen Frauen, die
tanzen aus den fallenden Gewändern.

Keine wilde fremde Melodie.
Keine Lieder, die vom Blute stammten,
und kein Blut, das aus den Tiefen schrie.

Keine braunen Mädchen, die sich samten
breiteten in Tropenmüdigkeit;
keine Augen, die wie Waffen flammten,

und die Munde zum Gelächter breit.
Und ein wunderliches Sich-verstehen
mit der hellen Menschen Eitelkeit.[6]

With the blood that screams out "from the depths," Rilke evokes both the Europeans' image of Africa and the violence done to Africans by European weapons, past and future. Likewise, Rilke's figure of the "brown women" operates on two levels: By dancing "out of their falling garments" they act out the erotic, orientalist fantasies of Europeans, to fantasies with deep roots in the German tradition. As early as Friedrich Hölderlin's poem "Remembrance" of 1803 (where Hölderlin refers to the Mediterranean people) there appear in the gaze of the German poet "brown women . . . on silken surfaces." Hölderlin's poem, according to a commentary by Martin Heidegger, is about "becoming familiar with one's own" through contact with the foreign.[7] Rilke's poem is about the same experience. Yet Rilke's projections onto the Africans fall apart at the

moment when the Africans laugh in the Europeans' face. Instead of being able to distinguish himself dialectically in the encounter with the other, and thus define himself, Rilke encounters the Africans' willingness and desire to interact with the "light people." The Europeans' "vanity," enshrined in a Hegelian notion of the dialectic of self and other shared by poets from Hölderlin to Rilke, consists of Europeans looking at Africans only for the purpose of defining themselves, of perceiving the Africans not on their own terms but as other.

At the same time that Rilke, in the letter quoted above, forbids the artist to "turn away from any part of existence," he wanted to turn away in his poem: "It made me shudder seeing that."[8] At the center of the poem is Rilke's fear of being seen. And in this poem to be seen means to be defined. It is not the Africans who are exposed in this poem but the poet himself, who cannot abide by the tenets of his own aesthetics.

In *The Book of Images* Rilke explains his fear of seeing the Ashanti. This fear comes from the recognition that the Ashanti are active in being seen and themselves want to see. The Ashanti disappoint Rilke and partly defeat his project of finding oneself through close and patient observation of the world. Strangely enough, however, his aesthetic triumphs in this disappointment. The way Rilke sees the Africans is determined by the Africans themselves. Since they cannot be seen by the poet in the way he wants to, the Ashanti become just what Rilke, as he writes in his letters, wishes to see in all of existence—that which is seen unfiltered, without "selection," "turning away," and "rejection."[9]

The artist must "overcome" himself in order to see the Ashanti. He must rein in his "vanity"; he must not judge everything from a distance, but rather should see the various parts of the world from their own perspective and on their own terms (and so for a short time exchange his own perspective for another's experience of the world). The Ashanti enter Rilke's vision as beings with their own wishes, desires, vanity, and projections who do not distinguish between themselves and the "light people": In the words of the letter cited at this chapter's beginning, they "count." These qualities attest to their humanity: the expectation that they will be seen by others, and that they see.

Allowing Africans displayed in the zoo "to count" means, for Rilke, not to show them in his poem. And by disappearing from his poem, they escape, at least in part, from Europe's racist imagination. Their absence

in the poem attests to their inaccessibility as a theme for the poem, and this absence, paradoxically, attests to their humanity.

The verses quoted above are followed by a freestanding line:

> And it made me shudder seeing that.[10]
> Und mir war so bange hinzusehen.[11]

In the poem's concluding stanza, Rilke confesses his fondness for animals: "O how much truer are the animals" ("*O wie sind die Tiere so viel treuer*").[12]

In the book titled *Ashantee*, Altenberg's narrator urges one of the two children he has taken to the Prater (Vienna's amusement park and zoo) to also look at the animals: "There is no shame in dreaming from the point of view of an animal."[13] Rilke first dreamed from an animal's point of view in *New Poems*: His efforts to inhabit the perspective of flamingos, parrots, gazelles, cats, and panthers made Rilke a completely "modern poet." In "The Ashanti" Rilke dreams of animals that offer the poet a sealed inner life:

> O how much truer are the animals
> that pace up and down in steel grids,
> unrelated to the antics of the new
> alien things which they don't understand.
> And they burn like a silent fire
> softly out and subside into themselves,
> indifferent to the new adventure
> and with their fierce instinct all alone.[14]

The animals are true only to themselves. They do not depend on us; rather, they are—as the end of the poem puts it—"with their fierce instinct all alone." The instinct of the Africans—in the rhetorical figure of negation and the image of their "blood"—cries out against that. The brutal and inhumane exhibition of the Ashanti in a zoo sets free their humanity. Rilke recognizes that man uses his consciousness to set himself apart from his animal nature and seeks a relation to the world and himself that was there all along but still must be discovered. He prefers animals, because they do not incorporate the poet into their world, and thus can be viewed as objects. The Ashanti, on the other hand, form a connection

with the poet by sharing their wish to be recognized and defined by their observer.

This insight hardly exculpates Rilke for the racism he shared with most Europeans of his time. He wants to keep his aesthetic project in a space that remains outside of politics and ethics, since in those fields it is necessary to make judgments or "pick and choose" from what there is. This idealized space, where no picking and choosing is permitted but into which everything enters unfiltered, is disturbed by the insistent presence of the Ashanti—in Rilke's poem the image of their mouths wide open with laughter. Yet this is precisely the meaning of that pre-ethical, transcendent space: that all that exists is permitted there. The poem about the Africans exhibited in a zoolike setting enacts Rilke's poetic principles, although it describes the poet at a moment where this all-encompassing vision fails.

Without mentioning "The Ashanti," the critic Paul de Man once described Rilke's method as follows: It is "the reversal of the traditional priority, which located the depth of meaning in a referent conceived as an object or a consciousness of which the language is a more or less faithful reflection."[15] In "The Ashanti," Rilke carries out this reversal of referent and meaning by not letting the Ashanti themselves appear and presenting only their inaccessibility—and therefore also their resistance to any rhetorical or imaginative appropriation. The Ashanti are figures in Rilke's language and not actual, embodied referents. De Man characterizes Rilke's devaluing of meaning (that is, of reference) as a form of "liberation": "On the level of poetic language, this renunciation corresponds to the loss of a primacy of meaning located within the referent and it allows for the new rhetoric of Rilke's 'figure.' "[16] De Man says nothing about the ethical and political meaning of this "loss . . . of meaning located within the referent." As soon as Rilke has freed himself from the convention that ties meaning to an actual object (de Man's "referent"), he can present the Ashanti without portraying them as "genuine" Africans. If he had stuck with a conception of meaning as equivalent to reference, it would have been impossible for the Ashanti to be represented on their own terms, apart from the semantics of a racist Europe.

Rilke's decision not to describe the Ashanti, and instead to show how they share (and therefore disappoint or block) the poet's expectations, projections, and "vanity," corresponds to the liberation of "meaning located within the referent." Does that mean that Rilke denies the

Ashanti their actual existence and turns them into the mere product of discourse, into mere figments of his imagination? Of course. But even so, in this dialectical poem the Africans escape the racist European imagination that had landed them in the zoo in actuality. In Rilke's poem, they win the autonomy of vanity, which they do not have in the Jardin d'Acclimatation, where (as Rilke's ironic subtitle also states) they are supposed to fit in and "acclimate" to the climate of Europe. Their mouths are prepared not only for laughter, but also for speech.

Rilke's poem is not postcolonial, nor is it a protest poem. Such interpretations would keep the Ashanti prisoners in the European imagination, as if their humanity and freedom depended on the judgment, politics, perception, and goodwill of Europeans and of a European poet. Africans had already featured as performers in a mass spectacle in Rilke's early and all-but-forgotten "Visions of Christ" from 1896, in which he dryly describes an African entertainer who forgets his part because of a primitive homesickness:

> And yonder, as if rooted to the spot
> A black man stood who should have bellowed, but
> Became enraptured of a coconut.[17]

How is it possible to free such a figure from the pernicious web of European racist projections?

De Man emphasizes that the "urgency" of Rilke's promise of a transcendent level of meaning (above the political reality in which these humans are prisoners in a zoo) cannot be separated from the "equally urgent, and equally poetic, need of retracting it at the very instant [Rilke] seems to be on the point of offering it to us."[18] Rilke's fear of looking directly at the Ashanti constitutes this simultaneous promise and retraction. At the linguistic level, Rilke's fear at being looked at by the Ashanti is the fear of losing his protective layer of poetic self-consciousness. Its second, literal meaning is the frisson experienced by a light-skinned European on a Sunday afternoon at the zoo before the cheap replica of an African village with a few Africans dressed to look exotic, other, strange. Rilke's fear is that the Ashanti will recognize his gaze in a way different from how animals behave. Rilke can promise transcendence and retract it at the same time, because his fear is simultaneously the metaphorical fear of the poet and the literal fear of the

visitor to the zoo. By speaking to both the figurative and literal levels at once, this poem can simultaneously show (and thus make a spectacle out of) and not show (and thus grant meaning to) the Ashanti.

On March 8, 1907, Rilke explains in a letter how the patient observation of the outside world allows an artist's internal vision to develop independently. The potential of "The Ashanti" may be found in this directive on how to unleash one's creativity:

> To look at something is such a wonderful thing of which we still know so little. When we look at something, we are turned completely toward the outside by this activity. But just when we are most turned toward the outside like that, things seem to take place within us that have longed for an unobserved moment, and while they unfold within us, whole and strangely anonymous, *without us*, their significance begins to take shape in the external object in the form of a strong, convincing, indeed their only possible name. And by means of this name we contentedly and respectfully recognize what is happening inside us without ourselves touching upon it. We understand it only quietly, entirely from a distance, under the sign of a thing that had just been alien and in the next instant is alienated from us again.[19]

When we observe something very patiently and closely, "strangely anonymous" things take place inside us. A new knowledge forms in us and overtakes us, since we can name this new awareness only with a "possible name" from "without." What does that mean? That something is changed by Rilke's "The Ashanti," something "inside us" but without our conscious control: a new (in)sight, which cannot fix or recognize, approve or condemn, the meaning of what is seen before it is seen—in this case Rilke's meaningful poem about Africans in the zoo. Here emerges a new concept of the everyday, which Rilke thinks of as "part of everything else," but which could, at any moment, become no longer "everyday," no longer a "part of everything else." This notion of the everyday and what is right in front of us as the potential for completely new meaning exists in every single one of Rilke's poems. In "The Ashanti" this potential is the possibility of seeing the Africans as humans, which means not regarding them as "other" but rather, based on our

understanding that they are "alienated from us again," seeing them, like all humans, as unique and yet part of the everyday at once.

The Ashanti block or interrupt Rilke's artistic project of "blessed contemplation." They mark the limit of the European imagination, which retreats from the task of recognizing other humans as such. Rilke addresses this limit in a later poem:

> For there is a boundary to looking
> [. . .]
> Work of the eyes is done, now
> Go and do heart-work.[20]

In the Jardin d'Acclimatation such "heart-work" would be the beginning of empathy and recognition, which would compel one to turn away. And that would be the beginning of the end of such inhumane exhibitions of people like animals. Rilke turns away, but the political intervention does not follow.

Rilke's project of artistic self-overcoming and of finding the right way of seeing, of a practice of *seeing* as a step past the "boundary to looking" from the "work of the eyes" to "heart-work," encounters the Ashanti. This encounter challenges the racist European view of the world, which locks people in actual and metaphoric cages and recognizes the meaning of these people *only*, blindly, in relation to Europe. The Ashanti throw Rilke's poem and project off course. They shamefully interrupt the stanzas and cause his rhythm to falter: In the original Greek meaning of the word, the Ashanti are Rilke's stumbling block, his *skandalon*, his scandal.

# b
# for Buddha

Can Rilke's writings, from the perennially popular and often-cited *Letters to a Young Poet* to the hard-won consolations of *Duino Elegies*, offer a guide to life?

In 1907 the Viennese bookseller Hugo Heller began a survey, the results of which were published by Hermann Bahr in a paperback volume entitled *Books for Real Life* (*Die Bücher zum wirklichen Leben*) that in a very short time sold forty thousand copies, an appreciable figure. In addition to bankers, philosophers, and politicians, famous authors listed the books that might be "indispensable [. . .] necessities for existence" for young people.[1] In his foreword, Hermann Bahr said of Heller's survey: "The question asked here is not about books, but rather about the future. What we think of it, what we want it to look like, what kind of belief we have in it."[2] Although it was only 1907, two participants in the survey cited Rilke's poetry, even if it did "not find a large audience" in the present, as a "major work of the future."[3] In his contribution to the book, Rilke wrote: "My relationship to books is not without an aspect of imprisonment, and it can happen that in a large library I find myself as if I had fallen into the hands of a powerful enemy force, against which any resistance by an individual would be useless."[4]

This is certainly an understandable response. The sheer mass of books to grapple with can cause even motivated and fast readers to break into a