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*Read, Written and Re-lived -
Magda von Hattingbergs Readings of Rilke as
Romantic Discourse*

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Letters, subjectivity and Jena Romanticism

“Der wahre Brief ist, seiner Natur nach, poetisch”, Novalis’ writes in one of his *Fragmente*.¹ Concepts such as *Wahrheit*, *Natur* and *Poesie* have, as we know a somewhat extended and also paradoxical meaning, especially when it comes to German Jena Romanticism. Friedrich Schlegel explains this in his own definition of the Romantic in the famous and often quoted 116. *Athenäum* Fragment.² The Romantic, claims Schlegel, should not be linked to any specific period of time, to any school of thought, or to any particular genre. The use of the verbs *vereinigen* and *verschmelzen* in his text indicate, that the limits between poetry, rhetoric, philosophy and criticism are not important (or valid) any longer. The idea of *eine progressive Universalpoesie* is consequently launched. This idea

“umfasst alles, was nur poetisch ist, vom grössten wieder mehre Systeme in sich enthaltenden Systeme der Kunst, bis zu dem Seufzer, dem Kuss, den das dichtende Kind aushaucht in kunstlosen Gesang.”³

¹ Hans-Joachim Mähl and Richard Samuel (eds.): *Werke, Tagebücher und Briefe Friedrich von Hardenbergs* (München 1978) vol. II, p 249.

² in: A.W and F. Schlegel (eds.): *Athenäum. Eine Zeitschrift* (1798-1800, 1956)

³ *ibid.* p 205

Positive attention towards subjectivity and the (dissolved) limits between the subjective and the objective is also of importance in Schlegel's concept of the Romantic - or as the 116. Athenäum fragment continues:

"(Man) kann sich so in das Dargestellte verlieren dass man glauben möchte, poetische Individuen jeder Art zu characterisieren, sey ihr Eins und Alles."

It is obvious that subjectivity at this point not only is given the status of aesthetic validity, but rather makes aesthetic validity its *premise*. It is therefore in this connection that I would like to use Novalis' statement about the letter.

His short fragment is part of "Blüthenstaub", an aphoristic collection of "emphatical selfreflection". This context makes it clear that *der wahre Brief* - the true letter - is more than what we would nowadays call a beautiful or poetical text. It actually seems to go beyond any definition of genre. The "true letter" is closer to a state of mind where the split between subject and object, between "I" and "you", has been dissolved. The fragment is obviously conceived by someone who is familiar with writing intimate letters, but also someone who has experienced the strange feeling of dissolving identity, of becoming part of the person one is addressing with empathy, either in one's thoughts or during the writing process.⁴

Let me therefore claim that a letter is a dialogue at the same time as being a monologue. And may I also point at a somewhat related reference - that the concept of "poetic" and "truth" in the Novalis' fragment refer to the same kind of utopia which formed part of the early Jena Romanticism.

⁴ In Novalis' own words: "...sich seines transcendentalen Selbst zu bemächtigen, das Ich seines Ich's zugleich seyn." (Mähl and Samuel 1978, vol II, p 239)

When Karl-Heinz Bohrer in "Der romantische Brief"⁵ reads Clemens Brentano's letters to Sophie Merau and Karoline Günderode he, however, characterizes them using the expression "Dialogverlust". In these letters, states Bohrer, it is no longer necessary to have an addressee. The prototype of the Romantic letter is - as Bohrer reads it - completely divorced from its normal referentiality, from being a specific means of communication from one person to another. There has been a change from the teleological to the emphatic-enthusiastic, from discursive to poetic speech in Brentano's letters, writes Bohrer.

But can we still consider a text with these characteristics to be a letter? Is it not closer to the definition of a modernist poem? I will not attempt to deal with these questions here, as they are closely related to Bohrer's interesting, but to me not fully convincing thesis about the relationship between the aesthetic modern, the Romantic, and what he calls aesthetic subjectivity. Even though I do not agree with Bohrer on this topic - and the range of this article does not permit me to discuss this further - I can fully support the other goal Bohrer is aiming at: namely to liberate the term "Romanticism" from any historical, philosophical and sociological literary tradition, which it has been subjected to - or rather embraced by - during the last, say seventy five years.

What I find necessary to discuss is Bohrer's reticence in recognizing the *particularity* of the genre "letter" - that a letter normally presupposes an addressee, although the addressee does not necessarily have to exist in what is usually called "reality", and that a single letter often forms part of a correspondence. I would therefore claim that regardless of how the individual letter appears, it is always-already part of a dialogue, real or imaginary. I would also like to point out that it is possible to find traces

⁵ Karl-Heinz Bohrer: *Der romantische Brief. Die Entstehung ästhetischer Subjektivität* (München 1987).

of "the Other" in the letter; traces that may appear in many different ways, ranging from proper answers to something the other correspondent has written in his or her letters, to various forms of aesthetic setting. And these methods of representation are never gender neutral.

Last, but not least: the letter, and also the collection of letters (the correspondence) is a hybrid genre. It points in at least two directions. On one hand there is a close link to empirical reality; on the other hand, we have an aesthetically arranged text. To examine the letter - or the correspondence - therefore requires a double approach. In my own research in letters, correspondences and epistolary culture I have chosen to employ both psycho-biographical method and rhetorical reading.⁶

What is a letter? - and are letters always Romantic?

Not all letters are Romantic (and even fewer are romantic, *hélas*). But if we limit ourselves to letters that are parts of *intimate* correspondences, the second question can be answered with a cautious "yes".

The intimate exchange of letters, which is the type of correspondence I am dealing with here, most clearly demonstrates that a letter is a monologue written with the intention of creating a dialogue. The monologic principle of the letter, however, already contains a dialogic principle⁷ - as one always writes a letter with somebody in mind. But

⁶ Lotte Thrane: *Sjælens mystiske fællesskab. En brevvæksling mellem Johanne Luise Heiberg og Hans Lassen Martensen*. Kritik 90 (Copenhagen 1989), *Det iscenesatte begær. Om Ingeborgs breve til Goldschmidt*. Spring 3 (Copenhagen 1993) and *Længselsbilleder - en beretning om forførelse, skrift og passion* (Copenhagen 1997).

⁷ cf. Wilhelm Vosskamp: *Dialogische Vergegenwärtigung beim Schreiben und Lesen. Zur Poetik des Briefromans im 18. Jahrhundert*. (in: DVjs, Heft 1, 1971), p 80-116.

this somebody - and let us for a while presume it is a person - is not, and can not be identical with the addressee of the specific letter. One is always *envisioning* "the Other".

This envisioning, which structurally belongs to what Lacan has called *l'imaginaire*, is therefore also coloured by the subject's desire to repair "the lack", or the separation which the imaginary order contains a memory of. Paraphrasing Lacan: the experience of loss creates an urge to recreate the original oneness and unity related to the primary register, namely *le réel*. The subject - in this case the letter writer - therefore aims at creating an image of "the Other" which is partly identical in an attempt to mirror what has been lost. One can thereby claim that a "you" does exist in the letter, but it is part of the first person, at best *eine rettende Phantasie* for the persona, as Walter Benjamin has put it.

Consequently the relationship between the letter writer's persona and the addressee becomes impossible to ascertain. Due to this ambiguity or *intangible reference*⁸ a *utopian addressee or recipient is established as part of the text. The utopian addressee serves as the highest authority for providing understanding and answers. He or she - and gender identity of an utopian addressee is also blessed (or cursed) with "intangible reference" - becomes a sort of ideal reader. It is therefore possible to say that the dialogue which is part of the correspondence is inspired by the listening and quiet understanding of an invisible but yet participating third. A utopian Third, that can be called.*

Even if the *utopian Third* is in principle the 'passive' reader of the letter

⁸ "Intangible reference" is my translation from Swedish of Horace Engdahl's neologism "undanvikande referens". He introduces the expression in his book *Den romantiska texten* (Stockholm 1986). The "intangible reference" is also that which cannot be expressed [det utsägliga], and as such a general quality in poetical language. In Engdahls brilliant rhetorical readings of Swedish poetry by Atterbom, Stagnelius, Tegnér and Almqvist he, however, shows how the status given to "the intangible reference" in these texts connect to the schlegelian concept of Romanticism.

(the intentionally ideal addressee), it is important to remember that as regards the hyperreality of the intimate correspondence, he or she also plays a rather active role in the mind of the letter writer. He or she is also *producing* text, or expected to produce text - to participate as correspondent. One can say that this ideal reader or listener is being equipped with a mind that reflects the innermost desires of his or her outspring - of the letter writer. And let me remind you, that this little drama is performed in *both* ends of the correspondence - considering we have two correspondents with convergent 'motives' in participating in a correspondence of this nature

This actually means that it is possible to find two (or more) sets of utopian *Thirids* in every intimate correspondence, - but it also means that these utopian *Thirids* enter into a new kind of dialogue. For the participants in an intense correspondence it is often experienced as though these 'dialogues of dialogues' take on a life of their own and become independent of the main or literal text, of the 'intention'. But hyperreality is, after all, a kind of reality.

I claim that it is here, in the imagination's own power of fascination, in this signifying chain, in this (indeed!) empty simulacrum - it is here the imaginary is jumpstarted in the *real* (or first) addressee of the letter who is - mainly as an effect of all this - becoming a producer of *new* letters.

It is right here you will find the inner force of an intimate correspondence. And the motivation to participate in it. And to continue it. It is also here the unity of the rhetorical-monological and the dialogical becomes apparent. This unity can be compared to a mutual seduction - and such a phenomenon is clearly visible in the correspondence I am about to present.

A mystical intimacy of kindred souls. The mutual seduction

As in most intimate exchanges of letters a man and a woman interacts with each other. The male part of this relationship is Rainer Maria Rilke; the woman's name is Magda von Hattingberg, a Viennese pianist and writer, who took the initiative for a correspondence which only lasted for one month - February 1914 - but yet resulted in 32 long, intimate letters. 18 letters written by Rilke, 14 by Magda - or "Benvenuta", as Rilke called her.⁹

Rilke (1875 - 1926) should not need any introduction, but Magda von Hattingberg is less known. She was born in Vienna 1882 and died 1960 in Traunkirchen. She married an Austrian writer, Herman Graedener, in the early thirties, and survived him with four years. Her authorship is considerable. It contains books about music, books for children and two books (and several reworkings¹⁰ of those two books) about her relationship to Rilke.

Among Rilke-specialists von Hattingberg is often reduced to a supporting biographical role in the rather treacly world of Rilke-hagiography, and she is furthermore often mocked for the "subjectivity" expressed in her books.¹⁰ Magda von Hattingberg therefore shares an unfortunate fate with most of the other women (and some of the men, too) around Rilke. I hope the following presentation of her and what I have chosen to call "her re-reading and re-writing of Rilke" will show, that she is more than this. Or rather - something different.

In 1943 von Hattingberg publishes "Rilke und Benvenuta. Ein Buch des Dankes" and in 1947 Rilke's letters to her under the title "So lass ich mich zu träumen gehen. Briefe an Magda von Hattingberg". A closer

⁹ "Benvenuta" - the welcome one, the one who will arrive.

¹⁰ See Dieter Bassermann: *Der Späte Rilke* (München 1947), B.J. Morse in: *Modern Languages Review* (London 1954) and Joachim Storck's epilogue in: *Rilke and Benvenuta. An Intimate Correspondence* (New York 1987).

look at the eleven years between 1943 and 1954 (where the complete correspondence was published ¹¹) show us that she reworked, edited, reedited and supervised new editions and translations of altogether ten books about the relationship in this period - though her attempts to have Rilke's Benvenuta-letters published began as early as 1935, where she discussed this with Anthon Kippenberg from *Insel Verlag*.¹²

Being so concerned about Rilke one could easily be lead to believe that this was proof of a lifelong friendship or love affair - maybe even being a parallel to the more well-known friendship which existed between Rilke and Lou Andr as-Salom . This is, in fact, not the case. Objectively speaking, Magda von Hattingbergs connection with Rilke was exclusively related to the month in which the correspondence took place. Nevertheless, what went on during this month becomes so important and loaded with meaning to the female correspondent, that she, according to herself, was affected by it for the rest of her life. In "Rilke und Benvenuta. Ein Buch des Dankes" - the book written more than twenty years after she received the last letter from Rilke - her emotional recalling of the relationship echoes a religious awakening:

"Ich habe mit meinen H nden die Erde ber hrt, unter der Du schl fst, und habe zu Dir gesprochen. Ich habe Dir gesagt, dass mein Leben durch Dich inneren Reichtum und Segen ohnegleichen empfangen hat, denn Du hast mich schauen gelehrt und begreifen. Du hast mich gelehrt, was Gr sse ist, und Leid und Gl ck und Verzicht. (....) alle Toren des Lebens hast Du mir ge ffnet, und nur so durfte ich in mein eigenes

¹¹ Magda von Hattingberg: *Briefwechsel mit Benvenuta* (Esslingen 1954).

¹² cf. two letters from Kippenberg to Magda von Hattingberg, 1935. The idea of a publication is, however, already raised 1933 in a letter from von Hattingberg to Kippenberg's wife, Katharina (all letters in Deutsches Literatur Archiv, Marbach).

Leben gehn, das erf llt und best tigt wurde."¹³

If we choose to take her words at face value, and I plan to do so, she owes her religious awakening - that she has been able to begin a richer, fuller life - to Rilke. He is consequently idealised. He is depicted as The Divine. But she herself has been blessed by seeing him, speaking to him, touching (the ground under) him, by being close to him. By being one with The Divine. The question here is not whether they had a (sexual) relationship - even that has caused a good deal of speculation, according to the many footnotes about Magda von Hattingberg! - the keyword is *intensity*. Intensity of words.

The intensity of words in the quotation above - the sensual intimacy expressed in "mit meinen H nden die Erde ber hrt, unter der Du schl fst" - echoes the intensity of the correspondence. Not only did the two correspondents build up intensity by exchanging so many letters over a short period of time, but a certain use of imagery and rhetoric was also in use. It is surprising to see how the two correspondents already from the beginning must have had a sort of understanding for one another, a kind of unspoken agreement, which allows or opens up to the use of a religious and erotic imagery. This is, however, mostly done in a playful manner, using language and its connotative powers at its utmost:

"Vor Jahren einmal, habe ich, noch als ein halbes Kind, wenn auch mit ganz anderen Worten - so  ber das Wesen der Musik sprechen wollen; wohl in dem dunklen Wunsch, den Heranwachsende haben, sich mitzuteilen: - da lachte man und sagte tr stend: "du bist ein kleines  berspanntes Ding" - und ich sch mte mich so sehr - f r die Anderen.

¹³ von Hattingberg 1943, p 305

Und gesprochen habe ich darüber nie mehr mit ihnen. Aber jetzt kommen Sie!

Wissen Sie, dass alle darauf warten, zu Ihnen zu kommen? Die Grössten aus aller Zeit und ihre Jünger und Nachfolger - wie werden die sich freuen! Und wie freue ich mich darauf."¹⁴

"Dürftig dürftig, theures Herz, komm ich zu Dir, alles Gestern, alles Undurchdrungene, meine ganze Niederlage haftet mir noch an. Ich soll Dich sehn, Magda, mit diesen unvorbereiteten Augen; meine Hände, meine gestrigen Hände, sollen in den Deinen Zuflucht haben -, mein Herz soll dein Herz fühlen wie der kleine Johannes in der Elisabeth den kleinen Jesus in der Maria"¹⁵

As the quotations above hopefully show - what matters is not so much the factual telling but *the mode of telling*. During the month of the correspondence this rhetoric create a universe of yearning which in form as well as in content borrows items from the troubadour relationship - embraced by the idea of absence but also by the idea of absolution of erotic feeling. Magda von Hattingberg plays the part of "die Nimmergekommene" - a wellknown figure in Rilke's writings - and Rilke becomes her "Traumgeliebter." It is a balancing act whereby the two letter writers mutually titillate one another (and by implication themselves) - and at the same time a tacit agreement exists between them that this fixed state of titillation or tension is the ultimate goal. One can say that the power of imagination is being put under pressure by this tension, whereby its ability for producing images is extended. The secret - and strength

¹⁴ von Hattingberg to Rilke 29/1 1914, *Briefwechsel mit Benvenuta* p 21

¹⁵ Rilke to von Hattingberg 25/2 1914, *ibid.* p 145

- in this playful game or *mutual seduction* is therefore that the apparent desire is only present in those images, in textuality.

It is commonly known that Rilke was strongly drawn towards (and indeed often practiced) a form of writing of the kind I have presented. Furthermore, he often discusses courtly love with (woman) friends in letters,¹⁶ just as it is thematized in some of his poems.¹⁷ Magda von Hattingberg, despite an obvious fascination and participation in the game of seduction, would obviously like to have proof of a more concrete reality. After they have exchanged letters for three weeks she suggests a meeting, Rilke hesitantly agrees - and this in effect means the death of the relationship. A slow death, nonetheless: the couple travelled around Europe for about two months before Rilke ended the relationship definitively in Venice.

Language, power and lifelong bonds

If one, however, reads these letters rhetorically, the balance changes a long time before their first meeting. The mastering of the symbolic which is a precondition of narrative seduction, is in fact not practiced at the same level by the two correspondents. They are

¹⁶ Rilke to Annette Kolb 23/1 1912: "Die Troubadours wussten genau, wie wenig weit sie gehen durften, und Dante, in dem die Not ganz gross wurde, kam nur auf dem ungeheuren Bogen seines gigantisch ausweichenden Gedichts um die Liebe herum! Alles andere ist, in diesem Sinn, abgeleitet und zweitem Grades." Furthermore, Rilke often refers to the Renaissance poets Louise Labé and Gaspara Stampa, who wrote in the same tradition. It should also be mentioned, that Rilke translated the (fictional?) love letters from the Portuguese nun Mariana Alcoforado to Chevalier de Chantilly. About Mariana writes Rilke in the same letter to Annette Kolb: "Der Fall der Portugieserin ist so wunderbar rein, weil sie die Ströme ihr Gefühl nicht ins Imaginäre weiter wirft, sondern mit undendlicher Kraft die Genialität dieses Gefühl in sich zurückführt: es ertragend, sonst nichts."

¹⁷ An obvious example could be *Du im voraus verlorne Geliebte*, but also *Perlen entrollen* and *Bestürzt mich Musik* (all written 1913).

from the present - which there were several other reasons for doing in Germany in 1943. The fact that she created this utopian "no-where" - or, as Christa Wolf has put it a "Kein Ort, Nirgends"²¹ - is at the same time a Romantic idea and a method of liberating herself from the strong bonds to Rilke. But first and foremost it is a *narrative technique*.

"Buch des Dankes" appears as a confession directed to the man who left her and thereby "gave her to herself" - as the religious awakening I described earlier also indicates. The composition of the book highlights a chain of considerable and memorable events or moments from their time together. A chain of moments, loaded with meaning - a chain of signifiers, that is. The significant qualifications would be experiences of intimacy, of a closeness-beyond-words. Or to put it differently: unification experiences.

The construction of reality

Magda von Hattingberg dramatises her memories by the use of dialogue. She often takes Rilke's lines from his letters to her from February 1914. A closer look at these lines, however, reveals that they are often made up of several statements. Sometimes she changes words, too. I will exemplify her method by the way she presents the presumably last letter she had from Rilke - the so-called *dernière lettre à Benvenuta*.

According to Magda von Hattingberg Rilke wrote this letter to her in 1926, a few days before he died. It was then left in a sealed envelope containing her letters to him from February 1914. The envelope was delivered to her years later. In this last letter from

²¹ Christa Wolf: *Kein Ort. Nirgends* (1979)

Rilke, from which a long passage is quoted in the end of her book, he expresses himself in a very sincere and loving way. After having done a kind of sad status of his life, he writes:

*"Und wenn ich's auch nie erreiche [die Sonne zu halten], so hat mich Gott doch auf den Berg geführt und hat mir Dich gezeigt. Dich. Benvenuta! Und wer vermöchte je wieder aus mir zu nehmen, was ich geschaut habe! Selbst der Tod kann es nur in mich verschliessen..."*²²

This is obviously a declaration of how much she meant to him - and a declaration of love. A closer look at the passage, however, reveals that it is very similar to a passage in the letter written the 15th of February 1914²³ - although this particular section has been left out of all printed editions of the letter.²⁴ In the original letter it says:

*"Und wenn ist [es?] vielleicht mir erreiche [die unschuldigste Landschaft] - so hat Gott mich dort auf den Berg geführt und mirs gezeigt. Wer mir vermögte wieder aus mir zu nehmen was ich geschaut habe? Selbst der Tod kann es nur in mich zuschliessen. Du theure Schwester, Deine Freudigkeit ..."*²⁵

²² von Hattingberg 1943 p 302

²³ *Briefwechsel mit Benvenuta*, p 75

²⁴ This includes the 1954-edition, which I consider the most reliable edition of the correspondence, although there are several omissions in the text. These are, however, clearly marked. Still, the 1954-edition has also changed the text slightly in the letter mentioned: ich seh hinein wie in die unschuldigste Landschaft [omission] Du theure Schwester, Deine Freudigkeit" I will leave the interpretation of these changes to somebody else....

²⁵ The original letter can be seen at *Deutsches Literatur Archiv*, Marbach.

The differences have been underlined by me here. The passage from "Buch des Dankes" points in two directions: *either* that Rilke was merely copying himself when he wrote important, intimate letters,²⁶ *or* that the material from the first letter has been manipulated by von Hattingberg. The non-existence of any original *dernière lettre à Benvenuta* make me choose the second option.

The effect of the changed passages is a changed tone in the letter - a more personal and appealing tone - where Rilke is actually presenting a philosophical or quasi-religious row of thoughts. One could say that by doing so Magda von Hattingberg forces a dialogue into his monologue.

This is just one of many examples of how Magda von Hattingberg constructs her own reality - or re-writes the existing reality - in the autobiographical "Book of Thanks". The motive behind these textual transactions might have been to show the world how close the relationship was. But behind possible personal motives - and one can only speculate here - the image of Rilke is always strongly idealised. His 'divinity' reaches its climax when she refers to him as "meine Troststimme (...) meine Heiland"²⁷

²⁶ This opens up for new (almost absurd) questions - like how Rilke should have managed to remember a passage from a twelve year old letter so accurately. Or whether he - contrary to what is generally known - took (and kept) copies of his own letters.

²⁷ Magda von Hattingberg 1943 p 247. Despite the idealisation carried out by Magda von Hattingberg, she does not depict Rilke as the victorious or heroic Christ. She assigns him the role of the suffering (and later dying) Saviour. One reason for doing this is that it matches the role she assigned for herself in her memoirs: the mourning mother, Mary at the Cross - *mater dolorosa*. Magda von Hattingberg's interpretation of this archetypical mother-son relationship is a major issue in my book *Længselsbilleder* [Images of Yearning], to be published 1998.

Re-reading and re-living. To step into one's own image

Even Magda von Hattingberg both seems to have manipulated her material and depicted Rilke in a way far from reality, I have no intentions of joining her critics. Her unreliability concerning factual information rather makes me wonder *why* she did it - and what kind of *added meaning* her text receives by her manipulations. That is why I prefer to call it "re-writing".

I have dealt with the "whys" in another context²⁸ - but the question of the added meaning is my main concern in this article. It could be summarized like this: The process of memory reactivates the emotions of being one with the Other experienced during the correspondence. But at the same time there seems to be an attempt in the book to break down the distance between *what took place* and *the memory of what took place* - twenty nine years earlier. This is both a psychological and a rhetorical strategy. I see the two strategies as an endeavour to extend (and by implication criticize) the existing view of reality, including the linear concept of time, of temporality. Parallels can, again, be drawn with Jena Romanticism. The afore mentioned strategies can be found on several levels in the von Hattingberg text. Let me exemplify this by a happy situation described in the Duino Chapter.

The scene takes place a sunny afternoon. Rainer and Magda are heading for the beach to sit on their favourite bench and have a quiet time together. Magda brings her needlework

"....die Rainer so sehr liebt: weisse Batisttaschentücher, mit feinem, durchbrochenem Saum, dessen Rand mit winzigen Blümchen in

²⁸ Thrane 1998

hellrosa Seide bestickt werden sollte."²⁹

As the meticulous description of her needlework indicates, there is *a script* for what she is doing. The reflection following the scene in the book reveals that:

"Vor wenigen Tagen habe ich mit Rührung beim Wiederlesen seiner [Rilkes] Briefe die Stelle gefunden: 'Du weißt nicht, was es heisst für mich, dass ich Dir zusehen werde, wenn Du helle seidene Blumen in weissen Batist nähst.'"³⁰

The reflection is connected to a situation from the past being recollected in the present. One could say that she *re-reads* - in May 1914 - in order to *re-live*. It also seems that she wants to recharge the present with an intimacy and intensity that transcends the actual reality described in the text. The beach situation is thus staged in accordance with Rilke's wish in a three months old letter, a letter where he expresses a wish to sit next to a woman embroidering. Von Hattingberg's text can therefore be seen as a visual representation, at the same time *re-reading and re-living* of the various emotions and moods connected to the correspondence.

If it is read as an autobiographical sketch, though, - and I am here referring to the so-called *autobiographical pact*,³¹ it appears to be portrayed as reality. In other words: we see the explicit narrator,

²⁹ Magda von Hattingberg 1943 p 184

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ cf. Philippe Lejeune: *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris 1975). According to Lejeune "autobiography" is defined as a genre where there is identity between name on cover, of narrator and of protagonist. When this "literary convention" about referentiality and identity is accepted by the reader, Lejeune calls it "the autobiographical pact".

1914-Magda, step into her own image. We see her *amalgamate* with the woman in the letter, the woman embroidering white silk flowers on batiste. Or, as Bohrer would have put it: "im imaginativen Wort zu amalgamieren". One could say that the explicit narrator on this level of the text *recognizes* herself in this woman - who indeed is Rilke's image of a woman he named "Benvenuta". And thereby created!

The impossible desire for identity. To re-invent one(s) self

I would claim that something similar happens in relation to the re-written version of the situation, that is to say in 1943. The implicit narrator - Magda in 1943 - writes herself into the memories of a past moment in 1914, a past moment with a certain, unique quality: the moment where she became one with her own image

The relations between the author, the implicit narrator (1943) and the explicit narrator (1914) are neither simple, nor referential - and I am here in opposition to Lejeune.³² The relations can be compared to the endless reflection in a cabinet of mirrors. The various personas are therefore not identical, they are *reflections on reflections*. What they have in common is a desire for identity. And what unites them is the nature of this desire - that all the reflections (or images) may melt together in the black hole of ultimate meaning.

This desire is not only symbolised by the disappearance of the explicit narrator, but also by the disappearance of the implicit narrator. I see this as Magda von Hattingberg's vision of having

³² See previous note.

direct access to the life she had lived herself - or at least to *the fictitious idea* of her own life, which remembered episodes - and autobiographies - in any case are.

Allow me at this point to refer to names such as (Maurice-
Blanchard, Domna Stanton, Paul de Man and Annegret Heitman.³³

These theorists all - although for different reasons and certainly with different goals! - point out that it is unacceptable to view fiction and autobiography as opposed to one another. I find this thesis fully demonstrated in Magda von Hattingbergs "Rilke und Benvenuta. Ein Buch des Dankes".

I doubt, however, that Magda von Hattingberg consciously problematized the relationship between fiction and reality. But her sex becomes the joker of the game. If she wants to write about herself as she was then and thereby unify with the image of herself now - and that I would claim is the goal of *every* autobiography - she must, as a woman, as culture's "Other", continually *re-invent herself*. In this way she is at the same time author/creator and reader/observer of her own life - even though she is deeply dependent on the image Rilke drew of her, namely "Benvenuta".

Magda von Hattingbergs autobiographical book of memories - which can be read as her very last "letter to Rilke" - therefore exemplifies what Karl-Heinz Bohrer has called "die ästhetische Verfremdung des Subjekts", meaning that the subject is both creator of and created by her own words and images.

I hope I have demonstrated that it is not possible to understand this *Verfremdung* or staging of events - which is also the evoking of the

³³ Marc Eli Blanchard: *The Critique of Autobiography*. Comparative Literature, vol. 34, nr. 2/19 (1982), Shari Benstock and Domna Stanton (eds.): *The Female Autograph* (New York 1985), Paul de Man: *Autobiography as De-Facement*. in: *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York 1984) and Annegret Heitmann: *Selbst Schreiben. Eine Untersuchung der dänischen Frauenautobiographik* (München 1994).

idea of subjectivity - independently of gender.

A Romantic discourse

The amalgamating of text and psychological reality, the attempt to overcome the split between subject and object - or to put it differently, the "intangible reference" - is to me the real secret in letters and other autobiographical or confessional texts. Therefore, the amalgamating is an equivalent to what Roland Barthes has called the *le désir du texte*. It is also here the Novalis' fragment about the "true letter" should be recalled.

The desire of the text, however, can be linked to a vision *transcending* both the text, the writing process and the monological or dialogical interference. This vision contains *an attempt to overcome the split between language and reality* - which is actually close to what Paul de Man (though being strongly critical of this - truly Romantic! - idea) has referred to as "metaphysics of being as presence."³⁴

I do not share the pessimism in de Man's critical attitude and his disparagement of the idea of *staging* the "impossible ambition" of overcoming the split between signified and signifier, between language and reality. I would rather believe that it is the presence of this impossible, but nevertheless beautiful *vision*, which makes it fascinating and inspiring - not to mention seducing! - to write, to receive and to read letters.

And of course to research them.

³⁴ Paul de Man in *The Rhetoric of Temporality*. (*Blindness and Insight*, Minneapolis 1971) - but owing the expression to Derrida.

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