

The Call of Muhammad

Nazim Baksh



Europe holds some deep Islamic secrets embedded in its history, theology, culture and literature. But none is more amazing than the relationship between a famous 20th century German poet and Islam. Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) is considered one of the German language's greatest poets. His haunting images focus on the difficulty of communion with the ineffable in an age of disbelief, solitude and profound anxiety – themes that tend to position him as a transitional figure between the traditions and the modernist posts.

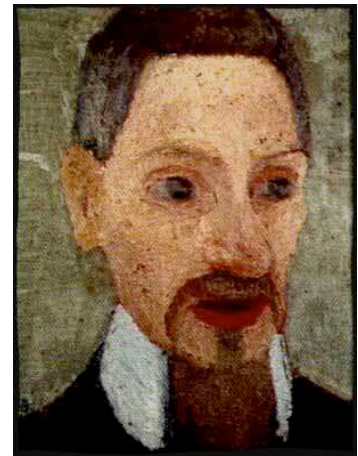
Throughout his life Rilke showed a high opinion of Islam and especially the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. This is obvious in his letters and some of his key poems. Yet not much of this exciting relationship between a European poet and the Blessed Prophet is known or appreciated by the masses.

To understand the relationship one has to grasp the relationship between poetry and poets in traditional societies and especially within the Islamic tradition.

Tufayl ibn Amr was a man of virtue, leader of the distinguished tribe of Daws that resided in the southern part of the Arabian peninsula during the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Tufayl fed the hungry, comforted those in distress and provided refuge to asylum seekers. He was also an outstanding poet capable of expressing subtle emotions in verse. Poetry was to the Arabs what pop songs are to our modern culture.

Tufayl's conversion to Islam came while on a visit to Mecca. He was warned by the elite among Muhammad's enemies in the powerful tribe of Quraysh to protect himself from the words of someone they described as an oracle. Tufayl plugged his ears with cotton even though he felt confident that he was capable of distinguishing between poetry and wizardry. Curiosity got the better of him though, and as he edged closer to the place where Muhammad was engrossed in prayers, bits and pieces of the Quran filtered past his ear plugs and stilled his troubled heart. He was convinced what he had heard could not be the speech of man.

Tufayl removed the cotton from his ears and followed the Arabian Prophet home. There, he asked him to recite more of what he had overheard. The Prophet recited two short chapters of the Quran and Tufayl submitted to his message and pledged his allegiance to the Prophet.



A portrait of Rilke.

Born: 4 December 1875 in Prague.

Died: 29 December 1926 aged 51 in Switzerland.

He returned to his people and shared what he had learned. In so doing he opened the doors of Islam to Abu Hurayrah, the inimitable companion of Muhammad who went on to narrate thousands of 'hadith' (sayings of the Prophet) that are quoted to this day by Muslims all over the world, exactly as he documented them.

Poets are remarkable people. They are the pulse – or curse - of a civilized society. Poets can take ordinary experience and express them in ways that can benefit others. They provide hope when all that seems to exist is despair. Poets can also steer people away from reality into a world of myth and distortion. The dual role of poetry is reflected in chapter 26 of the Quran which is titled "The Poets."

Although Prophet Muhammad was the recipient of the verses of the Quran which Muslims believe were preserved in his heart, he nevertheless admired good poetry. There was no comparison however, between the revealed verses of the Quran and the rhyme of the poet. The Quran says: "And God did not teach him (Muhammad) poetry, nor is it befitting of him."

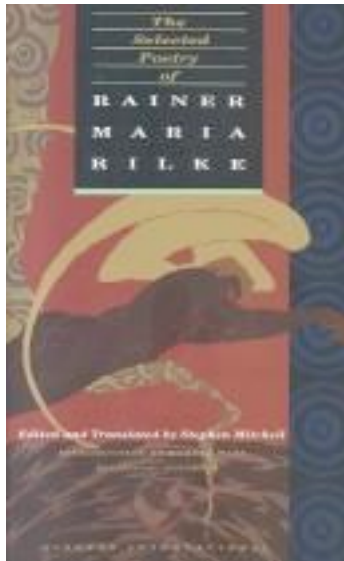
Even so, Muhammad recognized the beauty in poetry and never failed to praise it. Labid, one of the seven superior poets whose verses were hung inside the Ka'ba in pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula, once coined a verse that read: "Verily, Everything except God is futile." When the Prophet heard the verse he said: 'the truest words ever spoken by a poet are the words of Labid.'

Muhammad honored the poets among his followers and on several occasions he urged them to keep on reciting verses when they may have felt they had gone on far too long in his presence. Hasan ibn Thabit, the Prophet's appointed poet, would often recite his poetry in the sacred mosque of the Prophet in the city of Medina. Muhammad once prayed that God support him with the same "Holy Spirit" that came to him with revelations.

There were others as well. Ka'b ibn Malik, Abdallah ibn Rawaha and Ka'b ibn Zuhair were all celebrated poets who lived in the city of the Prophet and who practiced their art in the open. It is reported that on one occasion Zuhair had slandered the Prophet. This meant that at the time he could not have been a believer. Feeling a deep sense of regret for what he had done, he recited a lengthy poem in the presence of Muhammad. So impressed was the latter by his eloquent apology, that he took off his mantle (Burda) and covered Zuhair, evidence that he had been forgiven.

Everywhere in the Muslim world, from that time onwards, the Mantle (Burda) became a symbol of Prophetic sanction, blessings, and healing. Moreover, it encouraged anyone who desired to indulge in praise of the Prophet, to do so in whatever language they wished.

From the numerous islands in the Pacific Ocean to the tiny tropical dreamscapes of the Caribbean, Muslims and people from other faith traditions sing the praises of



Muhammad. In Tamil and English, in Urdu and Dari, Spanish and French, even Chinese and Russian, Muhammad's call echoes across the globe in a kaleidoscope of cultures and languages, song and music.

Rainer Maria Rilke, one of the greatest poets of the 20th century, also responded to the 'Call of Muhammad.' And yet there is no evidence that he had ever converted to Islam.

Anyone who is unaware of Rilke's influence on contemporary literary fiction, music, art and film, needs a primer on the foundations of modern popular culture. The brilliant philosopher Martin Heidegger cites Rilke as the highest form of thinker in his poem "What are Poets For?" Today, his ideas and words are inscribed in the books of J.D. Salinger, Douglas Coupland and Amitav Ghosh.

The Chicago Tribune calls this a "miracle of a book, perhaps the most beautiful group of poetic translations this century has ever produced."

Rilke's poem "You who never arrived" pops up in Norman Jewison 1994 film "Only You" starring Marisa Tomei.

His famous quote, "For one human being to love another: that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the work for which all other work is but preparation," is cited before the credits in the award-winning 2006 film 'Loving Annabelle.'

"For one human being to love another: that is the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test of proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation." ~ R.M. Rilke

In his early works such as the semi-autobiographical 'Notes of Malte Laurids Brigge,' Rilke was searching for answers to the important questions of his time. Faced with a deep sense of alienation and loneliness he wanted to know the true meaning of human existence.

When his wife Clara returned from a visit to Egypt in 1907 she showed him her sketches and the entries in her diary. Rilke was impressed with what he saw and heard. The picture that Clara painted of the people told Rilke that while they might be regarded as impoverished, they nevertheless radiated an inner sense of contentment and happiness.

Rilke believed that the purpose of life had to be much more than the acquisition of material wealth. In 1907 he turned to the Quran and began a serious study of the book that Muslims believe is guidance to all of mankind.

Rilke was fascinated by what he was reading. He wrote:

“And once I tried to learn the Quran by heart. I didn’t get very far, but what I did understand was that there you see a mighty index finger, pointing towards God, grasped in His eternal rise, in an Orient that will never be exhausted.”

Rilke also read available biographies of the Prophet Muhammad and concluded that the solution to the deep social and psychological alienation that had taken a firm hold in his culture was to submit to God’s will, like the followers of Muhammad in the East.

In 1907 he penned a beautiful poem entitled: “Mohammed’s Berufung” meaning ‘Mohammed’s Call.’ What follows is a translation of the poem by Leonard Cottrell (2001).

*“ Power stepped into his hiding place:
at once a presence he could not mistake
He begged the Angel - upright, fair and ablaze -
to leave him as he was.
He would forsake all his ambitions;
it was best he stayed that baffled,
over-traveled man of trade.
He’d never learned his letters, and now such a
word!
For wise men, even, far too much.
But no, the Angel fiercely showed and showed
the writing on its leaf.
This will that glowed would not back down,
again demanding - Read.
And then he did.
The Angel bowed its head before him,
one from thenceforth who had Read,
who knew, obeyed, and carried out the decrees.*



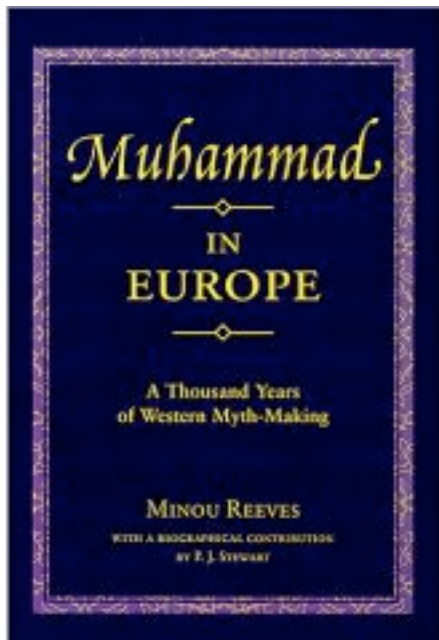
In ‘Mohammed’s Call,’ Rilke refers to the Angel Gabriel as ‘Power’ who entered the cave on the mountain of Hira, outside Mecca -- Muhammad’s place of retreat where he frequently sought refuge from the paganism of Meccan society. It was in this cave that Muslims believe divine revelation first came to him at the age of 40.

It was not possible for the Prophet to mistake the presence of the Angel, wrote Rilke, and he was palpably afraid and begged to be left alone – to be that ‘baffled over-traveled’ trader -- Muhammad’s occupation prior to revelation. Muhammad was not able

to neither read nor write, and so when the Angel demanded that he Read, Rilke said 'it was far too much.' But once he did, the Angel bowed in difference to him.

In obedience to a divine order, the angel 'called' Muhammad to 'Read.' It was the first command to descend from the heavens. The Prophet in turn, echoed the same call in his lifetime. Muslims believe his call will resonate in every age and in every corner of the world, until the inevitable occurs. Rilke, who lived 1200 years after Muhammad, heard and responded to this call.

To be able to write such words in 1907 in a language other than Arabic makes it abundantly clear that Rilke must have read more than the equivalent of a copy of 'Islam for Dummies.'



If you are interested in this topic Minou Reeves book is worth reading.

Three years after this poem Rilke embarked on a journey of his own to Algeria. He was moved by the way people went about their lives and how the five daily prayers of Muslims was fused seamlessly into whatever they did to earn a living. In a letter to his wife he observed that "it is as if the Prophet had been there only yesterday, and the city is his very realm." Rilke believed that the Muslim east was an 'infinitely superior and wise reality.'

Two years later, in 1912, Rilke spent time in Spain and there he began a fresh study of the Quran. At some point after that he observed that "Christianity is constantly slicing God up like some beautiful cake, but Allah is One, Allah is Whole."

The Muslim idea of Oneness, or the Unity of purpose in all of God's Creation, is something that had a profound impact on Rilke. The Quran, the life of Prophet Muhammad and the simplicity he saw reflected in the lives of Muhammad's followers, resolved for Rilke what he saw as the major challenge emerging in European society.

In the last decade of his life, Rilke wrote his masterpiece Duino Elegies, a set of ten elegies. It is recorded that he got his inspiration at the edge of some cliffs where he heard a voice calling to him: "Wer, wenn ich schrie, hörte mich denn aus der Engel Ordnungen?" Which means; "If I called out, who would hear me up there, among the angelic orders?"

In the mournful poem, modern man is depicted as lost in an alien environment. In them Rilke presents an alternative where man, animals and plants are unified in their original

purpose and where life and death are juxtaposed to each other – a place where people have no fear of death because they are no longer selfish. For Rilke, life and death were but two realities that point to a single Reality.

(Nazim Baksh is a broadcast correspondent with CBC. Based in Toronto, Canada, he is also a former Canadian Journalism Fellow at Massey College, University of Toronto).