



A comparative analysis of Rainer Maria Rilke and Sri Aurobindo's poetry

Risha Srinivas
Student

The Mother's International School.

Abstract

It is commonly acknowledged that language imparts identity, meaning and perspective to our human condition. Since language offers individuals infinite ways to convey a message, it proves to be a form of art in itself. This paper attempts to analyse and compare and contrast the language, implied meanings and themes of poems written by Rainer Maria Rilke and Sri Aurobindo. The paper concludes on the note that regardless of entirely different backgrounds and upbringings, both poets have used language in a similar manner.

Introduction

This paper is something of a pilgrimage.

It is a humble attempt to understand the essence of human life that is indistinguishably dissolved in Art, spiritual calling and their literary manifestations through the works of two artists and spiritual seekers - Austrian poet, Rainer Maria Rilke and Indian mystic, Sri Aurobindo. Both Aurobindo and Rilke came from significantly different backgrounds in India and the then Austria-Hungary respectively, yet their work or rather, sensibility, shares certain core commonalities. This leads one to believe that the language of Art is universal, and a tumultuous relationship with God or a Divine is a shared struggle across our race.

This paper compares the poetry of Rainer Rilke and Sri Aurobindo, taking into regard their personal journeys and the historical setting of late 19th and early 20th century Europe and India. During this period, Europe was engulfed by the Modernist movement in art and philosophy, while India was at the core of its transformation - attempting to assert its identity as a nation, rediscovering and relearning its own native culture, all while rejecting the unwelcome impositions of British colonial rule. The literature that emerged from both Europe and India during this time was charged with nationalism and often contemplated the role of artistic expression and faith in a quickly transitioning society. Both Aurobindo and Rilke show strong streaks of nationalism in their early poetry and while they evolved to the more complex themes of religion and

spirituality later on, this was something of a stepping stone in their search for understanding identity and devotion, which they both pledged to their nations.

While exploring these themes, there are certain larger questions that will be addressed in this study. This questioning is three-fold: the role of religion as a stepping stone to spirituality; both Aurobindo and Rilke's perception of the abstract and in relation, the commonalities between elements in writing style, imagery and symbolism that serve as throughlines for both Aurobindo and Rilke.

Yeats and Tagore, the Boston Brahmins stand testament to the correspondences between Indian poets and their European or American contemporaries, so it is ironic and almost surprising to see that no such correspondence existed between Rilke and Aurobindo despite their similarities. It is perhaps even likely that one was not even aware of the other's existence. Despite knowing no prior noteworthy comparisons, the synonymous life and art of these two literary stalwarts who were blissfully unbeknownst to each other follows an almost divinely chartered course of progression. I hope to uncover the finer details of it as we embark on the pilgrimage.

An introduction to Rainer Maria Rilke

René Rilke was born to Sophie Entz and Josef Rilke in Prague, in 1875. At the time, Rilke's family was coloured with melancholy and despair. His father had assumed the role of a railway official after a failed military career and his mother was mourning the death of the child she had borne before Rilke. His early childhood was afflicted by his mother's need to mourn her dead daughter and as a result, Rilke was always dressed in fine clothes and doted over the same way a mother would dote over a daughter or as he described it, even a doll (Poetry Foundation, 2020). Perhaps this unconventional influence for a boy in the late 19th century is what led Rilke to develop finer sensibilities in art and aesthetics, something that was far removed from the idea of masculinity. Rilke became acquainted with inconsistency from an early age. His parents' marriage failed in 1884, he had to shift schools multiple times and held a concentrated aversion to physical activities. Rilke's parents also failed to acknowledge his artistic sensibilities and

insisted on enrolling him in the military academy at Sankt Polten, which he soon dropped out of owing to frequent illness. Eventually, Rilke studied philosophy, art history and literature at a university in Prague.

One of the most profound relationships that Rilke made was with Lou Andreas-Salome, a married woman fifteen years his senior. Rilke first met Salome in Venice, in 1897 (Rilke and Andreas-Salome, 2008) and was almost immediately influenced by her powerful character, the ripples of which would echo throughout the rest of his life. Salome was trained with Freud and was even an equal muse to Nietzsche, so perhaps it comes as no surprise that this celebrated psychoanalyst and seductress held a lasting thrill of influence over Rilke. Rilke poured the entirety of his romance into the love letters he wrote to Salome and even dedicated his romantic work, *Book of Hours*, to her. It was during the peak of this intense connection that René changed his name to Rainer, prompted by Salome's suggestion of having a more commanding masculine name.

Even after their romantic correspondence had ended, Rilke travelled Europe with Salome and her husband and these experiences were extremely formative for him. During their visit to Russia, he met with literary stalwarts like Leo Tolstoy and was deeply impacted by the Russian culture and its people, calling Russia his 'spiritual fatherland' (Rilke, 1997). Once again, Salome had been the harbinger of a seismic shift in the way Rilke perceived the world. One could even say that the heavy influence of philosophy and its convergence with psychoanalysis coloured Rilke's works even if in the slightest of traces. This can solely be attributed to Salome. It was finally only in 1900 that Rilke came to be closely acquainted with Clara Westhoff, a skilled sculptor, whom he married the following year in 1901. This union would yield a daughter, Ruth, and continue lifelong (Holthusen, 2021).

One unalterable dimension of Rainer Rilke's personality was his native attraction to faith and spirituality. He was Catholic, though not a staunchly practising one, and this had bearings on the way he formed relationships with people. In his marriage, Rilke did not consider divorce a real possibility because it was something that Catholicism rejects. This desire to understand or practise his faith also allowed Rilke to form a stepping stone in the farther reach to knowing and intimately loving god. Perhaps it is the progression from the Book of Hours to Duino Elegies that aptly captures the course of spiritual transcendence in Rilke's life. The Book of Hours is titled 'Love Poems to God' and follows themes that speak about a personal relationship with this omniscient force that Rilke is expressing his devotion. He almost insinuates that the relationship that man, or he, shares with God is a two-way sustenance. God cannot survive without the love that man gives and man cannot survive without the faith that God instils.

Duino Elegies is set against the background of Rilke during the First World War, when he was briefly a guest at Duino Castle, Italy. This work took nearly over a decade to complete and had nearly the same impact on the German people that *The Waste Land* by TS Eliot did on the American people. This revolutionary work of art followed the conflicting inner monologue of Rilke's life, his questions, struggles with existence and beauty and the maddening endeavour of honest living. It is the ultimate play of faith that makes Duino Elegies the great work that it is. It employs the use of Christian symbols

A little glimpse of Rilke outside the spirals of the lyrical verse appears in the little collection called 'Letters to a Young Poet', sharing Rilke's side of the correspondence between him and a young Franz Xaver Kappus, who was a youth grappling with the daunting questions of purpose, passion and pursuit (Javadizadeh, 2021). The letters shared between Kappus and Rilke are few and far between, but render the essence of Rilke's innermost emotions and the deepest recesses of his being.

Rainer Rilke passed away in Switzerland as a result of severe sickness. He lived until the age of fifty-one. Much like his style, Rilke may not have lived long, but lived with severe passion - a willful force that could meditate the crux of the earth and recourse its energy entirely.

Poems by Rainer Maria Rilke

Rilke's verses are the eyes that bear his soul in their pupils. His vast body of poetry forms a great curve of progression, evolving from patriotic to spiritual in a course that charts both his art and his person.

The following lines, an excerpt from the Book of Hours is something that has always captivated me:

*I live my life in widening circles
That reach out across the world
I may not complete this last one
but I give myself to it.*

*I circle around God, around the primordial tower.
I've been circling for thousands of years
and I still don't know: am I a falcon,
a storm, or a great song?*

In a collection of deeply romantic works - the Book of Hours, I find that this excerpt is composed of what one might perceive as unconditional love. In this excerpt, we find that the general theme is to give oneself fully to God, yet not connoting something as extreme as asceticism, isolation or penance. It is a surrender to God that is viewed not as a renunciation but as the widest possible freedom - an uncharted, unfettered liberation.

It is evident that the poem has been composed to address the self. I think this can be said for most of Rilke's works. The primary audience is simply himself and is written in the context of his own life. Since we can never know the specific events that may have culminated in this verse, we can only conjecture that it has something to do with the finer nuances of love that revealed themselves to Rilke during the course of his passionate relationship with Lou Andreas Salome (Mattix, 2012). Rilke is questioning his innermost motives, his identity and the source of his living. Who is he? How does he live? These questions plague him but he resolves them in the larger identity that he sees with his God. This God is still an undefined divine force, not affiliated with or depicted in the religious sense. Something else that is interesting to note is that the aforementioned text is cited in The Book of a Monastic Life, the first section of The Book of Hours.

In the text, Rilke's tone is questioning and thoughtful, and his mood is pensive and reflective. Upon reading these lines, something specific and powerful was awakened in me but not something that can be aptly described in words. It is a universal, all-encompassing emotion that perhaps every living being has once been at the crux of and this is why it resonates with a large audience. However, with the soft cadence in his words, Rilke invokes the

presence of the same thoughts in the same magnitude in any individual who may chance upon these words.

Heavily metaphorical and infused with elements of imagery, Rilke introduces something new to the plane of poetry as we know it. His metaphors sound hardly like metaphors because he uses them in the most real possible way. He has artfully embedded subtle truths and perhaps his entire inner existence in these metaphors. It is as though Rilke truly does live his life in widening circles that span the ends of the world. The theme in the second stanza immediately comes back to the idea of endurance. When Rilke says that he has been circling the primordial tower for years, it shows that he has dissolved in this circling. In this devout devotion and dissolution arises the primary essence of love - a journey that knows no form, no end. It is an infiniteness. Am I a falcon, scouring and haunting the skies? A storm that has seized the world in its passionate frenzy? Or a song that is sweet and all-elusive?

Rilke's sentiments regarding nationalism, on the other hand, are somewhat wider and vaguer as compared to the general perception of nationalism (Devitt, 2020). He was not patriotic or deeply invested in his culture as an Austro-Hungarian of the time, but rather represented the crux of Europe in that period. Anyone who met Rainer Rilke, particularly in the latter years of his life, felt as though he was shaking hands with European culture. He held correspondences with Auguste Rodin, a renowned sculptor at the time, looked upon Russia as his spiritual fatherland and interacted with the philosophies of Freud and Nietzsche with a dynamic understanding (Corbett, 2022). He was a sum of the intellectual revolution that Europe was seated within.

In *Sacrifice to the Laren*, Rilke, aged twenty, dedicated a collection of poetry to his hometown, Prague. Like a poetic guide he takes the reader through the Golden City, looks down from the Hradschin at its spires, cupolas, and palaces, relates its history and commemorates its people. While ethnic tensions in the country were continuously increasing at the end of the nineteenth century, the Czech, German and Jewish people still formed a natural unity in the *Sacrifice to the Laren* – thus Rilke's poems continue to give life to a city that no longer exists.

It was this spirit of finding love and renewal in one's origins that characterised the ultimate of his works, the *Duino Elegies* - a metamorphosis of sorts and an intense monologue about human existence.

An excerpt from the First Elegy goes

*For beauty is nothing but
the beginning of terror,
that we are still able to bear,
And we revere it so,
because it calmly disdains to destroy us,
Every Angel is terror.
And so I hold myself back and swallow the cry
Of a darkened sobbing. Ah, who then can*

*We make use of? Not Angels: not men,
And the resourceful creatures see clearly
That we are not really at home
In the interpreted world.*

The Duino Elegies was composed in Italy and some of the elegies in the collection were drafted at the time when Rilke was conscripted into the Austro-Hungarian army in 1915 (Britannica, 2019). It was at this time that Rilke was haunted by the hounds of human loneliness, troubled by the unanswerable question of eternal faith and desperately in search of some semblance of beauty in a seemingly desolate world. These thoughts and intense emotions spill across the pages of the

Duino Elegies. In this excerpt, Rilke addresses himself once again, speaking of the fleeting nature of anything positive. Here he employs irony and dichotomy as key tools. Expressing one as an inverse of another. With fluid alliteration, metaphor and abstract symbolism, the narrative voice Rilke employed in the Duino Elegies strives "to achieve in human consciousness the angel's presumed plenitude of being" (Rilke, 2015).

True to his early influences, Rilke uses angels, a core Christian element, to depict the truth that godliness exists within each one but is frustratingly limited within earthly existence and the life that man leads.

This finally brings us back to the question of Rilke's progression through these works. The primary arc that is formed follows a course of the same questions and fears that shroud Rilke's mind, but the growth lies so - he breathes his youthful life into The Sacrifice to the Laren, interprets earthly existence through passion and romance in the Book of Hours and finally settles at unalloyed love in the Duino Elegies - a softness amid the harsh, a diamond in the rough, a sweet divinity that all mankind seeks but is told not where to find.

An introduction to Sri Aurobindo

We now turn the page to the Indian mystic, an ever-unravelling mystery - Sri Aurobindo. Aurobindo Ghose was born on 15th August 1872 in Calcutta (Britannica, 2022). His father was an anglophile and Sri Aurobindo, in the early formative years of his life, grew up in an atmosphere steeped in western ideas and culture. He was educated in England, where he was exposed to many literary and culturally rich Western languages. He wrote his first poem, 'Light' at the age of 11 (Banerjee, 2010); and his early works foreshadowed the boundlessness that was to become his poetry in the later years.

And when the broad tent of the firmament
Arose on its airy spars,
I pencilled the hue of its matchless blue,
And spangled it around with stars.

(Excerpt from Light)

Sri Aurobindo had spent very little time in his motherland, but it commanded his being at its core. He was intensely guided by the native Indian in him and upon his return to India in 1893, the first glimpse of his motherland from the sea invigorated him with a heightened sense of passion, spirituality, and sentimentality. Aurobindo was home and it revitalised his inner being.

Aurobindo's sense of patriotism was fiery, especially in his youth, and in one such endeavour to rebel against British colonial rule, he was arrested under the Alipore Bomb Case and detained in the Alipore jail in 1908. The incident was an initiative of the Anushilan Samiti, a group of rebelling Bengali nationalists who had attempted to murder the district judge of Muzaffarpur. Unlike many of the accused, Aurobindo was acquitted and released by 1910. The months he spent in jail are central to his life for it was then, and it was there, that he had many vital spiritual realisations and decided to dedicate his life to its true purpose. Aurobindo saw his physical imprisonment as a sign of the beginning of inner liberation. He described fantastical visions of Krishna, the Indian god, that he said he had beheld in the trees within the jail grounds. This was the spiritual awakening.

Through all of Sri Aurobindo's most renowned works, *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *Essays on the Gita*, and the epic, *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*, one can tell that his writing emerges from the highest consciousness. This was very central to Sri Aurobindo. Once he arrived in Pondicherry, undertaking his work as a poet and yogi over there, setting up an ashram, he rewrote a lot of his earlier works, including sections from the *Savitri*. He believed that any and all art must only emerge from the highest consciousness and so his poetry found origins in a different, more subtle plane, which he accessed through his creative capacity. He used external instruments for transmission and external expression only. Art was meditative for Aurobindo.

To quote him, "Inspiration is always a very uncertain thing; it comes when it chooses, stops suddenly before it has finished its work, refuses to descend when it is called." He believed that each poet has his own way of working and finds his own issue out of inspiration's incertitudes. For Sri Aurobindo, the process of writing poetry occurs in three stages. The first is the source or the inspiration, the second is the vital force of creative beauty and the third is the transmission of the outer consciousness of the poet.

While one would say that the most special relationship in Sri Aurobindo's life was that which he shared with the Divine, he also found an earthly manifestation of a Divine relationship with The Mother or Mirra Alfassa. Mirra Alfassa was a French woman who met Sri Aurobindo in Pondicherry and immediately felt drawn to his philosophy (Aurobindo Ghose and Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2006). Mirra was also a natively spiritual human being. She has mentioned on multiple occasions that she would have dreams and visions of Krishna in her sleep. She was captivated by his divine presence and the sentiment was rekindled when she saw it unravel with Sri Aurobindo.

Leaving behind her life as an artist, wife and mother, Mirra Alfassa joined Sri Aurobindo as The Mother, aiding and abetting his work and making it more accessible to his disciples and followers.

The peak of Sri Aurobindo's poetic achievement, however, was Savitri. Named 'Savitri: A Legend and A Symbol', the great epic is a layered, complex and intricate work of art that interprets the Hindu legend of Savitri and Satyavan. What is most striking about Savitri is its interpretive power and its unflinching grasp on all levels of reality. In a deeper sense, Savitri is infinitely more than the result of individual talent. It is seen as a renewal - the rebirth of a tradition being made eternal in the modern medium. It captures the essence of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy - the evolution of man and his transcendence to the highest consciousness. Perhaps one can say that all the stages in Sri Aurobindo's work led up to the creation of Savitri - the ultimate realisation of his potential and the culmination of all his works. Savitri can even be seen as a higher power that summoned Sri Aurobindo and spoke through his consciousness, using him as a vessel to make the abstract material. From the pulsating passion in his early patriotic poems, the lyricism of his romantic works and the surrender in his philosophical and mystic sonnets, Sri Aurobindo's sensitivity and sensibility render all of these powerful emotions into the eternal poetry that is Savitri.

Poems by Sri Aurobindo

To immerse oneself in Sri Aurobindo's verse is to behold the vastness of the world in all its aged glory.

The following is an excerpt from Who by Sri Aurobindo:

*In the blue of the sky, in the green of the forest,
Whose is the hand that has painted the glow?
When the winds were asleep in the womb of the ether,
Who was it roused them and bade them to blow?*

*These are His works and His veils and His shadows;
But where is He then? by what name is He known?
Is He Brahma or Vishnu? a man or a woman?
Bodied or bodiless? twin or alone?*

*All music is only the sound of His laughter,
All beauty the smile of His passionate bliss;
Our lives are His heart-beats, our rapture the bridal
Of Radha and Krishna, our love is their kiss.*

*The Master of man and his infinite Lover,
He is close to our hearts, had we vision to see;*

*We are blind with our pride and the pomp of our passions,
We are bound in our thoughts where we hold ourselves free.*

*It is He in the sun who is ageless and deathless,
And into the midnight His shadow is thrown;
When darkness was blind and engulfed within darkness,
He was seated within it immense and alone.*

‘Who’ was an earlier work of Sri Aurobindo, composed during the first decade of the 1900s. In this poem, he questions everything that we take as gospel about the higher power, recontextualising and fully relearning man’s perception of the Divine.

Through this poem, we can draw parallels with Rilke’s works on multiple accounts. First, regarding the relationship between man and the Divine. Both Aurobindo and Rilke see the relationship between man and the Divine as a mutual bond characterised by love and devotion. Man requires faith and he finds this in the Divine, while the Divine cannot sustain without man’s devotion. ‘Master of man and his infinite Lover’, speaks of this inextricable link that humans share with the most abstract of beings.

Secondly, both Aurobindo and Rilke function internally. Their poetry is written by them, inspired by the events and epiphanies in their lives and it is also addressed to their own self. They are their own primary audience. In this poem, Aurobindo addresses himself and all the conflicts and questions that lie within him. While the poem sounds as though it is addressed to anyone who might share these questions and doubts, a characteristic feature of Aurobindo’s works is always its internal nature. The work draws from the deepest recesses of his being and thus his words are a reflection of his inner orientation.

The poem highlights various different literary devices. It is heavily metaphorical, and lyrical and even displays vivid imagery and dichotomy, similar to Rilke. Perhaps something that is interesting to note is that any and all imagery is reflective of the vision of any individual. It is as though one may wear their eyes for a moment. Aurobindo plays around with nature and its sheer rawness (‘in the blue of the sky, in the green of the forest’) to express the power of faith and devotion and even highlights his perception in tandem with traditional Indian culture. Drawing references to the Hindu figures of Radha and Krishna, Aurobindo reflects on the nearly sensual and maddeningly captivating devotion and submission that man yields to god, even though he does not know who his god is or what form his god takes. This is very reminiscent of Rilke’s lines:

*“I circle around God, around the primordial tower.
I’ve been circling for thousands of years
and I still don’t know: am I a falcon,
a storm, or a great song?”*

A core similarity that Rilke and Aurobindo share is dichotomy. In the First Elegy, we see -

*“For beauty is nothing but
the beginning of terror,
that we are still able to bear,
And we revere it so,
because it calmly disdains to destroy us,
Every Angel is terror.”*

Similarly in the last stanza of Who, we find this similar dichotomy playing out when Aurobindo references darkness to be blind and the Divine as the infinite sight within it. In ways we can see that both Rilke and Aurobindo fixated on the same inner awakenings that contrasted tangible reality, thus employing this in their poetry.

Sri Aurobindo also wrote in and edited various patriotic newspapers as Vande Mataram, which were extremely nationalistic in nature. He led the freedom struggle with the power he wielded his pen. Though these endeavours were somewhat short-lived and taken over by his spiritual awakenings, Sri Aurobindo also envisioned patriotism more spiritually. He watched India embody itself as Bhawani in his vision, a mother with a life of her own, the source of all Indian life and Aurobindo was always devoutly Indian in his being.

Conclusion

So, one wonders what it is that a pilgrimage is undertaken for. This paper began with the endeavour to draw three comparisons - religion in spirituality, a perception of the abstract and similarities in style. It is safe to say all of these three points of comparison have risen from the unidimensional nature of their beginnings to evolve into an infiniteness of questions. Nonetheless, the following is how one may attempt to condense them.

Our two poets, Rilke and Aurobindo, use religion as a tool to ascend to a higher plane of existence. Religion is material, spirituality is immaterial. Christianity gave Rilke angels, which he interpreted and symbolised at various levels while the Hindu pantheon gave Aurobindo Krishna - a corporeal divine. Both Aurobindo and Rilke also perceive this abstract relationship as one that begins and ends in itself - tracing it in circles and understanding the love that is shared both ways. Man and god are two halves of the whole, a Life Divine and a Divine Life. This also directly translates to similarities in writing style where both Rilke and Aurobindo's poetry is defined by sharp dichotomy, weaving metaphors and strong imagery. But underneath all that is the base that defines the writing of Aurobindo and Rilke. Their writing is meditative at its core. It is evidently far larger than themselves and that is perhaps a rare thing to see so gloriously awake in any form of art because it would seem art is normally at the behest of its creator. More often than not, language is the medium of meaning and a creator is its source. Over

here, the creator is the medium through which meaning manifests in the enormity of language, and with that little feat has emerged a course of art that has altered the world irreversibly.

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