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Poetry as a Mirror of Evolving Consciousness: A Case Analysis of the Poet and Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke as a Mirror of Integral Structure of Consciousness

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Introduction

As a poet I have always found Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry a reflection of integral consciousness. I found Jean Gebser's (1905-1973) structures of consciousness in the writings of Rilke, and I believed his poetry lived in the present and yet extended into an *atemporal* existence outside of linear time and space. The *integral* structure of consciousness incorporates all facets of space and time, as well as all of the major structures in the history of humankind, and this is reflected in his poetry. When a person reaches the *integral* stage of human development, he represents all the earlier stages at the same time and is considered fully developed at the highest level. Allan Combs believes that rational people will not stick to rigid religious beliefs or politics that serve their own agenda, but rather to those that will serve all of humankind, the world, and the universe at large. By being fully present and philosophically open to all that exists, they can become fully realized at their highest potential, while also contributing to the full realization of universal consciousness (Combs, 2009). In this sense Ken Wilber (1949- present) divided all of existence into four quadrants, each of which was sub-divided into twelve levels. His anthropological studies, described in *Out from Eden* (1981), outline how human consciousness has developed throughout history.

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The Book of Hours (1905) by Rainer Maria Rilke

The Book of Hours concerns itself largely with God and his Creation. It is written through the eyes of an unnamed Russian Orthodox monk and painter of icons. Written in the first person, "I", it focuses on "subjective" truths and the relationship of the individual to the collective. The "you" usually refers to God. Thus he deals largely with the two left quadrants of Wilber, the "I" or interior-collective and the "we" or exterior-collective.

The Spirit in the first person is supposed to represent Spirit as the "Overmind" and of the moment. The Spirit in the second person represents the great "You" or God. The Spirit in the third person represents the "Great It", the "Perfection of existence itself, the Is-ness, the Thusness, the very Suchness of this and every moment." (Wilber 2006, p. 159).

The Book of Hours is written in a single sequence of untitled poems, which Rilke described as "prayers". This book is very important to help us understand Rilke because it helped to define his "voice"; he regarded the book as his "origin" (Snow, 2009, p. 623-626). "Origin" was a term used by Gebser to describe the quality that exists in all of nature. Rilke applies this term to his own mind and its creation. These are the integral nature of the following words:

"I live my life in widening circles
That drift out over the things.
I may not achieve the very last,
But it will be my aim.

I circle around God, around the age-old tower;
I've been circling for millennia
And still don't know: am I a falcon, a storm,
Or a sovereign song?"

(Snow 2009, p. 7)

While we may not achieve our highest potential, it is the aim of human existence. God represents that highest level of consciousness that it is possible to reach, although it never will be reached. If God is the ultimate level of consciousness, who is the speaker that comes closest to God? This poem, in which the speaker is unsure of his own identity, foreshadows the *First Elegy*, in which the speaker is fearful of being swallowed up by the greater entity of an angel.

In the four quadrants of existence, all things are part of something greater. Therefore a biological animal (a falcon), a cosmic weather system (a storm), and an idea (a song), all approach God because they are a part of Him.

The integral theory of consciousness involves a structure of temporalism (Gidley, 2007b). Time was explored at great extent in Gebser's *The Ever-Present Origin* (1985). According to the Bible, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). He is the "age-old tower" that always was and always will be.

"Your first word was: *Light*:
And time began. After long silence
Your second word was Man and there was fear
(we still darken in its sound)
Before your face resumed its brooding."

(Snow 2009, p. 29)

God embodies the eternal characteristic of time, never having begun and never ending. He is in all things, and all things are in Him. From the consciousness of God came time and all that was, is, and ever will be in existence.

Why is there fear when God creates man? Could it be that because he is all-knowing, he knows that man will disobey him and create disharmony in his creation? It is man's revolt against God that creates sin and chaos in the previously ordered world. It is one of the purposes of the integral theorists to make humans aware of their responsibility to all of creation and to behave in a manner that promotes peace and harmony.

“In all these *things* toward which I feel
This kinship and closeness, I always find you:
Basking like seed in the very smallest
And giving yourself greatly to the great.

Such is the wondrous game the forces play
As they flow so selflessly through the things:
Swelling in roots, narrowing in the long stems,
And in the blooming crowns: a resurrection.”

(Snow 2009, p. 25)

The speaker revels in his relationship to a larger consciousness. He sees the order of things from small to great and how they are interrelated, sharing a oneness with the Creator. The “forces” are not cold biological rules, but living presences that allow all things to exist. In the flower, the forces allow the seed to germinate, grow, and eventually come to its full potential in the form of a flower. The resurrection implies that death occurred to one form of the plant so that the result would be something more beautiful.

The Book of Images (1902, 1906) by Rainer Maria Rilke

These poems paint portraits of individuals at a certain point in time. The sundry topics represent the writer's own varied experience over a span of several years. Yet the same themes run through all of them. In *Memory*, a person waits for his good times and experiences and suddenly realizes the best times have already happened to him:

“And then suddenly you knew: it was *then*.
You rise, and before you
Stands the fear and prayer and shape
Of a vanished year.”

(Snow 2009, p. 85)

Clearly Rilke was affected by the death and suffering that surrounded him during World War I. However, he did not describe the ugly side of death. Rather, he explored the upper depths of consciousness that could be reached at the point of death, and the importance of living completely in the present. Paradoxically, he steered away from descriptions of modern life, preferring either mythological personages or timeless descriptions of people or animals that could exist at any time and place. In this poem he uses the pronoun “you”, speaking directly to the reader, warning him of what will happen if he does not awaken to live fully in the present.

New Poems (1907) by Rainer Maria Rilke

The upper right quadrant contains *interior-individual* existence, which is *intentional*. All that science understands about evolution is part of this quadrant, in the order of what Koestler called “holons”, or parts that make up a whole. The levels are ordered in increasing complexity. *Atoms* make up *molecules*, *prokaryotes* are simpler than *eukaryotes*, which are less complex than *neuronal organisms*; the *neural chord* is simpler than the *reptilian brain stem*, which is less complex than the *limbic system*, which is less complicated than the *neocortex*. The complex *neocortex* is the highest of these but the *SF1*, *SF2*, and *SF3* are even more complex. This quadrant can best be described in “it” language, describing objective truth.

The lower right quadrant includes *exterior-individual* existence, which is *behavioral*. In order of depth, this encompasses *galaxies*, *planets*, *the Gaia system*, *heterotrophic ecosystems*, *societies with division of labor*, *groups or families*, *foraging tribes*, *horticultural tribal villages*, *early agrarian states and empires*, *industrial nations or states*, and *informational planetary systems*. This quadrant can best be described in “it” language, describing “interobjective truth”, or how individual holons fit into larger systems.

The collection *New Poems* contains a number of “thing poems” about people and animals. These use the “it” language of the two right quadrants, dealing with objective truths of the interior-individual and exterior-individual. Rilke shows the beauty and regality present in each of the species as they approach idealization. *The Swan* demonstrates the oneness between the organism and his environment:

“Into the water, which received him gently
And which, so serene in its passing,
Withdraws beneath him, wave on wave;
While he, infinitely still and sure,
With ever greater confidence and kingship
And self-possession deigns to glide.”

(Snow 2009, p. 157)

There is no passivity in the environment in this serene scene. The water actively accepts the swan, while the swan reigns over the water. The swan seems to have achieved its potential in performing its function in its ideal environment. This picture demonstrates how the individual and the collective can enhance each other and reach higher levels of consciousness.

Sonnets to Orpheus (1923) by Rainer Maria Rilke

These untitled poems belong to the realm of the lofty and mythical. They were written while he was at Duino Castle awaiting inspiration for them. During that time he was mostly in isolation, and was profoundly affected by the death of a young girl with whom he was acquainted. He wrote in a letter how the sonnets suddenly came to him in a stream. After he had written them, they resulted in the creation of the *Duino Elegies*. Throughout the book Rilke is addressing Orpheus, but by the end he has become the subject, and can speak from the universal to the individual consciousness (Snow 2009, p. 648-654).

“And if the earthly should forget you,

Say to the silent loam: I flow.
To the rushing water speak: I am.”

(Snow 2009, p. 653)

The individual cries to the universe that it exists. It longs for recognition, knowing that without the universe it is nothing. “One thing that comes out in myths is that at the bottom of the abyss comes the voice of salvation. The black moment is the moment when the real message of transformation is going to come. At the darkest moment comes the light” (Campbell & Moyers, 1988, p. 37, as cited in Lu 2006)

Conclusions

To conclude, I found that transpersonal psychologists can take a page from Rilke, who suggests that one can examine the self and still be aware of the cosmic consciousness; alternatively, integral consciousness helps one realize one’s full potential (Louchakova & Lucas 2007; Hartelius et al. 2007). In this sense, higher education (Moore 2005) may need to turn toward consciousness studies as happens at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology and at the California Institute of Integral Studies. Thus, in this essay, Rilke’s poetry has proved itself to be timeless, another quality of artists who have infused *integral* consciousness into their own lives and works. Rilke demanded that people have “the courage to face the strangest, most unusual, most inexplicable experiences that can meet us”. He felt that people should not be afraid to recognize the supernatural, to which they could more readily relate. The refusal to believe in things beyond our senses, including God, has decreased the ability to achieve our fullest potential (Rilke, 1986, p. 88–89). In the integral structure of consciousness, we keep ourselves down to a lower level when we could be so much more.

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