

Ghostly Figures and Traumatic Hauntings:
Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*
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In literature and popular culture, the most common explanation of ghostly phenomena is that the souls of individuals with “unfinished business” remain on earth until that which troubles them has been resolved. The words of Hamlet’s father, one of the archetypal ghosts of world literature, articulate this theory nicely:

I am thy father’s spirit,
Doomed for a certain term to talk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
are burnt and purged away . . .
If thou didst ever thy dear father love . . .
Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder. (Shakespeare 1.5.10-26)

The dead, it seems, haunt the living precisely because they themselves are haunted by the events of the past. Usually, the ghost implores the living to help him seek vengeance for sins committed against him or absolution for his own sins. This essay seeks to flip this paradigm by suggesting that the figure of the ghost can be read as a product of the unfinished business of the living. Through an analysis of Rainer Maria Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, I suggest that ghosts are symptoms of the inability of the living to comprehend death. The ghostly figures in Rilke’s novel, I argue, illustrate how death functions as a traumatic wound in the world of the living.

In his study of *The Notebooks*, Frederick Garber argues that for Malte, who is fascinated by the deaths of historical figures, “Linear time is death time” (335). According to Garber, Malte sees linear time as the inescapable march toward to death;

thus, for the protagonist, “sequential time can be experienced only at the most frightful cost” (336). I would like to posit that in Rilke’s novel, *circular* time is also a death time, albeit one of a different nature than Garber’s death time. We can consider linear time to be death time in that its only possible end is unknowable yet certain death in the future. The circular time structure in *The Notebooks*, seen in the ghostly figures Malte recalls and in his repeated immersion in memory, is the mode of time that continually returns to deaths in the past that are also unknowable, as they belong to others. In circular time, trips *to* the past in memory and incursions *from* the past by ghost figures are a result of the fundamental incomprehensibility of death. Ghosts emerge in the living world because the human mind cannot know death, and this inability to know inflicts a psychic wound. As Patricia Merivale tells us, “Malte’s whole story is of memory pressing itself back into history to extract images for present psychic need” (254).

Before beginning an analysis of the ghostly figures in *The Notebooks*, it is important to note that this essay does not make the claim that every human being suffers from what we would call a traumatic neurosis or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder because we cannot understand death. Such a direct mapping of the structure of trauma onto *The Notebooks* would be reductive and ethically questionable. To say that death creates a traumatic wound in the world of the living is not to say that we all suffer from trauma in the way that the victim of a heinous accident or crime suffers from trauma. Even within the context of *The Notebooks*, the coexistence of Garber’s linear death time and circular death time shows that we are not examining the same kind of specific traumatic neurosis that Freud and the theorists who follow him discuss. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud writes:

the chief weight in their [traumatic neuroses'] causation seems to rest upon the factor of surprise, of fright . . . 'Anxiety' describes a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one . . . I do not believe anxiety can produce a traumatic neurosis. (11)

Linear death time, moving always towards its certain end, ensures that we do await death in a state of anxiety. Nevertheless, as we will see by examining the haunting returns in *The Notebooks*, the death of another person, even if expected, can create experiences that have structural characteristics of trauma.

Cathy Caruth discusses the impossibility of knowing another's death, and the traumatic implications of that impossibility, in her treatment of Marguerite Duras's film, *Hiroshima mon amour*. In the film, the female protagonist recalls staying with her dying lover through the night and says, "the moment of his death actually escaped me" (qtd. in Caruth *Unclaimed* 38). As Caruth explains, "Between the 'when' of seeing his dying and the 'when' of his actual death there is an unbridgeable abyss, an inherent gap of knowing, within the very immediacy of sight, the moment of the other's death" (*Unclaimed* 39). For the living, the moment of death happens too fast for comprehension. In fact, the living do not experience the death of another as a 'moment' at all—death is only that which divides the living body from the already dead body. Temporally, death does not even have the shortest of durations, and is thus inaccessible for the living who exist in linear time. The incomprehensible immediacy of death places it within the rubric of traumatic experience. Caruth tells us that "immediacy, paradoxically enough, may take the form of belatedness" (*Trauma* 6), and that "the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time" (*Trauma* 9). In Rilke's *Notebooks*

this belatedness, or traumatic repetition, appears in ghostly form. Death, which the living cannot isolate in a specific instant, returns in the form of ghostly figures that do not exist in linear time, but in their own repetitive, circular time.

In *The Notebooks*, Malte's mind never strays far from death. As he wanders Paris in the present, he sees death everywhere he looks. He is fascinated and horrified by the sights of the city, such as a baby who has a foul infection on his forehead, a fallen man who is swallowed by a crowd of onlookers, and a dying man in a café. Returning to the past in his memory, and in the memories of his family members, Malte encounters the dying and the dead again and again. Ghostly figures of the past and present haunt him continually—for Malte the boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead is permeable. David Kleinbard tells us that while Rilke was writing *The Notebooks*, he described in his letters the feeling that “Distinctions between past, present, and future [had] faded,” as had “the common sense opposition between the living and dead” (6). This feeling Rilke describes is like the circular death time Malte and his family experience, a time in which the ghostly figures of people and objects haunt the living. These ghosts are symptoms of death, which for the living is simultaneously inaccessible and certain.

In *The Notebooks*, Malte's maternal grandfather, Count Brahe, is completely unaware of linear time. Remembering a visit he made to Count Brahe's estate at age twelve, Malte writes, “The passing of time had absolutely no meaning for him; death was a minor incident which he completely ignored; people whom he had once installed in his memory continued to exist, and the fact that they had died did not alter that in the least” (31). So comfortable is the count with ghosts that in earlier days, he kept a personal

valet, Sten, who was a sort of spirit medium. Malte writes that according to his Aunt Abelone, “none of the servants would have dared to enter his [Sten’s] room, because he was supposed to be summoning the dead. His family had always trafficked with spirits, and Sten was especially predestined for this kind of commerce” (149). One could argue that death obviously does not bother the count, and therefore can hardly traumatize him. However, the count’s way of thinking is an example of the impossibility of understanding death. His very reality is structured by the inability to differentiate the living from the dead, to grasp how and when death comes between the two and separates them. The count, who speaks of the dead as if they are still alive and the unborn as if they are already grown (31-32), lives exclusively in circular death time. He is not just unaware of linear death time; he is the embodiment of the human inability to grasp the end of linear death time. It is fitting, then, that one of the count’s ancestors, Christine Brahe, haunts his home.

During his visit to the Brahe manor house, Malte sees the ghost of Christine Brahe four times. He describes how he saw Christine for the first time, before he knew she was a ghost:

A door there, which I thought was always kept locked and which I had been told led to the mezzanine, had opened little by little, and now, as I looked on with a feeling, entirely new to me, of curiosity and alarm, a slender woman in a light-colored dress stepped into the shadows of the doorway and slowly walked toward us. (33)

When Malte’s father rises from his seat to confront this stranger, Count Brahe forces him to sit down again that she might pass. Christine then disappears “through a door in the opposite wall” (34). Unlike Hamlet’s father, a fellow Danish ghost, Christine makes no demands of her relatives as she passes through “indifferently.” Malte does make

intimations that this ghost may walk the earth with unfinished business, recalling that Mathilde Brahe told him that Christine was “an unfortunate woman,” and that he later discovered “she had died a long, long time before, as she was giving birth to a second child, a boy, who grew up to a terrifying, cruel fate” (35-36). However, the text suggests that Christine Brahe’s ghost is more a product of the environment she haunts, of the space inhabited by the living Brahes, than it is a product of the unknown and unfortunate events of her life. It is the living Brahes who are fascinated and preoccupied with Christine, not vice versa.

As she wanders the house paying little or no attention to her living relatives, each family member treats Christine, in his or her own manner, as if she is death itself. Count Brahe, for whom death does not exist, treats the ghost as he would any family member, telling Malte’s father that Christine is “Someone who has every right to be here. Not a stranger” (34). Mathilde and Major Brahe avoid Christine’s presence as though terrified, despite the fact that she seemingly poses no threat to the family. The last time Malte sees Christine, Mathilde flees the scene and the Major is reduced to a quivering mass at the dinner table. Despite their efforts, Christine is an unavoidable repetition that will surface time after time to remind them of death, the terrible unknown. Malte, who grows up to be obsessed with death, fears the ghost, despairing when he thinks she has entered his room, and yet searches for her portrait in the hall that houses paintings of all the Brahes. At this point in his life, Malte has already lost his mother to death. It is because of this loss that he is drawn to Christine, even though he does not yet know she is a ghost. As David Kleinbard notes, “Rilke implicitly associates Christine’s ghost with Malte’s dead mother when he has Count Brahe speak to the boy’s father about Maman as if she were a

girl, dressed in white, who might be about to come into the dining hall” (73). The Count’s words about Maman come moments before Christine enters in her “light-colored” dress. Christine is, for Malte, a repetition of the inexplicable loss of his mother. For Malte’s father, who knows Christine is dead, the ghost is a painful reminder of his wife’s death, which he is ill equipped to handle. He sets into a rage the first night he sees Christine, and only grudgingly accepts her by the end of his stay—he shows his acceptance by lifting his glass, “as if it were something extremely heavy, a handsbreadth above the table” (37) as the ghost passes. Christine is a specter of death that haunts the house not because of the happenings of her own time, but because the family members cannot understand the death that awaits them in their own time.¹ Like Sten’s ghosts, who are called, Christine does not come of her own accord to harass the living or request assistance. Rather, she comes into the world of the living when summoned. In the case of Sten’s ghosts, the act of summoning is performed on purpose. Christine Brahe’s summoning, however, is an unwitting one that behaves like traumatic repetition. Christine’s ghost repeatedly arrives to bear witness to that which is not yet incorporated and can never be escaped, in this case, death.

In *The Notebooks*, Malte writes about one other specific human shade from his family’s history, Ingeborg. Malte never spells out Ingeborg’s relation to the family; we know only that she was a member of the household.² Her story, which Malte “asked for again and again” (84) as a child, comes to him by way of his mother, who recalls:

¹ Only Malte’s cousin Erik, who has a ghostly quality himself and as we later discover, will die at a very young age, seems to have a real understanding of Christine’s ghost and death. Later, Malte writes that Erik claimed to have communicated with the ghost on the upper floor of the house (117).

² Most critics seem to think that Ingeborg is Maman’s sister or a servant, but neither explanation is fully satisfactory. The story appears to take place with the Brigges rather than the Brahes, so if Ingeborg were a sister it would mean Maman brought not one but two sisters to live with her after marrying (Abelone and

It was the hour when the mail was expected, and it usually happened that Ingeborg brought it . . . During the weeks of her illness we had had ample time to get accustomed to her not coming; for we knew only too well that she couldn't come. But that afternoon, Malte, when truly she could no longer come—: she came. Perhaps it was our fault; perhaps we called her. For I remember that all at once I was sitting there trying to think what it was that was so different now . . . God help me, I was just about to say, 'Where is . . . '—when Cavalier shot out from under the table, as he always did, and ran to meet her. I saw it, Malte; I saw it. He ran toward her, although she wasn't coming; for him she *was* coming. We understood that he was running to meet her. (90)

Ingeborg does not appear as a visible ghost, yet the dog's behavior convinces the family that she has indeed come back. Notably, what Maman insists on is precisely the act of seeing, repeating the affirmation "I saw it," when in fact she has seen nothing but a jumping dog. For Maman, Ingeborg's invisible return is real—just as for the dog Ingeborg "*was* coming," for Maman Ingeborg *did* come, so she insists on seeing to assert that reality. What is most important here is what the family members believe: what logically happened does not matter, but what happened *for them* does matter. The ghost's very existence depends on the family's perception, not on its own abilities to transcend different realms. In this case, the ghost has no agency—she is what others make of her. As Maman says, it was probably the family that called Ingeborg back from death. In fact, Maman thinks it was her own failure to remember Ingeborg's death, which we can consider a kind of missing or skipping over the moment of death, that brought Ingeborg before them. The invisible ghost is a traumatic repetition of the wound that death deals the family, which is a gap in understanding. Ingeborg, for her part, died without unfinished business, saying, "I can assure you that things are right as they are; there is nothing more that I want" (86). Ingeborg has no reason to come back and haunt the

Ingeborg). As for the other theory, the family seems much more intimate with Ingeborg than one would expect with a servant.

family—she dies happily, thinking that all is right. It is those left behind who find it difficult to cope with Ingeborg's death, who feel there is something missing, something they have not understood.

Years after Ingeborg's death, Malte's mother is still obsessed with the event, and with her own failure to understand, saying, "I will never arrive at it, Malte . . . we pass away like that, and it seems to me that people are all distracted and preoccupied and don't really pay attention when we pass away. As if a shooting star fell and no one saw it and no one made a wish" (86). The moment of another's death, like the falling star that no one sees, passes too fast for the living to grasp how a body can be alive at one moment and then suddenly be dead. The continued presence of the body, the continued act of seeing the body, causes a breakdown in understanding—one does not know how the body, the location of the loved one, is suddenly not the living person one knew. Long after Ingeborg's death, Malte's mother continues to search Ingeborg's desk, in search of something that might grant her understanding. She reverently peers into empty drawers that still smell of roses, convinced that they conceal some truth: "She always imagined that something might suddenly turn up in a secret compartment which no one had thought of and which wouldn't open until some hidden mechanism was pressed" (87-88). For Maman, the desk has a ghostly presence, and still contains Ingeborg's essence. However, despite her compulsive searching, Maman knows she cannot unlock the desk's secrets, saying, "I wouldn't understand anyway, Malte; I'm sure it would be too hard for me" (88). Ingeborg's ghost and the haunting fragrance that Maman smells in the desk are symptoms of the fact that death is "too hard" to understand, not just for Maman, but for

everybody. Ingeborg's haunting demonstrates the impossibility of preparing for and grasping another's death.

The ghostly figures in *The Notebooks* are not exclusively the spirits of human beings. As Merivale explains, in the novel "there are two haunting houses, just as there are two haunted houses" (257). These haunting houses are partially destroyed buildings of the past that physically haunt the present. They serve as spaces where that which has been lost lingers, surfacing as a kind of traumatic repetition. The first of these houses is from Malte's youth in Demark, and belonged to the Schulins, a neighboring family. Malte explains that though the bulk of their manor house had burned down years before, the Schulins continued to live in the two wings that remained standing. Describing a nighttime visit to the Schulins, Malte writes:

we swung in and drove around something, past something else on the right, and came to a halt in the middle. Georg had completely forgotten that the house wasn't there, and for us all it *was* there at that moment. We walked up the front steps that led to the old terrace, and were amazed to find it so dark. (139)

When the Brigges realize that they have walked up to the destroyed house, Malte's father laughs and says, "We are climbing around like ghosts," while Maman insists, "But there was a house here just now" (140). Just as Ingeborg's ghost appears when Maman has forgotten her death, the house appears when the Brigges and their servant forget the house had burned down. It is as if they call the ghostly house back into existence through a failure of understanding. When they have forgotten the fire, here the correlative of incomprehensible death, the ghost house appears for them. The lack of specificity in Malte's retelling ("we drove around something, past something else"), illustrates how the breakdown of comprehension repeats. Interestingly, it is the hallucination of the house as

it was, the repetition of the intact house, that calls attention to the fire, not the emptiness that the fire left in its wake. This scene then matches Maman's experience with Ingeborg's ghost. Due to the failure to understand, the event, be it death or fire, is suppressed in memory—one does not recall the event, but a repetition arises that points to it.

Malte finds himself drawn to the phantom house, and once inside the Schulins' new residence he yearns to return: "I had firmly decided to somehow slip out . . . and look around for the house. I was convinced it was there" (141). When Viera Schulin tells him he cannot return to the old house because it is gone, Malte insists that it is there. He believes that the house comes and goes, depending on who is there to see it, thinking, "of course they only go when it isn't here . . . if Maman and I lived here, it would always be there" (142). Later, as we know, when his mother is dead, Malte will unwittingly search for another ghostly repetition, Christine Brahe, when he attempts to find her portrait. Here we see Malte's fascination with death, with that which is inexplicably gone, and his compulsion to seek its traces.

The Brigges' hallucination is not the only incursion the old house makes into the present time. The long-gone ghost house invades the Schulins' temporary residence, haunting their new living quarters. The objects salvaged from the fire clutter the smaller space in which the Schulins now live: "the enormous objects from the old house were crowding in, much too close" (143). These objects are a haunting, constant reminder of the lost building that used to house them. The smell of fire also haunts the Schulins; they investigate every odor that surfaces to remind them of the event that destroyed their

home. As the adults become alarmed and nervously sniff around for the source of a strange smell, Malte too becomes afraid. He writes:

I was overcome, for the first time in my life, by something very like the fear of ghosts. I realized that all these well-defined grownups, who just a few minutes before had been talking and laughing, were going around stooped over and occupied with something invisible; that they admitted there was something here that they couldn't see. (144)

The smells that stalk the Schulins are ghost smells, continually returning from the long-past fire. Garber posits that the house “retained its presence for those who knew it, and it came back suddenly and briefly into the lives of its former inhabitants and their visitors. It rises invisibly within them, absorbed into the depths of their consciousness” (329). Just as the ghost people, Christine and Ingeborg, arise from structures of traumatic experience at work in the living, so too does the ghost house arise from the traumatic experience of the Schulins, and from the failure of the Brigges to understand or remember the event of loss.

The other haunting house, which Malte experiences later but describes first in his notebooks, troubles him deeply. In Paris, Malte comes across the site of a demolished house, which, as Merivale tells us, “adumbrates . . . the burned-out house of the child Malte's country visit” (257). Malte can envision the space the house formerly occupied, because that space is surrounded by other decrepit houses that are still standing, though barely. One of the demolished house's walls, which it shared with the neighboring house, remains. As Merivale explains, this means that the remaining wall is “one edge of the actual as well as one edge of the beyond” (261). This wall bears witness to the lost house, tracing part of its shape, outlining the area it no longer occupies. Malte can see the interior of the wall, where old pipes still wind “in unspeakably nauseating, worm-soft,

digestive movements” (46). The feeling that traces of the house’s life issue from the wall and hang thickly in the air overwhelms Malte:

There, the noons lingered, and the illnesses, and the exhalations, and the smoke of many years, and the sweat that trickles down from armpits and makes clothing heavy, and the stale breath of mouths, and the oily smell of sweltering feet . . . The sweet smell of neglected infants lingered there, the smell of frightened schoolchildren, and the stuffiness from the beds of pubescent boys. (47)

In his notebooks, Malte discusses the smells of Paris constantly. As smell is the sense with the strongest ties to memory, odors can act as ghostly repetitions of the past. In this passage, the ghost smells emerge from the space shared by present and past (the wall) to invade the present as unbearable repetitions of the lives that no longer exist on the site. These haunting smells, unlike the haunting sights of the past, unhinge Malte completely. As a child, Malte sought out Christine Brahe’s portrait, begged to hear the story of Ingeborg, and tried to sneak away to search for the otherworldly Schulin house, but he flees from the ghostly figure of the Parisian house: “I swear I began to run as soon as I recognized this wall. For that’s what is horrible—that I did recognize it” (48). What Malte recognizes in this wall, or rather in the ghost smells it releases, is death—incomprehensible, unbearable death.

The Notebooks closes with a retelling of the story of the Prodigal Son. Malte’s Prodigal Son is a young man who leaves home because he cannot bear the burden of being loved. When this Prodigal Son returns home, Malte tells us, “The dogs have grown old, but they are still alive. It is reported that one of them let out a howl” (259). The dog’s howl recalls Ingeborg’s return after her death, as it is the dog that alerts the family to her presence. Though the Prodigal Son is still alive, his return to the bosom of his family is a ghostly one. He is someone from the days gone who was considered lost—he

is an incursion from the past into present time. Upon his arrival, the Prodigal Son begs his family not to love him; nevertheless, they greet him with love. However, as Malte writes, “He was probably able to stay. For every day he recognized more clearly that their love, of which they were so vain and to which they secretly encouraged one another, had nothing to do with him” (260). The text suggests that what the Prodigal Son’s family loves in him is not the man himself, but rather what he represents for them. For the abandoned family, he is the person who they thought was gone forever, the person they suddenly lost without understanding his disappearance. In the ancestral home, his return effectively has more to do with the family’s inability to comprehend why he left than it has to do with his own desire to go home. Thus, the Prodigal Son’s homecoming, like the other haunting returns in *The Notebooks*, is part of the traumatic structure of loss.

Comparing the poems of Rilke and Yeats, Merivale states that in Yeats’s “All Souls’ Night,” the ghosts stress “our incompleteness rather than theirs” (256). As we have seen by examining the ghostly figures and traumatic hauntings of *The Notebooks*, the same holds true in Rilke’s novel. Ghosts are the traumatic repetitions of the missed experience with death. This experience need not be a specific one, as it is in the case of Malte’s mother and her failure to recognize the moment of Ingeborg’s death. Ghosts are also symptoms of the trauma inherent in linear death time—they represent a restructuring of time, the emergence of circular death time, which occurs because of the human inability to know the death that awaits us.

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