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After Duino: A seminar series on the late poetry of RMR

Christ Church, Oxford, 7 March 2006

I'm going to start (and end, of course) with the untitled poem from the *Sonette an Orpheus* that everyone cites, in often horrible translations, when they write about unicorns. Then I will take you on a magical mystery tour of unicorn lore & images – and what I want to do with this material is look at the peculiarly Rilkean angle on the trope: taking the traditional erotics of virginity associated with this myth and giving it his distinctive spatial-temporal angle of *the intransitive*.

**QUOTATION 1**

O dieses ist das Tier, das es nicht gibt.  
Sie wußtens nicht und habens jeden Falls  
- sein Wandeln, seine Haltung, seinen Hals,  
bis in des stillen Blickes Licht – geliebt.

Zwar *war* es nicht. Doch weil sie's liebten, ward  
ein reines Tier. Sie ließen immer Raum.  
Und in dem Raume, klar und ausgespart,  
erhob es leicht sein Haupt und brauchte kaum

zu sein. Sie nährten es mit keinem Korn,  
nur immer mit der Möglichkeit, es sei.  
Und die gab solche Stärke an das Tier,

daß es aus sich ein Stirnhorn trieb. Ein Horn.  
Zu einer Jungfrau kam es weiß herbei –  
und war im Silber-Spiegel und in ihr.

Rilke, I want to argue, is all about grammar. It's about the transitive, the vocative, the locative. Where would Rilke be without the subjunctive? (Can English ever match up, with its feeble conditional and second-best modals?) This grammatical positioning, and especially the way it connects with gender and desire, is central to how Rilke represents the cluster of ideas that are associated with unicorns. Love, like the unicorn, stands in Rilke (and elsewhere) first for the *possibility of the impossible* – or the impossibility of the possible; second for the problem of transitivity.

I want to introduce this discussion also by a question that might sound rather strange. What is the opposite of a unicorn? Before we think about answering it, observe that opposites are only one kind of contraries. Gide complained rather meanly about the slow-wittedness of a six-year-old nephew who couldn't get the issues of grammar:

**QUOTATION 2** For the last three days I have been trying to get Jacques to work, or at least to occupy his mind and force him to think. This child, though he appears to be far from stupid, has a worryingly versatile mind. (I've tried in vain to find a better word to describe his inattention and lack of logic.) I wanted to teach him the difference between masculine and feminine – but he confuses it with the notion of opposites. After three half hours of trying (half an hour each morning), he tells me that the opposite of 'blanc' is 'blanche' or that the feminine of 'big' is 'small'. I have tried every way to explain it, and I've been as patient with him as I am with a dog or my starling, but I cannot find the way to awaken the commonsense in that young brain.

Confusing the difference between masculine & feminine with the notion of opposites – well, we've all been there. And in the trajectory of Rilke's unicorns we will find these questions recurring. So – is the opposite of a unicorn a maiden [as in the sonnet]? Or a saint [as in the *Neue Gedichte* poem entitled 'Das Einhorn', which we'll look at presently]? Or is it perhaps a rhinoceros? Or a narwhal? Or another unicorn? - Now *that* really doesn't exist (see later).

Three versions of 'the animal that doesn't exist':

- Pic 1 Paul Rotterdam (1985; from Megged)
- Pic 2 Lascaux caves – what is it?
- Pic 3 unicorn skeleton (1663, Germany; inspected by Leibniz)

The most common image we have of the unicorn is, I expect, this:

Pic 4 typical: a horse with a horn

But actually it is often rather different. This is the unicorn of the *Dame à la licorne* tapestries at the Cluny:

- Pic 5 close-up of unicorn (Vue): NB goat's beard + hoofs
- Pic 6 a young unicorn

You can see that it actually isn't a horse. Here is a description from Wikipedia: **QUOTATION 3** though the popular image of the unicorn is that of a white horse differing only in the horn, the traditional unicorn has a billy-goat's beard, a lion's tail, and cloven hoofs, which distinguish him from a horse. Interestingly, these modifications make the horned ungulate more realistic, since only cloven-hoofed animals have horns or the Cluny catalogue:

**QUOTATION 4** The body somewhat resembles that of a horse, but with forked hooves [*sic* = cloven hoofs] and a goat's head surmounted by a long, straight, coiled horn – hence its name: unicorn, *unicornus* – which is in fact the immensely developed upper canine tooth of the narwhal or cetacen [*sic*] of the arctic seas.

Pic 7 two views of a narwhal (name = old Norse: corpse + whale)

The history of the unicorn is one of both universality and enigma. Matti Megged:

**QUOTATION 5** The first & most obvious finding of my search, common to all the Unicorns I've seen and read about, was that the myths of the Unicorn, their verbal & visual manifestations, are always haunted by the doubting of the Unicorn's existence, by incredulity, by repeated questions about his [*sic*] nature & meaning. From his earliest appearance in poetry and art, the Unicorn has been a challenge & an enigma. He has always been perceived as an ambiguous creature, who kept revealing himself through hiding.

Its traces are found in ancient China, where it is one of four intelligent animals: the dragon, the phoenix, the tortoise and the 'ki-lin' or unicorn: a 'multicoloured animal whose horn was made of silver' first described in c. 2800 BCE, associated also with Confucius, and described by a Chinese poet of the 9c CE as **QUOTATION 6** a supernatural being of auspicious omen' (MM 4-5). It was also described as an Indian beast, by Ctesias, a Greek physician in the court of Darius II and Ataxerxes, kings of Persia at the end of the 5c BCE:

**QUOTATION 7** There are in India certain wild asses which are as large as horses and even larger. Their bodies are white and their eyes dark blue. They have a horn on the forehead which is about a foot & a half in length [...] The base of the horn is pure white, the upper part is sharp and of a vivid crimson; and the remainder, or middle portion, in black. Those who drink out of these horns, made into drinking vessels, are not subject, they say, to convulsions or to the holy disease [epilepsy]. Indeed, they are immune even to poisons. (Ctesias, *La Perse, L'Inde*, 398 BCE; Megged 6). Famously also, they could make poisoned pools safe for other animals by dipping in their horn.

The unicorn appears also in the Mahabharata, in writings by Aristotle, Julius Caesar and Pliny the Elder – each time represented as a creature the writer has 'heard of':

**QUOTATION 8** During the medieval period in Europe, the Unicorn appeared time & again in

legends, in allegories, in bestiaries and psalters. He gained a new mode of existence that did not require any 'scientific' proofs, any evidence by witnesses or direct observation. Yet, the wonder and doubts were not effaced; they merely appeared in different guises (Megged 8-9); and, as we shall see, in this period the creature comes to stand for a whole range of ideas and emotions, as often negative as positive. Three from late 16c/early 17c:

- Pic 8 Leonardo: Maiden & Unicorn (LdV dates: 1452-1519)
- Pic 9 Moretto, the holy Justina (c 1530)
- Pic 10 Domenico, Farnese, Rome (1602-04)

Onwards in history also: in Shakespeare, Samuel Johnson, Leibniz, and in the last century, Tennessee Williams, W. H. Auden, Iris Murdoch, Borges, Rilke of course – and Celan. Doubtless many others.

Always the unicorn is 'a fabulous monster', carrying with it a wealth of fable and monstrosity. Here's a typically quizzical version – a version of the mirror, if you like – from Lewis Carroll:

#### QUOTATION 9

"What – is – this?" he said at last.

"This is a child!" Haigha replied eagerly, coming in front of Alice to introduce her, and spreading out both his hands towards her in an Anglo-Saxon attitude. "We only found it to-day. It's as large as life and twice as natural!"

"I always thought they were fabulous monsters!" said the Unicorn. "Is it alive?"

"It can talk," said Haigha solemnly.

The Unicorn looked dreamily at Alice, and said, "Talk, child."

Alice could not help her lips curling up into a smile as she began: "Do you know, I always thought Unicorns were fabulous monsters, too? I never saw one alive before!"

"Well, now that we *have* seen each other," said the Unicorn, "if you'll believe in me, I'll believe in you. Is that a bargain?"

"Yes, if you like," said Alice.

- Pic 11 Alice, Lion & Unicorn

The first biblical mention of this creature occurs in Numbers, Deuteronomy, Job and the Psalms, where the Hebrew word *us re'em* (pl. *re'emim*), translated into Greek as *monokeros* and thence into the Latin languages as variants of *unicorn*. It's not clear from the context what kind of animal this was supposed to be, or if it had one horn or two; but it lives in the desert and is mighty. A tale is told of the young David fighting a lion (Megged 99) from the back of a 'unicorn'. And the unicorn, as a wild creature (a roe, a young hart or a stag) luring the beloved girl from the house or (esp) garden of a king is the central image in the Song of Songs (Megged 67-73).

From here it is but a step to the medieval use of the unicorn in Christian lore. Its main, but not its only, use is as a version of the Lamb of God, and it is in that guise that we see, for example, the seven magnificent tapestries now held at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, which portray – amongst a plethora of 'pagan' flora & fauna – the story of the hunt, seduction, capture and resurrection of the unicorn as Christ-figure.

- Pic 12 The start of the hunt
- Pic 13 The unicorn at the fountain
- Pic 14 The unicorn crossing the stream
- Pic 15 The unicorn defends himself
- Pic 16 The unicorn tamed by the maiden
- Pic 17 The unicorn killed & brought to the castle
- Pic 18 The unicorn in captivity

The story is well known (see the B. S. Johnson poem, 'A Dublin unicorn'): the wild unicorn can be captured only by a maiden – and note the sly, rather cruel look of the girl in this series:

- [Pic 19](#)      [The unicorn tamed by the maiden: DETAIL](#)

In this version, the unicorn is sacrificed like a scapegoat, almost to make reparation for the sexual sins of others (women) – and yet it is also resurrected, in the *hortus conclusus* that elsewhere is precisely the domain of the lady, and there it gives rise to new fertility – eg a tree 'das es nicht gibt'...

- [Pic 20](#)      [The unicorn in captivity DETAIL](#)

But, even in Christian iconography, the unicorn does not always stand for goodness. It often appears in Garden of Eden images

- [Pic 21](#)      [Eden \(Basler Totentanz – it isn't tho, is it?\)](#)
- [Pic 22](#)      [Bosch: 2 details](#)

– supposedly the first animal that Adam named (Megged 78) – but cast out and seemingly not rescued from the Flood *because he has no mate* (Megged 86) *I will return to this*. Sometimes it actually substitutes for the satanic serpent (Megged 84) – logical enough in the light of its priapic horn – but, given this, interestingly rare.

Or even attacking Jesus on the cross:

- [Pic 23](#)      [Christ attacked by a unicorn \(Stuttgart psalter\)](#)

The unicorn is universal associated with a virgin – but is it more dangerous to her or is she more dangerous to it? Most often the latter, and hence the myth allows the extraction from the figure of the Virgin Mary (to whom the unicorn sometimes, somewhat startlingly, plays baby Jesus; she placates it by giving suck) the *extraction* from the Virgin Mary of the elements of Eve. We will return to this.

As we shall go on to see, the *universality & ambivalence* of the unicorn motif along with its associations of sacrifice, desire and sanctity – saints and maidens – makes it a particularly potent motif for Rilke. Long after he has left the early pseudo-Christian poetry behind, he remains fascinated by this cluster of images. Let's begin, then, to look at successive versions of the figure, the first two taken from his pre-1910 Paris writings.

## QUOTATION 10

### Das Einhorn

Der Heilige hob das Haupt, und das Gebet  
fiel wie ein Helm zurück von seinem Haupte:  
denn lautlos nahte sich das niegeglaubte,  
das weiße Tier, das wie eine geraubte  
hülflose Hindin mit den Augen fleht.

Der Beine elfenbeinernes Gestell  
bewegte sich in leichten Gleichgewichten,  
ein weißer Glanz glitt selig durch das Fell,  
und auf der Tierstirn, auf der stillen, lichten,  
stand, wie ein Turm im Mond, das Horn so hell,  
und jeder Schritt geschah, es aufzurichten.

Das Maul mit seinem rosagrauen Flaum  
war leicht gerafft, so daß ein wenig Weiß  
(weißer als alles) von den Zähnen glänzte;  
die Nüstern nahmen auf und lechzten leis.  
Doch seine Blicke, die kein Ding begrenzte,  
warfen sich Bilder in den Raum

### und schlossen einen blauen Sagenkreis.

The first unicorn text is the least typical, in a number of ways. Actually titled 'Das Einhorn', unlike any of the others, it features no virgin; the unicorn's distinctively unreal reality is manifested instead to a *saint*. The unicorn is also – more uniquely still – compared to a female animal (humanised of course, with its desperate eyes): a hind. The poem is full of movement: the horn is highlighted not only by its brightness (licht ... hell) but by its rhythmic motion as the animal steps forward on its ivory limbs. Everything about this creature is white – except its unreal-reality, which is the shadow of white, the 'blauer Sagenkreis'. In this image, Rilke completes the reversal of what he will do later, more conventionally but much more extremely: the *hortus conclusus*, most typically encircling the lady/maiden figure is here *cast* by the unicorn appearing to the saint for whom praying has turned momentarily (perhaps) into something more like dreaming.

The next representation of the unicorns, published about 3 years later, is the prose version in *Malte Laurids Brigge*. Before looking at this I'd like to show you the 6 heads of the 6 ladies: the same woman? – this has been much debated from the time Mérimée and George Sand 'discovered' the tapestries at the château of Boussac in the late 1830s or early 1840s. These – & the other tapestry series - were rescued from being used as rugs or covers for carts (Erlande-Brandenburg 68) or to covering vegetables in a barn (Williamson 5).

- Pic 24      Sight – hearing - taste
- Pic 25      Smell – touch - *désir*

Rilke identifies this lady (who startlingly resembles the 'sly' maiden of the other series, doesn't she?) with the figure of Malte's young aunt Abelone, a displaced oedipal figure and the quintessential 'große Liebende'. What she stands for, as the quotations will show, is the supremely decorative feminine quality that Gide typically calls *resignation*: **QUOTATION 11** the most beautiful women's faces I have known are resigned; indeed I cannot imagine that a woman whose happiness did not include a little resignation could appeal to me; such a woman might even evoke a touch of hostility (J1 573). For Rilke it is not a question of happiness – nor of what Freud called (the alternative to neurosis or sublimation): 'ordinary everyday unhappiness' – but a special form of sanctity.

NB Rilke takes the 6 tapestries in an order one no longer could – the purpose-built semi-circular room is now set out so that the five senses appear one after the other, beginning nearest the entrance with Touch; and the final one, much the largest and isolated on the straight side facing all the others, is clearly *A mon seul désir*, which (it is now established) represents the renunciation, not the adoption, of luxurious items like those in the jewel-case. (NB reading extracts: see underlinings in handouts.)

### QUOTATION 12

Es gibt Teppiche hier, Abelone, Wandteppiche. Ich bilde mir ein, du bist da, sechs Teppiche sinds, komm, laß uns langsam vorübergehen. Aber erst tritt zurück und sieh alle zugleich. Wie ruhig sie sind, nicht? [various generic details + ...] immer sind die wappentragenden Tiere da, groß, mit auf der Insel, mit in der Handlung. Links ein Löwe, und rechts, hell, das Einhorn; sie halten die gleichen Banner, die hoch über ihnen zeigen: drei silberne Monde, steigend, in blauer Binde auf rotem Feld. – Hast du gesehen, willst du beim ersten beginnen?

- [Pic 26](#)      [Taste](#)

Sie füttert den Falken. Wie herrlich ihr Anzug ist. Der Vogel ist auf der gekleideten Hand und rührt sich. [Pic 27: Taste DETAIL](#) Sie sieht ihm zu und langt dabei in die Schale, die ihr die Dienerin bringt, [etc – no mention here of the unicorn]

- [Pic 28](#)      [Smell](#)

Geht man nicht unwillkürlich leiser zu dem nächsten Teppich hin, sobald man gewahrt, wie versunken sie ist: sie bindet einen Kranz, eine kleine, runde Krone aus Blumen. [...] Der Löwe nimmt nicht mehr teil; aber rechts das Einhorn begreift. She & Einhorn 'know'

- Pic 29 Smell DETAIL

- Pic 30 Hearing

Mußte nicht Musik kommen in diese Stille, war sie nicht schon verhalten da? Schwer und still geschmückt, ist sie (wie langsam, nicht?) an die tragbare Orgel getreten [NB movement: rug perspective, unicorn 'dancing'] und spielt, stehend, durch das Pfeifenwerk abgetrennt von der Dienerin, die jenseits die Bälge bewegt. So schön war sie noch nie. [...] Verstimmt erträgt der Löwe die Töne, ungern, Geheul verbeißend. Das Einhorn aber ist schön, wie in Wellen bewegt. NB she + Einhorn 'schön'

- Pic 31 Hearing DETAIL

- Pic 32 Désir

Die Insel wird breit. Ein Zelt ist errichtet. Aus blauem Damast und goldgeflammt. Die Tiere rafften es auf, und schlicht beinah in ihrem fürstlichen Kleid tritt sie vor. Denn was sind ihre Perlen gegen sie selbst. [...] Und hast du den Spruch entdeckt auf dem Zeltrand oben? Da steht: « A mon seul désir. » nothing on unicorn

- Pic 33 Désir DETAIL

- Pic 34 Touch

Was ist geschehen, warum springt das kleine Kaninchen da unten, warum sieht man gleich, daß es springt? Alles ist so befangen. [interesting – my research on touch: NB all animals have collars - & monkey chained to roller: Pic 35: Touch DETAIL chained monkey] Der Löwe hat nichts zu tun. Sie selbst hält das Banner. Oder hält sie sich dran? Sie hat mit der anderen Hand nach dem Horn des Einhorns gefaßt. Ist das Trauer, kann Trauer so aufrecht sein, und ein Trauerkleid so verschwiegen wie dieser grünschwärze Samt mit den welken Stellen?

- Pic 36 Touch DETAIL

NB here Rilke assumes she is in mourning but this refers only to the colour of her dress, not her expression. Their expressions are very similar, tho the look and the touch don't coincide.

- Pic 37 Sight

This, for Rilke, is the final and climactic one. As we've seen, he uses the lady/unicorn motifs as analogous or connected in a number of the other images. In this one, instead, a circuit is set up between them, and there are new & different elements of mystery.

Aber es kommt noch ein Fest, niemand ist geladen dazu. Erwartung spielt dabei keine Rolle. Es ist alles da, alles für immer. Where does he get this from? This scene is no more festive or ceremonial than any of the others; but he insists no one is *drawn* there Der Löwe sieht sich fast drohend um: es darf niemand kommen. Wir haben sie noch nie müde gesehen; ist sie müde? we'll come back to this term oder hat sie sich nur niedergelassen, weil sie etwas Schweres hält? Man könnte meinen, eine Monstranz [= an open or transparent receptacle, usually gold or silver, for exposition of the consecrated host or relics] Aber sie neigt den andern Arm gegen das Einhorn hin, und das Tier bäumt sich geschmeichelt auf und steigt und stützt sich auf ihren Schooß. Es ist ein Spiegel, was sie hält. Siehst du: sie zeigt dem Einhorn sein Bild -.

Abelone, ich bilde mir ein, du bist da. Begreifst du, Abelone? Ich denk, du mußt begreifen.

- Pic 38 Sight DETAIL

*Quintuple structure: the triangle of Lady, unicorn & mirror plus two watchers: Malte & Abelone. Chiefly, though:*

What Rilke has done here, is link together three elements: Abelone, the Lady and the unicorn. (The lion, always there as well, has been ignored or shown to be lesser; and NB see Williamson, the lion is the solar creature, the unicorn the lunar one, ie feminine-identified, a lover not a warrior...) Successively, in the order he has presented them:

- Taste: there is nothing said
- Smell: they both *know* ('begreifen')
- Hearing: both 'schön'
- Désir: nothing
- Touch: oddly, little on the unicorn, given this is the most 'phallicly connected': she gently touches without looking (Rilke, both grasp and reach out: **Sie hat mit der anderen Hand nach dem Horn des Einhorns gefaßt** – and this makes him speak of 'Trauer', she both has + has lost)
- Sight: here the whole description tends towards the ending/centre.

In *Sight*, the Lady holds up a mirror which acts as the frame for a holy host or relic: the unicorn's reflection – smiling, actually, rather dopily, like the unicorn itself. A few observations of the image first. As Megged points out (p. 104) we don't see his erect horn in the mirror. Megged and Williamson also note that the mirror is associated with both Narcissus and with the unicorn and especially with capture/doom:

#### QUOTATION 13 (Williamson)

To explain the importance in iconographic art of reflections in water and mirrors in general, we need only recall the myth of Narcissus at the fountain. This god of vegetation, enticed by his own reflection in the waters, dissolves into oblivion. The fate of the beautiful youth is a mythological explanation for the death that precedes new life. (169)

[Unicorn with maid': border miniature in *Wharnclyffe Book of Hours* by Maître François, c. 1470, Melbourne, Nat Gallery of Victoria (Williamson p. 168)]

#### QUOTATION 14 (Megged)

I have read several interpretations of the use of the mirror confronting the Unicorn. One of them says that the mirror is the symbol of the Immaculate Virgin, but since the mirror is present in some scenes without the maiden, there must also be other reasons for its relationship to the Unicorn. So far as I know, the Unicorn is the only mythical creature that is incited to look at himself in the mirror, yet cannot or doesn't see the reflection. (149)

- Pic 39 Wharnclyffe (no reflection)

My first reaction to that is: what about vampires? My second is to observe that it fits rather interestingly to my main question today: what has the reflection to do with intransitivity and absence, in the Rilkean relationship between maiden and unicorn?

While the unicorn – erect horn or not – looks rather smugly pleased with its reflection in the mirror, the Lady looks... well, depressed. It is as though the circuit of narcissistic pleasure that she enables between the unicorn and its own image is *draining her*. She looks quite different from in all the other tapestries, where a smile is always playing on her face:

- Pic 40 three faces (again)

My suggestion is that the circuit between the unicorn and itself, replacing here that between the unicorn and the Lady, makes the Lady suffer: she is both feeding it and excluded from it ('resigned', in other words). But, more importantly, we should note the epithet used by Rilke: 'müde'.

I also want to observe the motif of absence which will be so central in the sonnet. Abalone's function in the *Dame à la licorne* narrative is to be present in Malte's desire *because she isn't there*. She is present in the particular configuration of absence that characterises so much in the text's mental cityscape: the Schulin house's burnt-down wing, the rest of that demolished Paris building that Malte conceives as **QUOTATION 15 zu Hause in mir**, or Malte when he is 'playing' Sophie, or the hand he sees under a table (does he see it?) or the various family ghosts. So: Abalone isn't there, but (or *because*) she '**muß begreifen**'. Understand what? We don't know, it's intransitive. As for the unicorn: it *is* there: in every tapestry, brought forward out of its symmetrical place: **aber rechts das Einhorn begriefft**.

Great love in Rilke is intransitive. At another point in the text *Abelone* reappears: **QUOTATION 16** Manchmal früher fragte ich, warum *Abelone* die Kalorien ihres großartigen Gefühls nicht an Gott wandte. Ich weiß, sie sehnte sich, ihrer Liebe alles Transitive zu nehmen, aber konnte ihr wahrhaftiges Herz sich darüber täuschen, daß Gott nur eine Richtung der Liebe ist, keinen Liebesgegenstand? Wußte sie nicht, daß keine Gegenliebe von ihm zu fürchten war? (225) In this, she prefigures in the feminine the *Verlorene Sohn* of the final, climactic narrative, and the last words of the text (note that the male figure has not got as far, in his intuition of God's reassuring inability to reciprocate, as the female figure). Just returned to his family, greeted with recognition, forgiveness, and finally love:

**QUOTATION 17** Das Erkennen? Wirklich nur das Erkennen? – Das Verzeihen. Das Verzeihen wovon? – Die Liebe. Mein Gott: die Liebe. [...]

He is relieved to discover that, so much has he changed, the person they are forgiving or loving cannot actually be him (presence here disguising absence):

Fast mußte er lächeln, wenn sie sich anstregten, und es wurde klar, wie wenig sie ihn meinen konnten.

Was wußten sie, wer er war. Er war jetzt furchtbar schwer zu lieben, und er fühlte, daß nur Einer dazu imstande sei. Der aber wollte noch nicht. RMR, *MLB*, 233-4

As for *Abelone*, then, so for the VS, God is an object who will not make you *his* object. The 'great [female] lovers' are those who understand that **QUOTATION 18** Geliebtsein heißt aufbrennen. Lieben ist: Leuchten mit unerschöpflichem Öle. Geliebtwerden ist vergehen, Lieben ist dauern (226). Or, as he writes 50 pages earlier: **QUOTATION 19** Immer übertrifft die Liebende den Geliebten, weil das Leben größer ist als das Schicksal. Ihre Hingabe will unermesslich sein: das ist ihr Glück. Das namenlose Leid ihrer Liebe aber ist immer dieses gewesen: daß von ihr verlangt wird, diese Hingabe zu beschränken (189). These women represent the power of an energy that flows unstopped - pure libido, if you like, in the Freudian hydraulic/economic theory - because it is unrequited. Grammatically, it is what we started with: a transitive verb turned intransitive. No wonder, then, that he concludes: *Abelone*, ich bilde mir ein, du bist da. Begreifst du, *Abelone*? Ich denk, du mußt begreifen.

Present, comprehending - but also *tired*. Somehow or other it isn't working well - could women have got, well, just mildly fed-up with the moral gratification of being unloved? Immediately after the *Dame à la licorne* narratives, over the page in the opening of the second Notebook, Malte describes the girls who come and sketch bits of the tapestries. Girls *aus guter Familie*, they have left to find some independence, and a few buttons on the back of their dresses are left undone because there's no maid or sister there to help. But are they on the wrong track? **QUOTATION 20** Sie haben schon angefangen, sich umzusehen, zu suchen; sie, deren Stärke immer darin bestanden hat, gefunden zu werden (125).

These women - women in general, in Rilke - are those magical creatures that Freud describes somewhere as impelled to follow 'the active pursuit of a passive goal'. This grammatical enormity (when was desire ever grammatical?) characterises the ambivalence of a particularly feminine entrapment, not just a social but also a psychological one. The medieval solution (and Rilke's) is resignation - but resignation on a grand, heroic scale. The attempt to find independence (Clara? Paula? [Pic 41: the two](#)) is dangerous but understandable: prodigal sons do it too, after all. But the female version is distinctively connected to being 'tired': **QUOTATION 20** Das kommt, glaube ich, weil sie müde sind. Sie haben Jahrhunderte lang die ganze Liebe geleistet, sie haben immer den vollen Dialog gespielt, beide Teile. Denn der Mann hat nur nachgesprochen und schlecht (etc, 125).

So: what does the unicorn have to do here? I think that what Rilke has picked up in the *Sight* tapestry is exactly what he describes here: the mirror destroys the circuit between the masculine & feminine that the Lady/unicorn couple implies: the Lady becomes a heroic lover and, actually, it destroys her.



Before concluding with the poem again, I want to make one last general observation about that other grammatical enigma, the question of opposites vs masc/fem. Actually what gender is a unicorn? Banned from Noah's ark because it has no mate it also has no very clearcut sex: feminine in French (because 'corne' is feminine, but that's interesting too – *French slang terms for male genital are almost all feminine in gender*), in German neuter. Many writers use the masculine, because of course this creature – oddly humanised – is always the counterpart of a female, and heterosexuality tends to dominate the coupling of pronouns [see my *The Adulteress's Child*, 1-2]; so that in the obvious transaction or circulation of something libidinous, whether sexual or maternal, he is her 'other'. But what is transacted is – as in Rilke – something not really to do with meeting in gratification of a sexual kind. Indeed, it's almost the reverse. By very dint of the *non*-sexual action: he lays his horned head in her lap (recall the many images, the horn rather grossly pointing at the woman's genital but always stopping short, turning into the child dandled rather than the lover received) and is captured. Someone must be destroyed by this: is it the virgin introduced to the corruption of lust, her own or the other's; or the unicorn who is too good for the world? There is, as we speak, a weird and very unpleasant myth going around, mainly in S. Africa, that if a HIV-positive man has sex with a virgin, he will be cured. Inverse of usual pollution myths, generally f→m pollution (despite the fluid arrangements!), bcs normally only badness can be acquired. Here, purity is imbibed – and the particular horror is that the younger the girl the more purity/cure the man may get... Actually, in a horrible and desperate way, he is re-enacting the unicorn myth.

- [Pic 42: Rilke by Paula](#)

Finally, back to the poem

O dieses ist das Tier, das es nicht gibt.  
 Sie wußtens nicht und habens jeden Falls  
 - sein Wandeln, seine Haltung, seinen Hals,  
 bis in des stillen Blickes Licht – geliebt.

Zwar *war* es nicht. Doch weil sie's liebten, ward  
 ein reines Tier. Sie ließen immer Raum.  
 Und in dem Raume, klar und ausgespart,  
 erhob es leicht sein Haupt und brauchte kaum

zu sein. Sie nährten es mit keinem Korn,  
 nur immer mit der Möglichkeit, es sei.  
 Und die gab solche Stärke an das Tier,

daß es aus sich ein Stirnhorn trieb. Ein Horn.  
 Zu einer Jungfrau kam es weiß herbei –  
 und war im Silber-Spiegel und in ihr.

- The maiden appears here only in the last two lines. Before that, the unicorn belongs only to a nameless 'them' who *love* it despite/because it does not exist (like God?);
- They - we, culture, the saints and mythmakers of the *Sagenkreis*– have generated a space, an empty slot, in which
- the idea of the unicorn – material (and this is typically Rilke) that all the imaginings give a precise *body* to the wish, so that, in this space the creature *is* because it is not;
- '*Brauchte kaum* (kaum!) *zu sein*' enjambes the central space between quatrains & tercets.
- The chaste sexuality of the horn is generated by '*die Möglichkeit, es sei* – glorious subjunctive, crunchy as corn – *but still dependent on its non-existence*
- *Ein Horn*: the horn and the name are synonymous, and each is synonymous with the uniqueness of the unreal creature (does one have to be non-existent in order to be unique? or is uniqueness something we can only recognise in ourselves or others by an idealisation that 'dematerialises'?)

- Unreal, like the idealised [Lacanian] phallus, it cannot act sexually, enter the ark, mate with any female; it can only find-and-be-found-by an unsexed, or rather not-yet-sexed, about-to-be-raped, or (why? how?) not-be-raped virgin.
- The maiden, very unusually, has not been put there or stopped there for the purpose of unicorn-catching. **Note that**
  - There is no transitivity here at all. The unicorn simply **comes by [white] towards her** – I'm giving this clunky English version to show how much of this phrase is prepositional: movement without magnetism, rather 'round and about' than *pulled or pushed*: what happens here is neither purpose nor chance but something in between – cf Rilke's comments on 'Sight': the unicorn is not even **dazu geladen**.
  - The 'space' here follows the unicorn (as in 'Das Einhorn'): it does not belong to the maiden, as in most *hortus conclusus* versions, nor to the unicorn, as in the Metropolitan series. **Instead:**
    - ❖ By the last line, both space and motion disappear into the verb 'to be': the word 'war' has absorbed both space and motion. It reverses the essential **nicht geben** and the developmental **ward** [via] **Möglichkeit, es sei** to reach the end-point of being – being premised however on its continued not-being a) because this *must* still be **das Tier, das es nicht gibt**, and b) because it has disappeared. **Where?**
    - ❖ *Both* into the mirror (narcissistically, destroying or 'tiring' the woman) *and* into her (sexually, destroying her, destroying itself, because can either of them be left now the one 'is' wholly in the other? –
    - ❖ or perhaps finding some kind of [mutual?] consummation
    - ❖ in which – what is left?