

'O dieses ist das Tier, das es nicht gibt': Rilke and unicorns

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I shall begin by taking 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.

Rilke, I shall 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 – and second for the problem of transitivity.

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

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 common sense in that young brain.¹

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 of my title? 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 – as we shall see later.

The one thing I assume we feel sure about unicorns is what they look like. But this too is less certain than we might believe. Matti Megged was stimulated to research the subject by discovering, in an art gallery in Boston in 1985, a drawing by Paul Rotterdam entitled 'The Unicorn' and consisting of a blurred-edged grey triangle superimposed on a white line diamond, hovering above a flat smudgy line of grey.² The 'Unicorn' image from the Lascaux caves, dated ca 16,000 BCE, shows a two-horned creature, probably pregnant,

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¹ André Gide, *Journal 1887-1925*, ed. É. Marty (Paris : Gallimard, 1996), 804. It is worth remembering that Gide, as well as writing his own prodigal son narrative, *Le Retour de l'enfant prodigue* (1907: [check](#)), which Rilke translated into German, also translated the closing section of *Malte Laurids Brigge* into French ([check both!](#))

² Matti Megged, *The Animal that never was* (New York: Lumen Books, 1992), 1, illustration on facing page x; henceforth abbreviated MM.

marked with circles and lines in black and red ochre.³ And in 1663, a unicorn skeleton was identified in the Harz mountains in a spot now known as the 'Einhornhöhle: it looks rather more like a kangaroo and was probably cobbled together from mammoth bones, but it convinced Leibniz.⁴

The most common image we have of the unicorn is, I expect, that of a horse with a single, angled horn. But actually the fabled creature is often rather different. The unicorn of the *Dame à la licorne* tapestries at the Cluny Museum in Paris, to which we shall return, is actually not as horse-like as it appears at a first, careless glance. Here is a description from Wikipedia: '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'. And here is the account in the Cluny catalogue: 'The body somewhat resembles that of a horse, but with forked [*sic* = cloven] hooves 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'.⁵

The history of the unicorn is one of both universality and enigma. As Matti Megged puts it: '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' (MM, 2-3).

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' (MM, 4), first described in ca 2800 BCE, associated also with Confucius, and described by a Chinese poet of the 9c CE as 'a supernatural being of auspicious omen' (MM, 4-5). It was also described as an Indian beast, by Ctesias, a Greek physician and contemporary of Hippocrates, who served at the Persian court at the end of the fifth century BCE: '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'.⁶ Famously also, a unicorn could make poisoned pools safe for other animals by dipping in its 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': '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

³ See: [http://www.originsnet.org/upgallery1animals/pages/m\)lasxunicorn.htm](http://www.originsnet.org/upgallery1animals/pages/m)lasxunicorn.htm) (as of 31 March 2007).

⁴ For this and further details, see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unicorn> (as of 31 March 2007).

⁵ Alain Erlande-Brandenburg, *The Lady & the Unicorn* (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1989), 70.

⁶ Ctesias, *La Perse, L'Inde*, 398 BCE; cited by Megged, 6.

"scientific" proofs, any evidence by witnesses or direct observation. Yet, the wonder and doubts were not effaced; they merely appeared in different guises' (MM, 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. The 'Maiden and unicorn' motif in Leonardo, Moretto and Domenichino, all depicted in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, each represent a young woman showing various degrees of interest in the unicorn at her side but the latter, in every case, gazing up at her with a winning, modest eagerness.⁷ The unicorn features in Shakespeare, Samuel Johnson, Leibniz, and in the last century, Tennessee Williams, W. H. Auden, Iris Murdoch, Borges, Rilke of course – and Celan. And doubtless many others.

It is always '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:

'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.⁸

The first biblical mention of this creature occurs in Numbers, Deuteronomy, Job and the Psalms, where the Hebrew word is *re'em* (pl. *re'emim*); it was translated into Greek as *monokeros* and thence into other languages as variants of *unicorn*. It is 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 Talmudic tale, later adapted by the Christians, describes the young David fighting a lion 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 (especially) garden of a king is the central image in the Song of Songs.⁹

From here it is but a step to the medieval motif 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.¹⁰

The story is well known – it is viewed from three angles in the title poem of B. S. Johnson's *Dublin unicorn* (1973) – and tells us that the wild unicorn can be captured only by a maiden. In the fifth Metropolitan tapestry, we can see the sly, rather cruel sidelong look of

⁷ I refer to Leonardo's *A Maiden with a unicorn* (late 1470s, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford); Moretto's *St Justina with the Unicorn* (ca 1530, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) and the *Virgin and the unicorn* fresco attributed to Domenichino (ca 1602, Palazzo Farnese, Rome).

⁸ Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (1896), in *The Complete Illustrated Works of Lewis Carroll* (London: Chancellor, 1982), 196-7.

⁹ These details are from Megged, 99 and 67-73.

¹⁰ References are to John Williamson, *The Oak King, the Holly King and the Unicorn* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), xxx.

the girl 'taming' the doomed creature. In this version, the unicorn is sacrificed like a scapegoat, almost to make reparation for the sexual sins of others, specifically women – and yet it is also resurrected, in the garden-island (*hortus conclusus*) that elsewhere is precisely the domain of the lady, and in the last tapestry it gives rise, within this circle, to new fertility – a fabulous tree 'das es nicht gibt'.

But, even in Christian iconography, the unicorn does not always stand for goodness. It often appears in Garden of Eden images: a pair can be glimpsed dipping their horns in the Paradise panel of Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*. It was supposedly the first animal that Adam named, but was not rescued from the Flood because it had no mate. Sometimes it actually substitutes for the satanic serpent – logical enough in the light of its priapic horn – but, given that, interestingly rare.¹¹ In an illustration to the Psalter held in the Württemberg Provincial Library at Stuttgart, the unicorn is even depicted as attacking Jesus on the cross (MM, 121).

These variants demonstrate the flexibility and adaptability of the unicorn motif. Its juxtaposition with a/the virgin is the most widespread. And yet, with its association of moral risk, is it more dangerous to her or is she more dangerous to it? More 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) of the elements of Eve: *la maman* is familiarly always also a *putain*.

The universality and 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 left the early pseudo-Christian poetry behind, he remained fascinated by this cluster of images. Let us begin, then, to look at successive versions of the figure, the first taken from his pre-1910 Paris writings.

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.¹²

¹¹ These three references are to Megged, 78, 86, 84.

¹² Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Das Einhorn' in *Neue Gedichte* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1907), 35.

This first unicorn text is the least typical in a number of ways. Actually titled 'Das Einhorn', unlike any of the others, it features no maiden; femininity is not focused, as conventionally, on the unicorn's other, but on itself. The unicorn is compared to a female animal: a hind – this is something we almost never find in the literature, at least since the Lascaux painting 160,000 years earlier, though of course it is often a feminised male. The counterpart to the creature, to its distinctively unreal reality, is instead a saint. He is the focaliser, the whole three-sentence text being his vision; in this it connects to the sonnet, where again the *being* of the creature is dependent on a creative state of contemplativity on the part of others: this thing walks into one's field of vision only when one is in a kind of dream. In such a state – prayer giving way to legend, the vocative to the collective imaginary – 'das Niegeglaubte' is made manifest.

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 elegant ivory limbs. Everything about the creature is white – except, at the end, the shadow of white, '[der blaue] Sagenkreis'. In this image, Rilke completes the reversal of what he will do later, more conventionally but much more extremely: the *hortus conclusus*, typically encircling the lady/maiden figure, is here replaced by a shadow cast by the unicorn. The closing question is, however: who dreamed it? Those images cast and enclosed in the 'Sagenkreis': who creates them, the ability of the saint to stop praying and see, or the unbounded gaze of the unicorn on the saint?

This complex of gazes is multiplied further in the next representation of the unicorn, published about three years later, in *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910), in the section concerned with the *Dame à la licorne* tapestry series displayed at the Cluny. Mérimée and George Sand 'discovered' these tapestries at the château of Boussac in the late 1830s or early 1840s. They were – like the New York tapestry series, and indeed the lady in them startlingly resembles the 'sly' maiden of that other series – rescued from being used as rugs or covers for carts or to cover vegetables in a barn.¹³

The narrator seems to identify the lady with the figure of Malte's young aunt Abelone, a displaced oedipal figure and the quintessential 'große Liebende'. More precisely, the whole of the narrative is in the vocative mood, couched in the second person: Abelone is invoked, addressed and invited to see. The conjuring of this figure is similar, in fact, to the conjuring of the unicorn in both the poems, called forth by the desire to see, be seen by and see with.

What Abelone stands for in the text, as we shall see later, is the supremely decorative feminine quality that Gide typically calls *résignation*: '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'.¹⁴ For Rilke it is not a question of happiness – nor of what Freud called (the alternative to neurosis or sublimation): 'common unhappiness'¹⁵ – but a special form of sanctity.

The text presents the six tapestries in an order one no longer could – the purpose-built D-shaped room is now set out so that the five senses appear one after the other,

¹³ See, on the Paris series, Erlande-Brandenburg 68 and on the New York one, Williamson 5.

¹⁴ André Gide, *op cit.*, 573.

¹⁵ *Note to self: closing para of Studies on Hysteria*

beginning nearest the entrance with 'Touch', and the final one, much the largest and isolated on the straight side facing all the others, is *A mon seul désir*, which (it is now established) represents the renunciation, not the adoption, of luxurious items like those in the jewel-case. The narrating Malte sets the scene:

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? [...] 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?¹⁶

The first tapestry described is 'Taste': 'Sie füttert den Falken. Wie herrlich ihr Anzug ist. Der Vogel ist auf der gekleideten Hand und rührt sich. *Check if [...]* Sie sieht ihm zu und langt dabei in die Schale, die ihr die Dienerin bringt'. The description continues – but with no mention of the unicorn. Malte then moves on to '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'. Here the unicorn is assigned an essential role: the narrator contrasts the rather silly smile of the lion with the altogether more knowing gaze of the unicorn: it watches the lady, and without her eyes moving away from her hands binding the wreath, they seem to share some understanding.

In the third description, this shared experience moves sideways. Both lion and unicorn are holding the banners on either side of the lady who, with the help of her maid, is playing an organ (those with sharp eyes can see a miniature lion and unicorn at the top of the tallest and shortest pipes). As the narrator observes, the lion is sitting fatly on the ground, looking less than pleased, but all we see of the unicorn's body is his grasping – or are they prancing? - forelegs. This time what the lady and the creature have in common, despite the emphasis on sound and a gratuitous element of movement, is a visual quality: beauty.

Mußte nicht Musik kommen in diese Stille, war sie nicht schon verhalten [*check*] da? Schwer und still geschmückt, ist sie (wie langsam, nicht?) an die tragbare Orgel getreten 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.

The connection between them is unstressed, indeed it is less a sharing than a parallel; but it sets up a line of vision (Malte's? Abelone's?) that follows the pointers of the tapestry: the tallest pipe above the lady's head, the unicorn's horn.

The unicorn goes unmentioned again in the fourth description, which views the tapestry that to the Cluny curators is the culmination of the series, '*A mon seul désir*'. The fifth description represents the tapestry known as 'Touch'. Here many of the animals seen against the flowered ground are depicted with collars; a grim-looking monkey even has the chain running from its collar clipped to a heavy roller - monkeys are notorious of course for getting their paws into everything. As the narrator notes, the image is asymmetrically balanced: touch is most directly represented here by the lady's hand on the unicorn's horn.

¹⁶ All these citations are from Rainer Maria Rilke, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp 1975 [Insel, 1910]), 119-122; henceforth abbreviated MLB.

Was ist geschehen, warum springt das kleine Kaninchen da unten, warum sieht man gleich, daß es springt? Alles ist so befangen. 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 grünschwarze Samt mit den welken Stellen?

The assumption that she is in mourning refers to the colour of her dress, much more than her expression. The unicorn gazes at her while she looks away, vaguely, with arched eyebrows; but their expressions are very similar, though neither the look nor the touch coincide.

'Sight' is, for Rilke and his protagonist Malte, the final and climactic tapestry. 'Aber es kommt noch ein Fest, niemand ist geladen dazu. Erwartung spielt dabei keine Rolle. Es ist alles da, alles für immer'. This point is nowhere rooted in the image, this scene is no more festive or ceremonial than any of the others; yet the insistence that no one and nothing has been *drawn there* is part of the motif of enclosure that has been assumed throughout, typically of the *hortus conclusus* of the tapestries and other versions. Central to this enclosure is the circuit of 'understanding' between the lady and the unicorn. The lion, always present as well, has been ignored or in each case shown to be lesser,¹⁷ while the unicorn, in the four descriptions where it is mentioned at all, has formed the concluding moment, a kind of connection: once in shared knowledge, next by common beauty, and finally through a touch presented not as sexual (even absent-mindedly) but rather as something midway between grasping and reaching: 'Sie hat mit der anderen Hand nach dem Horn des Einhorns gefaßt'. The touch that suggests a commonality beyond looking is connected in some way to mourning - the lady is dressed in a worn heavy black fabric: she both has and has lost - as it does elsewhere in the figure of Abelone.

In the description of 'Sight':

Der Löwe sieht sich fast drohend um: es darf niemand kommen. Wir haben sie noch nie müde gesehen; ist sie müde? oder hat sie sich nur niedergelassen, weil sie etwas Schweres hält? Man könnte meinen, eine Monstranz. 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 mußßt begreifen.

Strictly, this circuit is a sextuple structure: represented in the tapestry are the lady, the unicorn and the mirror image that the former is holding up to the latter; beyond this, intra-diegetically, are two viewers, Malte & Abelone; beyond all of them is the reader. While of course everything in a text is virtual, these figures are ranged in a rising succession of immateriality: at the centre the tired lady, at the furthest end, you or me, in between the less and less materialised creature, reflection, fictional protagonist and his lost object. But the chief circuit, upon which we are all spectators, is that between the lady/unicorn cluster focused on the mirror and the figure of Abelone.

In 'Sight', the lady holds up a mirror which acts as a monstrance, the frame for a holy host or relic, and that relic is the unicorn's reflection - smiling, actually, rather dopily, like the unicorn itself. A few observations of the image first. As Megged points out, we do not see its erect horn in the mirror.¹⁸ Megged and Williamson also note that the mirror is associated both with Narcissus and with the unicorn and especially its capture or doom:

¹⁷ NB see Williamson, the lion is the solar creature, the unicorn the lunar one, ie feminine-identified, a lover not a warrior...

¹⁸ Megged, 104 and 149.

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.¹⁹

Amazingly, in almost all the mirrors that face the Unicorn, we don't see his image. The mirror was presented in some paintings and engravings as a tool to help the hunters capture the Unicorn. We can see it, for instance, on a French ivory casket from the 14th century (now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York): the main or lady is holding the mirror and the horn, while the Unicorn is being stabbed by a hunter – but again, the mirror is blank.

[...]

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 there his reflection (MM, 149)

Megged is, of course, forgetting here about vampires: the failure to be visible in a mirror is a sign of the uncanny state between life and death, the obverse perhaps of Williamson's positive reading of Narcissus. But the motif of the mirror goes beyond the association with undeadness or with doom; it also takes us back to my main question today: what has the reflection to do with intransitivity and absence, in the very 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 in this tapestry 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*. Her facial expression is quite different from that in the other tapestries, where a smile is always playing on her face. 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 – like the virtuous women described by Gide as 'resigned'. But, more importantly, we should note the epithet used by Rilke: 'müde'.

I want to start to develop the motif of absence which will be so central in the sonnet. Abelone's function in the *Dame à la licorne* narratives is to be present in Malte's desire precisely because she isn't there. She is present in the particular version of absence that characterises so much of the text's mental landscape: the burnt-down wing of the Schulin house, the rest of that demolished Paris building that Malte conceives as 'zu Hause in mir' (MLB, 47), or the child Malte when he is playing the role of Sophie, or the hand he sees under a table (does he see it?) or the various family ghosts. So: Abelone isn't there but - or because, or so that - she 'muß begreifen'. Understand what? We are not told know, it is intransitive. As for the unicorn, of whom the same verb is used: it *is* there: in every tapestry, brought forward out of its symmetrical place: 'rechts das Einhorn begrieff'.

Great love in Rilke is intransitive. At another point in the text Abelone reappears: 'Manchmal früher fragte ich, warum Abelone die Kalorien **check** ihres großartigen Gefühls nicht an Gott wandte. Ich weiß, sie sehnte sich, ihrer Liebe alles Transitive zu nehmen, aber

¹⁹ Williamson, 169; reference is to 'Unicorn with maid': border miniature in *Wharnclyffe Book of Hours* by Maître François, c. 1470, Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria, reproduced on Williamson, 168.

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?' (MLB, 225). In this, she prefigures in the feminine the prodigal son of the final, climactic narrative, and the last words of the text.

Here are those last words. Just returned to his family, greeted with recognition, forgiveness, and finally love, the prodigal son is shocked: 'Das Erkennen? Wirklich nur das Erkennen? – Das Verzeihen. Das Verzeihen wovon? – Die Liebe. Mein Gott: die Liebe.' (MLB, 233). 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 anstrebten, 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. (MLB, 233-4)

As for Abelone, then, so for the prodigal son, God is an object who will not make you his object. But the female version goes further in that paradoxical, creative ability to *desire* God's inability to reciprocate. The 'great [female] lovers' are those who understand that 'Geliebtsein heißt aufbrennen. Lieben ist: Leuchten mit unerschöpflichem Öle. Geliebtwerden ist vergehen, Lieben ist dauern' (MLB, 226). Or, as the narrator has put it fifty pages earlier: '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' (MLB, 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 Malte 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 girls who come and sketch bits of the tapestries. Girls 'aus guter Familie' (ref), they have left home to find some independence, and a few buttons on the back of their dresses are always undone because there is no maid or sister there to help. But are they on the wrong track? 'Sie haben schon angefangen, sich umzusehen, zu suchen; sie, deren Stärke immer darin bestanden hat, gefunden zu werden' (MLB, 125).

These women are those magical creatures that Freud describes as impelled to follow 'the active pursuit of a passive goal'.²⁰ This grammatical enormity - but when was desire ever grammatical? - characterises the ambivalence of a particularly feminine entrapment, not just a social but also a psychological one. Rilke's solution, like Gide's, is resignation - but resignation on a grand, heroic scale. The attempt to find independence is dangerous but understandable: prodigal sons do it too, after all; but the female version is distinctively connected to being 'tired': '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, MLB, 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 in the passages about Abelone: 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.

²⁰ 'Femininity' (1933), get full ref

Before concluding with the sonnet of my title, I want to return to that other grammatical enigma, the question of opposites versus masculine and feminine. We return to the much-cited question: what sex is a unicorn? Banned from Noah's ark because it has no mate, it also has no very clear-cut gender: feminine in French, masculine in Italian, neuter in German.²¹ Many writers use the masculine pronoun, because of course this creature – oddly, persistently humanised – is always the counterpart of a female, and heterosexuality tends to dominate the coupling of pronouns; so that in the transaction or circulation of something libidinous, whether sexual or maternal, he is her 'other'.²² But what is transacted is – as in Rilke – something not really to do with gratification of a sexual kind. Indeed, it is 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 always be destroyed by this encounter: is it the virgin introduced to the corruption of lust, her own or the other's, or the unicorn who is too good for this world? There is, as we speak, a new myth going around, mainly in South Africa, that if a HIV-positive man has sex with a virgin, he will be cured. This is the inverse of the usual pollution myths, in which harm is traditionally carried from female to male (despite the fluid arrangements), on the principle that only badness can be acquired. Here, purity is imbibed – and the particular horror is that the younger the girl the more purity and cure the man thinks he will get. In fact, in a desperate and despicable way, he is re-enacting the unicorn myth.

With all these motifs in mind – intransitivity both active and passive, absence, the mirror, the circuit, sexual ambiguity, desire and death - let us turn at last to the sonnet:

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.

What brings the unicorn into being this time is not prayer or imagination but love: it is the reification of that 'possibility of the impossible' that I referred to at the start. Neither love nor existence is ever justified; but the 'fabulous monster' is made present as a material thing, just as it was to the saint. Its attributes are enumerated and again they are formed of such immaterial qualities as light, lightness, purity, grace, restraint; the few adjectives in the first eight lines – 'still', 'rein', 'klar und ausgespart' – are all negative ones: the love of those others enable the unicorn to fill space, that is all.

²¹ In each case, of course, the name follows the gender of the word for 'horn'. The French usage makes particular demands, though (curiously or not), slang words in French for the genitals generally have the grammatical gender of the opposite sex.

²² See the opening of my *The Adulteress's Child* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

Then between lines 8 and 9, we see the precariousness of its existence changed into necessity: it feeds off nothing but its own possibility, but this proves tasty as corn and just as empowering. In typical Rilkean mode, the subjunctive of 'die Möglichkeit, es sei' produces not just the creature but its product, the horn, which is also its name. Uniqueness and the possibility of being – the essential characteristics of the monotheistic deity – must, it seems, coexist with unreality. Unreal, like the idealised Lacanian phallus, it cannot act sexually, enter the ark, mate with any female unicorn; it can only find-and-be-found-by an unsexed, or rather not-yet-sexed, about-to be-sexed virgin.

The maiden, very unusually, has not stopped there or been put there for the purpose of unicorn-catching. She appears only in the last two lines, but she has not been precipitated, like the rest of the text, by sheer wishing: the indefinite article reveals her as already existing before the scene. There is no transitivity here at all. The unicorn simply comes 'zu [ihr] herbei': I have stripped the phrase down to show how much of it is prepositional: a wandering kind of movement without magnetism: what happens is neither purpose nor chance but something in between – as we saw in Malte's comments on the 'Sight' tapestry, the unicorn is not even 'dazu geladen'.

As 'Das Einhorn', the circular space of the traditional *hortus conclusus* follows the unicorn, not the maiden; both times it is precipitated by a combination of a human will and the creature's own presence, specifically its head. In the earlier poem, 'seine Blicke [...] schlossen einen blauen Sagenkreis'; in this one, the unicorn's space is, like itself, 'klar und ausgespart', both empty and full, the head rearing up within it to be crowned with the horn/name. These circles are womb-like because they are occasions of creativity. By the last line, both space and motion have disappeared into the verb 'to be'. In the course of the fourteen lines, the negative 'nicht geben' and the developmental 'ward' have proceeded, via the subjunctive 'sei', to this end-point of 'war'. And at this final point the creature so carefully built up has disappeared. Where to?

The unicorn, conjured and nurtured by love, winning a name and a horn, reaches its acme by being inside both the mirror and the woman. So elegant has the poem's grammatical progress been, we are not sure whether this act is dual, successive or appositional. In one way, this is the most delicate representation of sexual penetration that we are likely to find in literature. In another, it is about the complexities of creativity - after all, both the creature and the horn are products of the desire of others, not their own. Both ways, the resting point is internal.

If love can create an imaginary creature, what does it mean to say that desire is invested 'in' the other? We use this simplest of metaphors both for precise sexual acts and for the imagination in which love imagines itself enclosed or invested in the beloved.²³ In this image, has the beloved unicorn – momentarily subject of its story, but only in one, wandering line – found containment inside the other or has it violated and thus exhausted her? Does the maiden still exist – can she still exist as a maiden? – once the unicorn is inside her? Or is Rilke's unicorn (more Narcissus than vampire after all) contained in the myth of the mirror in which two can actually be simultaneously the containers of each other?

²³ See Didier Anzieu, *Créer Détruire* (Paris: Dunod, 1996), 246-7: 'Leur couple s'enveloppe dans ces deux peaux imaginaires maternelles [qui] enferme les deux partenaires dans une bulle à l'abri de la réalité [...] Ce qui sous-tend leur relation, c'est le fantasme d'avoir un corps unique pour eux deux, avec une même peau' etc.