

# Augmenting Religious Aesthetics: Representation of Buddha in Rilke's "Buddha in Glory" (1908)

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## Abstract

Buddhism has long been a productive part of literary and philosophical discourse in the West. The Austrian German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) uses mythological, sacred and religious subjects in his literary works. He integrates figures, symbols, motifs, parables and legends from Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. This paper focused on Rilke's encounter with the sitting statue of Buddha in the garden of Rodin's in Paris. The poem is given the title Buddha in Glory, where Rilke describes his perception of Buddha, which is considered to be a sacred object (religious aesthetic) at the same time perceiving as a piece of an artwork (artistic aesthetic). Correspondingly, I pursue the question, is Rilke interested in Buddhist philosophy and Buddha's life? Are Rilke's images of Buddhism exotic? To what extent does Rilke represent the religious aesthetic of Buddha statue? Is it purely religious poem or a poem on a piece of artwork? Moreover, religion is not only a matter of faith and believe but also a matter of perception. This leads to an interesting discourse on religious aesthetic where aesthetic can be treated as a theory and practice (art) which can refer to a variety of certain themes and disciplines including art, symbol, beauty, taste, imagination and perception. A religious aesthetics concerns with the merging of the above-mentioned themes and deals with God, faith and believe and sacred. The contemporary world encounters a great transformation of interest in religious aesthetics, whereby religious art has been recognized as an important literary text which complements the written and the visual art at the same time.

**Keywords:** Religion, Aesthetic, Literature, Visual Art, Poem, Rilke, Buddha.

Buddhism has been part of German literature for a long time. As early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century, poets such as Rudolf von Ems's Verse *Barlaam und Josaphat* (1225) can be mentioned in German-speaking countries. Since Schopenhauer, the discourse on Buddha and Buddhism has flourished in German literature. The translations of Paul Deussen and Karl Eugen Neumann from Sanskrit and Pali canon and the adaptations of Buddhist doctrines of salvation in Richard Wagner and August Strindberg's music dramas also belong to Buddhist influence on Western literature. Novels such as *Der Pilger Kamanita* (1906) by Karl Gjellerup and *Siddhartha* (1922) by Herman Hesse, Alfred Doebelin's essay *Buddha und die Natur* (1927), Bertolt Brecht's *Gleichnis des Buddha vom brennenden Haus* (1937) and the 1949 volumes of poems *Gewisse Lebensabend* by Gottfried Benn contributes to the integration of Buddhism in German literature. These authors serve as bridge builders and intercultural-religious mediators between East and West in Western literary space. The reception and adaptation of Buddhism are the subjects of research

projects promoted by literary scholars, religious historians, and philosophers. Therefore, Buddhist studies and their figures of thought, Buddhist religion, and tradition are considered to be a productive part of literary and philosophical reception in the West.

Some current authors, such as Luise Rinser (1911-2002) or Adolf Muschg (1934-), who deal with Buddhist themes in their works, are also convinced about Buddha's teaching and perfection. Luise Rinser reads Neumann's *Die Reden Buddhas* (1922), the Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita during her youth day. She was interested in everything related to the Far East. She became acquainted with Buddha through Hesse and wrote *Die gläsernen Ringe* (1941), a work related to Hesse's *Glasperlenspiel* (1943). However, she received a publication banned because of her anti-fascist statements. Like Hesse, Rinser rejected the strict authoritarian educational system in her Catholic upbringing tradition. Completely fascinated by Hesse's *Siddhartha*, she writes:

The idea of all-encompassing and loving oneness of all living things. These coincided with what I had found in the German mystics: the idea of universal love. I understood what Hesse lets his Siddhartha experience, looking into the river: the one whole, the 'Tat tvam asi', the key word: 'thou are that', namely everything: stone and plant, animal and human. (Rinser 17).

For Hesse, Buddha teachings serve as his salvation. These results in his dedication and contributions towards German literature:

There is a Buddha who is of far more than intellectual importance, especially for our time. Soon as we stop looking at Buddha's teachings from a purely intellectual point of view and content ourselves with a certain sympathy for the ancient idea of unity in the East, as soon as we allow Buddha to speak to us as an apparition, as an image, as the awakened, the accomplished one, we find almost regardless of the philosophical content and dogmatic core of his teaching, one of the great models of humanity in him. Anyone who carefully reads even a small number of countless 'discourses' of Buddha will soon hear a harmony, a calmness of soul, a smile and standing above it, a complete unshakable firmness, but unshakable goodness, infinite tolerance. And the speeches are full of advice, of regulations, of hints about the ways and means of achieving this holy stillness of the soul. (Hesse, *Gesammelte Briefe in 4 Bände* 349)

Hesse rejected the European Christian tradition, finds salvation within the Eastern religion viz. Buddhism. On February 10, 1923, he wrote to his fellow writer Stefan Zweig about his experience and perception of Buddhism as follows: "Very early on, I turned to Indian studies and Indian ways of life and found my religion within Indian and Chinese imagery, i.e., the one that I seemed to be missing in Europe" (Hesse *Gesammelte Briefe in 4 Bände* 52). The confrontation with Asian religion and the fascination with Buddhism developed particularly after the catastrophe of the First World War. In addition to the above-mentioned writer, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Theodor Lessing, Rudolf Pannwitz, Alfred Döblin, Klabund, and Lion Feuchtwanger are some other Buddhist scholars who perceived and represented the teaching and character of Buddha in their literary works. These Western writers, philosophers, and thinkers' perceptions of Buddha and his teaching are mainly related to finding one's salvation and wisdom through Buddha. They intend to praise and worship Buddha along with his teachings thereby rejecting the traditional, orthodox Christianity way of thinking. These shows that they are more interested in the spiritual side of Buddha.

Rainer Maria Rilke is one of the aesthetic poets of the early 20th century. He is considered one of the most important German-language poets. In addition to poems, he wrote essays on art, a monograph on the sculptor Auguste Rodin, a novel, and numerous translations, mainly from French into German. He

wrote many letters to friends, artists, and patrons. For Rilke, writing letters was an artistic activity. Rilke dealt with religious motifs early on. In 1896 he wrote the cycle of poems *Christus. Elf Visionen*. For Rilke, religion has ‘no content of feeling’ but ‘it is a natural movement within an existence’:

[...] Religion is something infinitely simple, simple-minded. It is not knowledge, not content of feeling [...], it is not a duty and not a renunciation, it is not a restriction: but in the perfect expanse of the universe it is a direction of the heart. [...] That the Arab at certain hours turns to the East and prostrate, that is religion. It’s hardly faith. It has no opposite. It is a natural movement within an existence through which the wind of God blows three times a day, in that we are at least this: flexible“[...] (Rilke, *Rilke Briefe* 286).

Between 1907 and 1930, Rilke was regarded almost exclusively as a religious poet. Critics of the time used stereotypical expressions like: “Rilke the outsider, the mystic, the aristocratic God seeker, the advocate of the soul, the quiet dreamer, and the religious idealist” (Metzger 4).

### **Buddha in Glory (1908)**

Centre of all centres, core of cores,  
almond that encloses and sweetens itself –  
everything, reaching to all the stars  
is your fruit’s flesh: Hail.

Look, you feel how nothing clings to you;  
now your shell surrounds the infinite  
and there the strong sap dwells and rises.  
And without a radiance assists him

for high above your suns are turned,  
whole and glowing, in their orbits.  
Yet in you has already begun  
what endures beyond the suns.

Rilke first met Buddha’s statue in Rodin’s garden in Meudon in 1905. He describes Buddha’s image using strong rhetorical expressions such as “almond”, “star”, and “strong sap”, expressing Rilke’s enthusiasm for the glory and glory of Buddha. This is supported by his letter to Clara with formulations such as ‘fanatical reticence’, ‘unutterable unity of his gestures’, and ‘in silent reserve’. Buddha figure not only signals an external perception but also an inner dialogue:

I’ll sleep soon after supper. I’ll be in my little house by half past nine at the latest. Then in front of me is the wide blooming starry night, and under the window, the gravel path rises to a small hill on which a Buddha image rests in fanatical reticence, giving out the unutterable unity of his gestures under all the skies of day and night in quiet reserve . ‘C’est le center du monde’ I said to Rodin. And then he looks at me so kindly, so very friendly. That is very nice and means a lot. (Rilke, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1902 - 1906* 262)

In the poem ‘Buddha in Glory’ the pilgrim appears personally to greet Buddha. Here a human being confronts Buddha and greets him. The pilgrim in this poem does not pray to Buddha, he does not ask for anything from Buddha, but he seems to be completely independent of Buddha. The poem evokes a new

world of imagination and a mystical mood. The title of the poem itself suggests oriental religion, mysticism, and meditation on the way to nirvana or salvation. At first, the poem seems mystical. Buddha is recognized as the centre of all beings and his central position is compared to an almond covered by its shell. The nucleus, which lies at the core of the almond, symbolizes the radiation that radiates from the core. And this core of the almond is none other than Buddha. The comparison of Buddha to an almond indicates a sacred object separated from the Profane world. It also points to Buddha's enlightenment and perfection. The lyrical subject sees precisely this spiritual accomplishment and salutes Buddha. Singh emphasizes that this poem is "written in a tone of the Litany of Lauretania. The poem makes liberal use of the iconography of Mariology (almond, pulp)" (Singh 198). He also "offers homage to Buddha in Mariological form '[...] 'Hail'.'" (Singh 199) The 'Hail' is the literal translation of the angelic form of 'The Hail Mary' which implies an Angelic Salutation which is used to greet Buddha. Here one can identify the juxtaposing of two religious aesthetics i.e. the Christian tradition of angelic salutation to Mary being embedded to greet Buddha indirectly. This shows Buddha's purity and perfection as Mary was pure and virgin. On the other hand, it is also Rilke's way of accentuating the connection between the traditional European Christian symbol and Asian Buddhist iconology.

Furthermore, Buddha and Mary are considered images of spiritual perfection and expanded consciousness, but Rilke adds a second level of metaphor by comparing Buddha statue to the living system of an almond. The technique of embodying spiritual meaning in a specific physical object (often a work of art) is typical of many of the poems in the *New Poems*. In this case, a metaphor from the natural world (almond) is added to explain the vital spiritual meaning of the sculpture, which in turn symbolizes the perfect consciousness of Buddha himself. As the poem's opening line suggests, the poem begins with the 'Centre of all centers, the core of cores,' and ends in the expanse of heaven on 'what endures beyond the suns.' The line 'Centre of all centers' is labelled by Govinda as *alaya-vijñāna*, meaning deep consciousness:

This centre of all centres is none other than the Buddhist *Alaya-vijñāna*, the cosmic and also universal depth-consciousness, which is potentially present in every being, but must first be raised into the light of full awareness before it can be realized in every individual (Govinda 224).

As Buddha is the centre and core, he is thus "protected from the impure profane outside world" (Singh 199), the one who is perceived as pure and sacred.

It is also noteworthy in the second stanza that Buddha is address with 'you'. The previous pilgrim character no longer appears, there is only 'you'. The usage of 'you' suggests their friendly relationship and closeness towards each other. In the last two stanzas the metaphors 'Shell', 'sap', 'radiance' and 'suns' are used. First, the shell and sap signifies the infinity and eternal spiritual growth of Buddha and his perfection. The strong sap of energy from within and the radiance of light from outside reinforce the dynamism of Buddha.

Buddha's perfection continues in the final stanza, where Buddha's image even touches the sky filled with Buddha's suns, which is elaborate as 'whole and glowing, in their orbits.' Buddha partakes in the celestial realm itself, while the rays of his sun now glow and shine. These outer symbols, however, are nothing compared to the intensity of consciousness that glow within Buddha: 'Yet in you has already begun.' Interesting is the metaphor of the sun as the rays of Buddha and that his rays and perfection are meant to last forever, longer than the glory of the sun which suggests that, enlightenment is considered as an integral part of Buddha. Bassermann emphasizes that "the essential thing about Buddha is that he became enlightened. If he was enlightened, others must also be able to become enlightened. If they can,

then actually becoming enlightened is the only goal” (Bassermann 196). Buddha himself is compared to sun, illuminating and enlightening the whole cosmos whereby enlightenment is an indicator of inner spiritual growth.

Throughout the poem and in the representation of Buddha through visual art (sculpture), Buddha sits still and silent in the centre of time and space. He resembles the seed or nucleus in the centre of an almond. The finite core expands along with Buddha’s consciousness to encompass all cosmos, including the starry sky, the whole time, while the almond’s physical shell swells to infinity. Here is Rilke’s letter to Rodin dated 19/20. 11. 1905 about Buddha statue that supports the above mentioned description, “Buddha alone remains in his divine balance (generously illuminated by the snow on his lap-a little like la Pensee in Luxembourg-), actual ruler and sage of this strange world” ( Rilke, *Rilke August Rodin Der Briefwechsel und andere Dokumente zu Rilkes Begegnung mit Rodin. Mit Abbildungen* 126).

Buddha as ‘ruler’ and ‘sage’ does not mean that Buddha is someone like a political ruler, but a spiritual ruler, based on life wisdom and perfection. The divine balance mentioned is the primal experience of this particular Buddha figure. According to Kuschel, this balance is to be understood as a difference between Buddha and other things:

He calls the balance, that Rilke sees here ‘divine’, distinguishing it from the usual things that somehow also have their balance. The ‘balance’ perceived in the Buddha figure has a completely different density and essentiality. Therefore, this Buddha - as if he were alive - can withstand the winter cold. Therefore he can be called the real ‘ruler’ of the world, unshaken, unaffected, unmoved by external influences of the world, a world that Rilke does not coincidentally calls ‘alien’ (Kuschel, *Rainer Maria Rilke und der Buddha: Ein Vortrag* 180).

In a similar letter to Clara dated November 21, 1905, Rilke writes about Buddha’s statue as stated:

We are still covered by snow, heaven, and earth alike; the small antiquities have all fled from their pillars, and only Buddha alone is still there, buried but unburdened, quiet, indifferent, appeared in a new way (a bit like the Pensée in Luxembourg) and Master in this new one too, unexpected world that he seems to have known for as long as any other (Rilke, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1902 - 1906* 274).

In his letter to Clara, Rilke used the term ‘Master’, which has a parallel meaning to the term ‘ruler’ in Rilke’s letter to Rodin. Rilke’s affinity and his approach to Buddha is intensified with the line ‘the small antiquities have all fled from their pillars, and only Buddha alone is still there, buried and unburdened’. Rilke viewed the statue of Buddha from his window and perceived it as if it was a living being. There were also other ancient figures in Rodin’s garden, but only Buddha was mentioned ‘buried and unburdened’. Rilke sees more in Buddha sculpture than “a structure made of stone that sees condensed spiritual energy which creates vibrations and enables relationships” (Kuschel 180).

Similarly, the seated Buddha image symbolizes Buddha’s spotlessness, and his unaffectedness from external worldly influences, and it teaches people that perfection is found within oneself. The statue is seen not only as an object but also as a teacher of perfection:

Buddha’s sculpture, with his gaze directed inward under lowered lids, is both an art object and a teacher, sending messages to the viewer that he has the same opportunity to develop qualities as the sculpture represents. It is the trigger and carrier of experiences that Rilke sees embodied in the old Rodin and that Rodin’s work both contains and creates for Rilke: stillness and tranquillity, collection and concentration, balance and measure (Renger 135).

The image of Buddha thus unites a certain level of existence. Buddha statue is made of stone and embodies the inanimate world, and the almond metaphor represents the natural world. On the other

hand, Buddha as a historical figure brings in the human world and finally, Buddha's spiritual perfection encompasses the transcendent realm of the heavens and the divine. The poem itself becomes an act of spiritual union and perfection. To emphasize this unity, Rilke uses a poetic rhyme scheme that connects the core and stars in lines 1 and 3 of stanza 1. In lines 2 and 4 of stanza 2, Rilke rhymes 'shell' and 'radiance' to emphasize the same impression.

What fascinates Rilke about Buddha is an interest in art or Buddha sculpture and a deep bow before an art object. Through Buddha poem, Rilke also depicts the sacred world of Asia using a Christian rhetorical device such as the Mariological greeting and 'glory'. This depiction of the Christian rhetorical device in a Buddha poem is a testament of Rilke's interest not only in the field of art but, also in the history of religion, and religious syncretism plays the main role in this poem. In religious studies, the term syncretism is understood as the union of different Religions. Although Rilke's Buddha poem is designed with great aesthetic poetry and hardly expresses the deep cultural and religious dimensions of the Buddhist tradition, the poem is more than a description of a work of art. It does not contain an exact representation of the sensual appearance of the sculpture, but shows Buddha as a self-contained consciousness that encompasses the entire cosmos. In Rilke's view, this poem implies a work of art that "appears as a vehicle for religious awakening, as the originator of new revelation, or even as a poetic realm of redemption" (Kuschel, *Rainer Maria Rilke und der Buddha: Ein Vortrag* 116).

As a result, Rilke's relationship to Buddhism differs from that of Christianity and other religions. What connects Rilke with Buddhism is not the religion and religious teaching per se, but its representation in the visual arts and the use of rhetorical religious means. Rilke does not know Buddhist history, religion, and literature. Although his wife Clara sent him a two-volume translation of *Die Reden Buddhas* (1907) by Karl Eugen Neumann, Rilke put the book aside and never read it. When Clara visited her friend Anna Jaenecke in Hanover from mid-August to the end of September 1908, the two women began to read a copy of *Die Reden Buddhas*. Clara immediately recommends this book to her husband. Instead, Rilke read Bettina von Arnim's novel *Briefwechsel mit einem Kinde* (1883), whose motifs he later integrated in his *Malte* novel. In his letter to Clara of September 4, 1908, Rilke states that the Buddha text will have to wait:

I am reading Goethe's correspondence with a child [...] this perhaps speaks again for the current contradiction of our paths: that I am learning from this book (Bettine's) while Buddha has to wait. Don't pass judgment, please, accept me and have faith. Don't asks anything else of me, even in spirit. Otherwise, I feel it, and it settles deep in my heart that is supposed to be innocent (Rilke *Rilke Briefe* 231-232).

And in another letter dated September 8, 1908:

Dear, I have just received a fine copy of *Die Reden Buddhas*, with a black suede back bearing the inscription on two strips of malachite green leather. I thank Anna Jaenecke and you from the bottom of my heart for this great gift; and following what I wrote the other day, I would like to say: I know what I received. I opened it, and as soon as I heard the first words, any words I had just opened, I shuddered as if I were opening in a golden hall in which there is nothing but proportion. Why I refrain from this silent, only leant door; why does this new hesitant gesture arise in me, which alienates you so much? – it may be that it is for the sake of Malte Laurids, which I have put off for too long (Rilke, *Rilke Briefe* 235).

Although Rilke puts *Die Reden Buddhas* aside, he wrote the first Buddha poem as early as 1905 by the time when he first met Buddha in Rodin's garden. Rodin bought a Buddha figure and displayed in his Meudon garden. He also owns other Buddha figures that are slightly different from each other in their

hand positions. Rodin was proud of the seated Buddha figure in deep meditation. Rilke looks at the sculpture of Buddha for a long time and puts both hands on himself (Buddha in complete contemplation). The two hands are clasped together at the navel, “for Buddha need not raise his hands in teaching or open generosity downwards, but both hands are facing upwards on the lap, clasped together. That expresses the attitude of complete inner contemplation” (Kuschel, *Rainer Maria Rilke und der Buddha* 182). What Rilke sees in Rodin’s Buddha sculpture is an art thing that is linked to religion. By seeing this, Rilke develops a connection to this unique statue.

Fascinating about Rilke’s Buddha figure is that Buddha does not require followers, i.e., one should not become Buddhist, but one can discover Buddha within themselves. One should set out on the path of Buddha themselves or awaken Buddha nature in themselves and go his own (Buddhist) way. Rilke wants to experience the divine in all the things that he finds an ultimate solution that God could be in all things. God cannot be touch, and that is precisely why he remains the most mystery in the world, which the poet has to express. That is why a sensitive religious aesthetic is portrayed in Rilke’s poetry.

Ultimately, Rilke does not study Buddhism. He does not want to become a Buddhist. His interest in Buddha’s charisma led him to write Buddha poems before he engaged himself with the teaching and philosophy of Buddha and Buddhism. He transfers his Buddha vision to the theme of his vocation as a poet. It is an utopia of perfection. For Rilke, Buddha is “the embodiment of a person who is completely at peace with complete mental concentration, and it is the figure who tries to express the power of stillness, the power of stillness through his body.” (Brück, *Online Webinar* 16.04.2020) Buddha remains fanatically silent and wants to be determined because he does not want to be revealed by his worshippers. Therefore, Buddha is for Rilke, a contrasting figure to saviour figures such as Christ or Mohammed. He also does not respond to demands for salvation, revelations, or words of comfort, but remains very far away and completely self-contained. However, this unity does not mean making people small but liberating everyone who looks at himself and enters into a dialogue with Buddha. People should redeem themselves, i.e., one should not be convinced by the teaching, but should liberate himself through his own experiences. In complete contrast to the other European authors, Rilke never read Buddhist literature and philosophy and never dealt intensively with Buddhist intellectuals. As an European-influenced poet, he wrote Buddha poems, enabling “a bridge across intellectual and cultural divisions.” (Kuschel, *Rilke und der Buddha* 11) Rilke establishes a relationship with Buddha and a religious aesthetic relationships. Rilke does not sit in front of Buddha’s statue and begin to meditate, sinking into the wordless, but rather he writes poems, using language and refusing speechlessness, while the Buddhist’s medium is silence in front of Buddha figure.

In contrast to the other European authors, Rilke never read Buddhist literature and philosophy and never dealt intensively with Buddhist intellectuals. As a poet, however, he can find poetic-religious expression. Rilke wrote three Buddha poems, enabling a bridge across intellectual and cultural divisions. Rilke establishes a relationship with Buddha, a literal relationship, and in doing so, he acts differently as a European-influenced poet. Rilke does not sit in front of Buddha statue and begin to meditate, sinking into the wordless, but he writes a poem. The Buddhist medium is typically the silence in front of the Buddha figure (this is the fundamental difference between Buddhism and the European approach. Rilke only dealt superficially with Eastern religion: “As far as religion is a concern in Rilke’s poem, Rilke never seriously concerned himself with Eastern wisdom—India, China, Japan, and knew no more than the usual about it, as he occasionally happened to encounter it” (Bassermann 197).

Therefore, Rilke's encounter and engagement with Buddha sculpture is acknowledged as a pure encounter with the 'art thing' (Dinggedicht). The professor and academic director for theology and culture and current Rilke expert Karl Josef Kuschel does not see Rilke's Buddha poem as an intellectual, religious-scientific encounter, but as an occupation with fine arts. He says: "It is not reading that determines Rilke's behavior, but seeing. Not study, but perception. Not meditation, but contemplation" (Kuschel, *Rainer Maria Rilke und der Buddha: Ein Vortrag* 182). It is therefore, to be said that Rilke's approach to Buddha is not a meditative contemplation with closed eyes, but with open eyes, and not silent but speaking, in which seeing is considered a medium of transformation: "Becoming still does not lead to silence (as in the Buddha meditation), but urges expression. Looking does not end in the absence of words but in the intrinsic value, indeed the power of words" (Kuschel, *Rainer Maria Rilke und der Buddha: Ein Vortrag* 182).

Kuschel's engagement with Rilke's Buddha is that, he saw in Rilke's Buddha a contrasting image of Rilke's Christian traditional catholic upbringing, because Rilke's childhood was shaped by a Christian sense of guilt. Kuschel believes that Rilke is distancing himself from the Christian piety of his childhood. Although the Christ figure is the redeemer figure according to Christian tradition, Rilke sees in Buddha figure a model of "perfection and for all things the figure from a religious tradition that were not left to him" (Kuschel, *Rilke und der Buddha, SRF Radio* 29.5.2011). Rilke superimposed symbols of the Christian tradition with symbol of Buddhist origin and formed his poetical aesthetic image. He traces the Buddhist experience of awakening.

As mentioned earlier, Rilke's inclination toward Buddha is purely the representation of Buddha through visual Art. Hence, it is not the religion and religious teaching per se that connects Rilke and Buddha, but its representation in fine arts. This representation of Buddha in fine arts in return has a deep root and connection with religion that somehow drives scholars and researchers of Rilke when dealing with this kind of poetical religious text to mention the religious aesthetics behind a literary work. Three poems demonstrate Rilke's interest in Buddha. Otherwise, there is not much to document.

The volume of poems from *New Poems* has two Buddha poems with the same title, 'Buddha' and *New Poems The Other part* contains the poem 'Buddha in Glory' which closes the volume. These three Buddha poems are closely related. Although the three Buddha poems are not necessarily among Rilke's most treasured poems, they can serve as a good example for examining the connection between art, religious aesthetic, and literature in Rilke's modern era.

The first Buddha poem was written in 1905 while Rilke engaged as a secretary to Rodin. The poem deals with Buddha's charisma and the experience of stillness. The name Buddha is not present in the poem. Only the title of the poem indicates that it is about the sacred Buddha image and the relationship between Buddha and the lyrical subject we. Buddha statue is represented as a sight that makes people stop and catch their breath. He stays in a distant, which implies a goal to achieve that lies in the distance. This distance is associated with stillness. The stillness can be marked as Rilke's contrast to the big city of Paris covered with noise and disturbance. According to literary scholar Rosy Singh, "Buddha belongs to a very different distant world from which we are separated." (Singh 195 ) Buddha lives in the distant like the stars and we can no longer hear and see him and stand around him. Buddha is further compared with 'stars, other great stars', which symbolize the cosmic dimension into which one draws the sublime. He is the star. He is the cosmological centre of the world and this is underscored by 'O He is everything' The stars around him also symbolize the cosmological order of Buddha because many stars and large stars indicate his size and charisma. If Buddha is a great star, the viewer cannot expect any tangible

devotion from him. He is also big because he is everything, self-sufficient, he does not need anything, does not need to see anything, so he does not answer. He remains complete in himself, he is the force from the beginning of the world and therefore, he is infinitely far from us. The 'distant' also indicates Rilke's view of the statue from his small house through his window, from which the bridge of Sèvres can also be seen. Lou Andreas Salome read this description of the 'distant' on November 23, 1905:

If it is not work, then it is my little house its distance, and proximity, that keeps me busy its the beautiful antique things and the things of Rodin that I move among that's how it is: because everything together out here is what other people never get together in one place in their entire lives. To show you my little house (which, as much as it is up to me, I want to hold on to for a long time), to stand with you at that window, in front of which are the Buddha and the distance, which crosses the bridge of Sèvres like a stanza ringing rhyme seems ordered is a hope that I want to nourish and cultivate with some good thoughts (Rilke, *Rainer Maria, Rilke-Lou Andreas Salomé, Briefwechsel* 211).

Buddha's infinite distance from us is a timeless distant 'millions of years'. The timeless distance can also be understood as the metaphysical mystery of which Buddha was incarnated for millions of years. Despite his distance, Buddha still retains his dignity as a saint, he is the other great star. Concerning 'silence' and 'stars' one may recall Rilke's first comment on Rodin's Buddha-figure, in a letter to Clara dated September 20, 1905 And another familiar motif of Buddha is emphasized again by Rilke in a letter to his wife dated January 11, 1906 (a few days after the poem was written):

And I stand at my desk, the window is open, and the gardeners walk about below, and now and then a device, which the earth quickly covers its mouth, sounds of hope. And Buddha is big and knowing, and you think the juice is rising in him. And one would like to see that he was master of innumerable moonlight all night. Yesterday, on a clear late evening, when we turned down from the Musée, the wall of my garden was dark, but behind it was all the moonlight in the world around the Buddha, like the illumination of a large church service, in the midst of which he lingered, unmoved, rich, radiant with ancient indifference (as cited in Kuschel, *Rainer Maria Rilke und der Buddha: Ein Vortrag* 182).

The second Buddha poem was written in July 1906. The poem is rendered in the classic sonnet form and bears the same title 'Buddha'. In this second poem, Rilke has in mind the Buddha-figure, a figure overlaid with gold that abounds in Buddhist iconography. Buddha is not addressed directly, but the pilgrim reflects on his experiences in front of a gilded Buddha statue. The reader finds himself through the character of the shy foreigner pilgrim. Through the pilgrim figure, Rilke describes a kind of path of knowledge because the pilgrim sees a Buddha covered in gold from afar. Rilke is fascinated by the thought that Buddha does not let himself be impressed by precious stone but remains incorruptible, indifferent or dumb. He is above everything. The golden state signifies the offerings made by people out of remorse for their deeds. As the pilgrim approaches him, he is overwhelmed by the emanation of Buddha. It must feel very poignant on the spot. This highlights the epiphany moment.

The lyrical subject appears in front of the pilgrim in a distanced form. This pilgrim senses and feels the beauty and preciousness of Buddha through his approach to Buddha. The pilgrim feels small and behaves very pious. Far and near are juxtaposed. On the other hand, it indicates the majesty and holiness of Buddha and holds a high position not in worldly sense. The elevation of Buddha corresponds to his being-like appearance as a precious, imperishable being in the chalice of the soul. As Buddha is portrayed with golden statue, it symbolize that the statue radiates the surrounding space and reflects the beauty of art. Radiance can indicate human artwork as well as Buddha's perfection.

Rilke's three Buddha poems search for the sacred in art. In Rilke's view, these three poems imply a work of art, as Rilke defines the meaning of art that he presented in his lecture on March 5, 1898, in Prague entitled *Moderne Lyrik*. This lecture is part of Rilke's earlier research on art in the context of his emancipation from the literary environment:

Art appears to me as an individual's endeavour to go beyond the narrow and the dark, to find an understanding with all things, with the smallest as well as with the largest, and in such constant dialogues to come closer to the last quiet sources of all life. The mysteries of things merge within him with his deepest feelings and become loud to him as if they were his longings. The rich language of these intimate confessions is beauty (Rilke, Rainer Maria, Aufsätze und Rezensionen 27.10.2020)

By art, Rilke means the relationship of art to the individual artist, 'Art is an endeavour of the individual' and not of a community, i.e., Rilke focuses on individual artists, as his Florence diary says, "Know then that art is: the means of the individual, lonely people to full fill themselves" (Rilke, *Das Florenzer Tagebuch* 27) and further "Know then that the artist creates for himself – solely for itself. What will make you laugh or cry, he must form with wringing hands and lift out of himself" (Rilke, *Das Florenzer Tagebuch* 27). The individual and lonely artist tries to take a closer look at art and find an understanding of all things. Be it with the smallest or with the largest it does not matter as long as the artist reaches an understanding of the art and his goal. Basically, "the artist aims to establish a connection, a relationship, to that innermost part of things, to the soul of the world, so to speak: to find understanding with things, with the world" (Löwenstein 147).

What is remarkable about Rilke's Buddha poem is it does not convey only religious aesthetics, but also what he called *Dinggedicht* that is translated in English as the 'Thing poem'. Rilke's thing-poem is that the things in the poem are not only represented as appearances of art, but the things serve as images expressing an untold mystery i.e., The art thing lies behind the words and is a symbol for the feelings that are being depicted:

The words in the poem that signify things are, therefore symbols of a feeling. In other words, the poet forms his feelings, and mood metaphorically, and symbolically behind the everyday meanings of words. In this respect, the words in the poem are a pictorial expression of feelings and the poems are emanations of feelings (Löwenstein 152).

Furthermore, the focus of the thing poems is the appropriate representation of things. The inside is the most crucial thing for Rilke rather than the outside appearance:

Rilke is not concerned with the ontology or phenomenology of objects in the outside world, but with what the poet feels when looking at things, what the thing triggers in him. Ultimately, it is not about the surface of things, but about something inner that is expressed on this surface: a feeling or the soul of the poet" (Löwenstein 224).

It is important to emphasize that not only was Rilke inspired by Rodin's sculptures to create his thing poems, but Rilke also learned from Rodin 'what to work on?' And in his monograph on Rodin, he says: His eye sees much more during session hours than he can do in that time. He does not forget any of it, and often when the model has left him, the actual work begins for him from the wealth of his memory" (Rilke, *Auguste Rodin Mit 96 Vollbildern* 55).

What Rilke sees in Rodin is also loneliness, inseparable from the artist. The aesthetics of the artwork is awakened not only from inspiration but also from tireless work. In it, Rodin is considered by Rilke to be a 'great master'. In addition, Rilke's letters show how much he misses Rodin "My very dear great master, I would like to write you a long letter; for my thoughts are often always looking for you," (Letter

from 21.12.1905 Rilke, *Rilke August Rodin Der Briefwechsel und andere Dokumente zu Rilkes Begegnung mit Rodin. Mit Abbildungen* 146) and the absence of Rodin is considered an infinite and perpetual longing for Rodin “You are missing like salt and bread and like work and sleep.” (Letter from 24.11.1905, Rilke, *Rilke August Rodin Der Briefwechsel und andere Dokumente zu Rilkes Begegnung mit Rodin. Mit Abbildungen* 135)

In a further letter to Andreas-Salomé from 10.8. In 1903, Rilke argued that Rodin also succeeds in creating a solid material reality that exists in contrast to the restlessness of modern life:

“...thus grew around him (Rodin) a reality, a vast stillness, kinship of things that connected him to other and older things, until he himself seemed to come from a dynasty of great things: his calmness and his patience. Hence his fearless, enduring old age, his superiority over people who are much too flexible, too vacillating, playing too much with the balances in which he almost unconsciously rests. [...] Somehow I too have to get around to making things; not plastic, written things - realities that emerge from the craft. Somehow I too must discover the smallest basic element, the cell of my art, the tangible immaterial means of representation for everything: then the clear strong consciousness of the immense work that lay before me would compel and testify to it; then I would have so much to do that one working day would be the same as the next and I would have work that always works because it begins with what is achievable and small and yet it is already big right from the start” (Rilke, *Rilke-Lou Andreas Salomé, Briefwechsel* 102-105).

Rilke’s articulation of a ‘kinship of things’ allows him to connect Rodin and his work to different varieties of aesthetic objects, both past and present. Through the metaphor of family relationships, Rilke brings synchronic and diachronic temporalities together in the interrelationship of things, i.e., the artist creates a ‘kinship of things’ through his work in the present. In this way, Rilke’s anthropological justification of the artist and artistic production enables it to bridge a historical distance and to revive the mimetic kinship between people and things through aesthetics.

What one learns in Rilke’s *New Poems* and *New Poems the Other Part* is the written art thing. Visual art becomes verbal art through a form of language appropriate to verbal art, e.g. the gilded description of a Buddha statue. With the *New Poems*, Rilke creates a new type of poetry and marks a turn from emotional poetry to the so-called objective poem ‘Thing poem’. The ‘New’ in the *New Poems* reflects a new world experience and perception and how to express that perception in a new language. That is why the *New Poems* are ‘signs of a new beginning’ both with Rilke’s development and concerning the history of German poetry:

They are all new in their underlying world experience and in the method that transforms it into form, even if not all poems as individuals have an equal share in the progress that they represent as a whole. The *New Poems* are the first big step to deal the world as a task. What is new compared to earlier times is that anything, whatever it may be, can be an occasion for creative work (Kunisch, *Rainer Maria Rilke: Dasein und Dichtung* 150).

The volumes of the *New Poems* mark a development of new consciousness. However, Rilke partly departs from the traditional norm of the thing poem, in which he gives the thing a ‘mystery of being’. The aim of Rilke’s thing poems is to convey the essence of a sculptural object. At this point, the definition of a thing poem as defined in the real lexicon of German literary history should be quoted:

The term ‘thing poem’ was coined in 1926 by the Germanist Kurt Oppert. A thing poem is a lyrical text with a sensual concrete object. In a thing poem, a thing is viewed objectively and from a distance. The thing can be everyday objects, plants, living beings or objects of art. Rilke’s poem is about the

transformation of things, through the internalizing feeling of their innermost reality, which gives them transparency to the immanent mystery of being. They become translucent in the poetic structure; they are transforms in feeling into the invisibility (Martini, *Dinggedicht* 268).

Rilke describes works of art with vivid words, the unexpected and worthless things. Fuerst describes Rilke's thing poems as poems about small things "poems that did not wait for inspiration, but forced inspiration: poems that did not exude a mood, but summarize sensual-spiritual impressions" (Fuerst 43).

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