THE DUALISM OF LANGUAGE AND REALITY IN THE
MAJOR WORKS OF RAIJER MARIA RILKE

by

K. F. Purvis
(B.A.Hons)

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SUMMARY

In their efforts to situate Rilke in the development of modern German literature, critics have traditionally concentrated on the later works. Their investigations on the theme of language, for example, have been largely concerned with the Duineser Elegien and the Sonette an Orpheus, and little attention has been paid to the early and middle periods of Rilke's work. They have argued that Rilke underwent a "Sprachkrise" at that it occurred during the composition of the Elegies. This concentration on the later period has tended to obscure the complexity of Rilke's thinking on language during all stages of his literary career.

This thesis sets out to examine the dualism of language and meaning in Rilke's works and to show that criticism of language is already a recurring theme in the early essays of 1898. It will show further that the disunity of word and meaning is reflected in the structure of Rilke's works, and that this is just as true for Malte and the Neue Gedichte as it is for the poetry written after 1912.

The essay "Intérieurs", which was written in 1898, provides the basis for a treatment of language in Rilke's works. A comparison of this essay with Hofmannsthal's "Ein Brief" reveals a number of very interesting similarities. Rilke, like Hofmannsthal, whose essay was not published until four years after the composition of "Intérieurs", realizes that language and meaning have been forced apart and that words cannot represent a fragmented reality. In Rilke's essay it becomes clear that the problem of language is closely linked with the question of aesthetic structure, and that it plays an important role in redefining
the function of the writer in the creation of a work of art. These three interrelated aspects of the language problem are examined in the following sections of the thesis which deal with Rilke's four major works.

Malte and the Duineser Elegien are examined first and the continuity between the earlier and later periods of Rilke's production is demonstrated by a comparison between the aesthetic structures of "Vorwand-Geständnis" in the novel and "Verwandlung" in the Elegies. The Neue Gedichte and the Sonette an Orpheus are then considered together and their function as complementary works to the other two is analysed.

The thesis concludes with a brief discussion of Symbolism and Naturalism and with an assessment of Rilke's place in the development of modern literature. Rilke belongs undisputedly to the twentieth century because the problem of language has such a profound effect on the structure of his works. At the same time, however, his repeated attempts to overcome the dual of language and reality and the re-emergence of an ideal unit of word and meaning in the Sonette reveal a desire to retreat from the issues which confront the writer in the twentieth century. Modern and very conservative elements exist side by side in his work, and both must be accounted for when the attempt is made to evaluate Rilke's contribution to the development of modern literature.