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**A Poem, a Dancer and a Painting:
Rainer Maria Rilke's 'Spanische Tänzerin'**

Robert Vilain

[After a reading of Rilke's 'Spanische Tänzerin' that unpicks the three main layers of imagery and explores how they interact, this article investigates Rilke's relationship with the Spanish painter Ignacio Zuloaga in order to dispel confusions about an event and a painting that are often felt to have inspired the poem. A fourth, poetological interpretative layer is exposed, and via the trope of the poet-as-magus, echoes (perhaps conscious) of the 1906 text in poems from the 1920s and links with *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* are suggested.]

[Nach einer Deutung von Rilkes Gedicht 'Spanische Tänzerin', welche das Zusammenwirken der drei Hauptschichten der Bildsprache interpretiert, untersucht dieser Artikel Rilkes Verhältnis zum spanischen Maler Ignacio Zuloaga, um Fehlinterpretationen der Bedeutung einer Veranstaltung und eines Gemäldes zu beseitigen, die das Gedicht vermeintlich inspirierten. Eine vierte, poetologische Interpretationsschicht wird zutage gebracht, und schließlich wird durch den Tropus des Dichters-als-Magus auf (möglicherweise absichtliche) Anklänge an das 1906 entstandene Gedicht in Texten der 1920er Jahren und auf Beziehungen zu den *Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* hingedeutet.]

Wie in der Hand ein Schwefelzündholz, weiß,
eh es zu Flamme kommt, nach allen Seiten
zuckende Zungen streckt – : beginnt im Kreis
naher Beschauer hastig, hell und heiß
ihr runder Tanz sich zuckend auszubreiten.

Und plötzlich ist er Flamme, ganz und gar.

Mit einem Blick entzündet sie ihr Haar
und dreht auf einmal mit gewagter Kunst
ihr ganzes Kleid in diese Feuersbrunst,
aus welcher sich, wie Schlangen die erschrecken, 10
die nackten Arme wach und klappernd strecken.

Und dann: als würde ihr das Feuer knapp,
nimmt sie es ganz zusamm und wirft es ab
sehr herrisch, mit hochmütiger Gebärde
und schaut: da liegt es rasend auf der Erde 15
und flammt noch immer und ergibt sich nicht – .
Doch sieghaft, sicher und mit einem süßen
grüßenden Lächeln hebt sie ihr Gesicht
und stampft es aus mit kleinen festen Füßen.¹

‘Spanische Tänzerin’, written in Paris in June 1906, is a poem from a book at the very foundations of German modernism, Rainer Maria Rilke’s first volume of *Neue Gedichte*.² Like many of the ‘new poems’, this one works by overlaying different image-clusters in various combinations of metaphor and simile so that the object of observation is linguistically displaced from the centre-ground and as a result allowed to grow to fuller significance for the reader / observer. Rilke begins with a simile, ‘Wie [...] ein Schwefelzündholz [...] zuckende Zungen streckt’, delaying the subject of the main clause (‘ihr runder Tanz’) until line 5. The verbs in the subordinate and main clauses – ‘streckt’ and ‘beginnt’ respectively – pivot on

Rilke's idiosyncratic 'dash-colon' punctuation at the half-way point of the middle line of the stanza. The verb of motion in that main clause is further delayed, emerging as the last word in the stanza, an infinitive dependent on 'beginnt', and this retardation is compounded by the addition of a second line rhyming with 'weiß' as line four ('heiß'), when the rhyme for 'Seiten' might have been expected instead. Stretched though it may be in this way, however, there is no danger of the extended simile falling apart: the link between 'strecken' and 'ausbreiten' is underlined by the repetition of 'zuckend', itself part of a phonetically binding network of 'z'- and 'k'-sounds alongside the very obvious alliteration of 'hastig, hell und heiß' in line 4, and there are three images of containment ('in der Hand', 'im Kreis' and 'rund') evenly spread across the five lines.

The moment being evoked is the start of a flamenco, and it is the dance itself that is shown coming to life – the possessive 'ihr' introducing the dancer only somewhat obliquely. To render the convulsive effect of the movement, Rilke chooses for his comparison initially not a flame, as some readings suggest,³ but the moment of striking a match, the split second when it resembles those children's fireworks called 'sparklers', white and fizzing circles of light, shooting sparks out in all directions before settling into the comparatively stable form of the flame itself. In another instance of structural pivoting, the moment at which the flame achieves its identity as such is isolated in a single separated line, before a second five-line stanza completes the first part of the poem with an evocation of dance-as-fire, before the second part embarks, in line 12, with 'Und dann:'. Simile shifts to metaphor: the verb 'ist' in line 6 posits the fundamental identity of flame and dance ('er') – there is no 'wie', and the verb is not 'wird', both of which would have attenuated the force of a shift in form and identity that is both sudden and total.

The pronoun in the first line of the next stanza is potentially ambiguous: 'sie' could be 'she' (the dancer of the title) or 'it' (the flame of the previous line). At this point in the poem

it is perhaps read most forcefully as ‘flame’ (with ‘ihr’ as ‘the dancer’s’), partly because the shift from ‘er’ to ‘sie’ re-enacts the positing of identity between ‘[der] Tanz’ and ‘[die] Flamme’ in the previous line⁴ – Orlando-like, a he becomes a she without changing who or what s/he is. The fact that line 7 rhymes with the separated line cements the equation. Out of the blazing fire rise and stretch ‘die nackten Arme’, like startled snakes – the comparison has been anticipated by the image of ‘zuckende Zungen’ in line 3, of course, which uses the same verb, ‘strecken’, thereby reinforcing the unity of the eleven-line symmetrical unit that forms the first part of the poem. The noise that accompanies the stretching – ‘klappern’ – evokes perhaps a rearing rattlesnake in the context of the flickering tongues, but is primarily presumably the sound of the castanets.

There is something slightly sonnet-like about this poem, which has an octave-ish first section (albeit 11 lines long), a clear *volta* (‘Und dann’), and a sestet-like coda (of 8 lines), so that its relative proportions are very similar to those of a sonnet.⁵ There is certainly a shift in direction and mood at this point (line 12) that is characteristic of a Petrarchan sonnet, a shift clearly articulated, too, by the firm rhythms of the first five lines of this last stanza, where the lines are mostly broken by caesuras, irregularly placed. The referent of the pronoun in line 13 has shifted: following ‘ihr Kleid’ and ‘die nackten Arme’, ‘sie’ here sits better now not with ‘Flamme’ but with ‘die Tänzerin’, who seizes what is left of the fire, magisterially casts it to the ground and stares haughtily at it while it writhes, flaming still, and not succumbing. Fire has become snake, although it is also still dance: the phrase ‘als würde ihr das Feuer knapp’ hints at the more familiar ‘ihr wird der Atem knapp’ as the dancer approaches the limits of her stamina.

The last three lines of the poem (sometimes set as a separate stanza) enact a characteristically Rilkean gesture as the word ‘Doch’ introduces a shift in attitude, from passionate engagement to sovereign control, breath regained. The end of ‘Venezianischer

Morgen' in *Der neuen Gedichte anderer Teil* does something similar, and with the same smiling gesture, as a sequence of actions suddenly gives way to contemplation: 'sie aber hebt San Giorgio Maggiore / und lächelt lässig in das schöne Ding' (KA, I, 557). In 'Spanische Tänzerin' the fire is extinguished by the heavy heels of the flamenco dancer (a movement known as *taconeo* or *zapateado*); the 'snake' is trodden into the dirt and killed, the jerky stamping movement of the dancer's feet echoing the fitful flickering of the tongues in the first stanza and the description of the dance's opening as 'hastig'. It may not be too far-fetched to see here a faint echo of another form of coup de grâce, the kill in the bullfight. Be that as it may, Rilke's dancer has now taken control of the dance, the fire and the snake, and terminated them all. The match has ignited, burned as a flame, and is now spent. The period in which the self appears to have been lost or given up, consumed by the fire and the dance, gives way at the volta and reminds us that the dance is a combination of 'controlled and released gesture, [...] discipline and ecstasy',⁶ the dancer both 'Gefäß des Tanzes' and 'seine Schöpferin'.⁷ The original melding of dancer and dance has given way to a very distinct distancing between the two; the shaper has asserted herself over the shaped. As Gerok-Reiter observes, this reminds us of the relationship between creative artist and work of art, between poet and poem: 'die Loslösung der Tänzerin von dem Tanzgeschehen [bedeutet] nicht einfach, daß sie ihr Werk beendet, sondern daß sie es jetzt erst vollendet. [...] In der Vollendung des Kunstwerks findet sie selbst ihre eigenste Verwirklichung'.⁸

Rilke's editors and almost all previous studies of this poem tell us that it was inspired by a specific event.⁹ On 25 April 1906 Rilke attended the celebration of the baptism of Antonio, the son of a Spanish painter resident in Paris, Ignacio Zuloaga y Zabaleta, in the painter's atelier at 54 rue Caulaincourt in Montmartre. He wrote to his wife about it:

Gestern war die Taufe von Zuloagas Sohn. Ich hatte keine Zeit, in die Kirche zu gehen, war aber hernach für eine Weile in seinem neuen Atelier, Montmartre, unter dreißig oder vierzig mir völlig fremden Menschen [...]. Man sang und tanzte. Eine Spanierin, deren Wesen es war zu singen, sang sehr schön, im Rhythmus spanischen Bluts, die Carmén und spanische Lieder; eine Gitane, mit dem gewissen schwarz-bunten Tuch, tanzte spanische Tänze. Es war ziemlich viel vom Klima in dem mittelgroßen Atelier, in dem man sich drängte. (Aber die eng von Zuschauern umstandene Tänzerin Goyas war mehr.) Zuloaga war lieb und schön, mit seinem Stolz und seinem aufglänzenden Lächeln.¹⁰

It was a glittering gathering, with Edgar Degas amongst the guests and the Catalan pianist and composer Isaac Albéniz at the piano. According to a report in the *Madrid Herald*, the guests were also entertained by the virtuoso guitarist Miguel Llobet, and the flamenco dancer to whom Rilke refers was one ‘Carmela’.¹¹ Zuloaga had by this point become a good friend; Rilke had sent him a warmly inscribed copy of *Das Buch der Bilder* in September 1902 and his book on Rodin in April 1903.¹² There is little doubt that Zuloaga played a significant part in stimulating Rilke’s desire to visit Spain, even if this only came to fruition in 1912, and the fact that Zuloaga himself had some experience of bullfighting may confirm the impression that there are allusions to this in ‘Spanische Tänzerin’.¹³

Rilke’s first encounter with Zuloaga’s work had been in Berlin in 1900 in the Kunstsalon Schulte.¹⁴ In a letter to the artist written in 1903 he recalled having seen the portrait of the dwarf Doña Mercedes there.¹⁵ An exhibition in the Dresden Kunsthalle in April 1901 continued to fuel his enthusiasm, and Clara Rilke wrote to Paula Becker of having seen there seven ‘wunderbare Zuloagas – viele schöne Bilder’,¹⁶ four already exhibited in Berlin,¹⁷ and three more, including the famous ‘Portrait of the Actress Consuelo’, separated

from the other six in Room 5 of the gallery.¹⁸ This was the exhibition that established Zuloaga's international reputation, for he won the coveted gold medal, one of only four artists ever to do so. The portrait of Consuelo was a particular public favourite, admired hugely when exhibited in the Munich Secession in 1902, and thereafter on permanent loan to the Bremen Kunsthalle, for the opening of whose new building Rilke wrote a short tableau.¹⁹

It was not long before Rilke was to meet the painter himself. He wrote enthusiastically to Clara Rilke on 28 September 1902, 'Aber denke, [...] Zuloaga lebt in Paris! [...] ich werde mir alle denkbare Mühe geben, [seine Adresse] zu erfahren und dann zu ihm gehen; vielleicht schon mit Dir. Er muß zu finden sein.'²⁰ He was as good as his word, found the address and wrote passionately to Zuloaga at the end of September 1902 of his feelings on learning how close he was to hand:

C'est plus d'une joie – c'est un accomplissement de mes désirs les plus ardents. Votre œuvre était pour moi, dès que j'ai vu à Berlin quelques toiles, et après à Dresde en 1901 plusieurs chefs-d'œuvre – alors: cet œuvre était et est pour moi une source de Beauté, de joie – d'éternité.²¹

He singles out the Consuelo portrait for special praise, 'cette dame en rouge devant ce fond gris et simple et vaste. Qu'avons-nous parlé de ces gants, de cet éventail, de tous ces détails excellents d'une unité ferme et grande'. Zuloaga was away at that time, so Rilke had to wait, although he was invited to visit Zuloaga in Eibar in the Basque country, where he was born. In several other letters Rilke talks of making that journey,²² but it never came to pass; the same was true of the short monograph on the Spanish painter that he planned but never wrote, although it is mentioned more than once, and in a letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé from Rome on 12 May 1904 Rilke lists it as one of two plans requiring 'eine Reise durch Spanien'.²³ A

parenthesis at this point is typical of remarks from this period: ‘Zuloaga war neben Rodin der einzige Mensch, mit dem ich mich während des Pariser Aufenthaltes tief und lange berührte und dessen Wichtigkeit und Wert ich fühle und sagen kann.’²⁴ Rilke and Zuloaga did meet, frequenting each other’s apartments, and with many friends and acquaintances in common.²⁵ The relationship was evidently very warm indeed, for Rilke writes on 28 April 1904 from Rome that ‘Vous et Rodin et notre petite fille [...] voilà les trois êtres sur le monde à qui nous avons pensé le plus souvent pendant cet hiver.’²⁶

In the third of the nine letters that have been preserved from a total of perhaps forty or fifty written to Zuloaga, Rilke refers to two works he has recently seen in the Musée du Luxembourg.²⁷ He identifies one, the dwarf Doña Mercedes (LF cat. 94), which had been in the museum since 1899; the other must have been the triple portrait of the painter’s Uncle Daniel and his daughters, ‘Mi tio y mis primas’ [My Uncle and My Cousins, 1898, LF cat. 87], which had been acquired by the French state in 1902.²⁸ And in the fourth letter, written from Viareggio on 9 April 1903, he refers to photographs of two other works that Zuloaga had sent him, ‘deux admirables tableaux’ that are not precisely identified. He praises above all the textiles in the pictures:

Devant nos yeux enchantées ils semblaient prendre leur grandeur naturelle [...] l’éloquence harmonique des couleurs, la cadence des tons, la souplesse des étoffes (dont vous connaissez si merveilleusement la vie), la richesse des tuniques que répandent les fleurs le secret des voiles, qui les retiennent; l’éclat des dents et des dentelles; les châles de soie qui contournent les épaules en les caressant avec chaque fil de leur tissue; l’ondulation tardente des bords; – les plus ombreux qui cachent les nuits, et les autres – les fontaines de plissure, qui retombent avec le bruit clair des

sources solitaires; et le jeu des franges, qui s'allongent et se courbent comme des jeunes serpents de soie.²⁹

One of the paintings he has in mind is probably 'Víspera de la corrida' [On the Eve of the Bullfight, LF cat. 89], painted in 1898. The Spanish jury had excluded it from the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1900 but it was exhibited in the Luxembourg before being bought by the Belgian government.³⁰ Rilke mentions his admiration of this work in a letter to Zuloaga sent in April 1904.³¹

Rilke's enthusiasm did not wane. He wrote to Arthur Holitscher from Rome on 5 November 1903 that on his journey to the Eternal City 'in München und in Venedig waren die Bilder Zuloagas das Wichtigste für mich',³² and indeed stops in these cities had been planned for the specific purpose of seeing Zuloaga's pictures. The Munich 'target' was 'Gallito y su familia [The Bullfighter Gallito and his Family, 1903, LF cat. 173], 'das große Bild eines *Freundes*', as he described it, a painting 'in das er vieles aus sich hineingegeben hat, [und dem wir] gleich wie einem Wiedersehen erwartungsvoll entgegenfreuen.'³³ There are often images of comfort and familiarity associated with Zuloaga; looking back on a journey that took him via Düsseldorf, Rilke jotted down the effect of his gallery visits in a letter to Lou: 'Freundliche und neugierige Spießbürger; mitten unter ihnen, wie ein Steinbruch wild, Rodins Dinge, und wie ein großer Garten: Zuloaga.'³⁴

In the *Kommentierte Ausgabe* of Rilke's works (1996), echoing another standard reference work, August Stahl's commentary on the lyrical work (1978), it is suggested that Rilke's inspiration for 'Spanische Tänzerin', was a painting by Francisco Goya entitled 'La ballerina [*sic*] Carmen la Gitana'.³⁵ No painting with that name by Goya exists, nor indeed is there any painting by Goya that might fairly be described by Rilke's remarks in his letter to Clara quoted above. Birgit Thiemann rightly disputes the attribution of the painting in

question to Goya; however, she claims much less convincingly, ‘daß für Rilkes Gedicht “Spanische Tänzerin”, das im April 1906 nach einer spanischen Fiesta im Pariser Atelier Zuloagas entstand, weniger das Erleben der echten, den Gästen dort gebotenen spanischen Tänze inspirierend war, als vielmehr das im Atelier zu bewundernde “goyeske” Gemälde “La bailarina, Carmen la gitana”.’³⁶ This is a painting by Zuloaga, ‘The Dancing Girl, Carmen the Gypsy’ [1903, LF cat. 143], which, when it was exhibited in Düsseldorf, was ‘[ein] Schlager allerersten Ranges’.³⁷ It is sometimes known as ‘Gitanilla’ (Fig. 1). Thiemann suggests in passing that Rilke will have seen it in Zuloaga’s atelier,³⁸ and indeed a photograph of that painting in that studio was published in a Zuloaga special number of the *Figaro illustré* in August 1903 (Fig. 2).³⁹ The dancer has her hands on her hips, wears an Andalusian hat, a fringed shawl and a flounced flower-patterned skirt, and she has castanets in each hand. She is not ‘eng von Zuschauern umstanden’, however – but if Rilke saw ‘La bailarina, Carmen la gitana’ *chez* Zuloaga at some point between 1903 and 1906, then he may well have seen the painting (rather than the dancer *in* the painting) being admired by an appreciative crowd.⁴⁰

This still does not resolve all the difficulties scholars have found in (or read into) the letter Rilke wrote to Clara on 26 April 1906 about the baptism of Zuloaga’s son. While there should now be little or no doubt remaining about which picture by which artist Rilke can have had in mind as he composed the poem – if a painting was the key stimulus at all, which remains to be seen – the critical literature has repeated or compounded the slips and misreadings that have bedevilled this question. The misattribution to Goya appears to have been made first in Kramer-Lauff’s 1969 book on *Tanz und Tänzerisches in Rilkes Lyrik*, where the great Spanish Romantic artist is wrongly accredited with the work that (as she correctly notes) Rilke saw in Düsseldorf and Bremen.⁴¹ This claim is repeated by Brandstetter in 1995 and Gerok-Reiter in 1996; Brandstetter also implies that the supposed ‘Goya’ was on display at the baptismal celebration, which, *mutatis mutandis*, may indeed very well have

been the case.⁴² Kramer-Lauff references Jaime Ferreiro Alemparte's *España en Rilke*: the latter's translation of the key phrase in Rilke's letter of 26 April 1906 is 'la goyesca bailarina', and his gloss is 'Rilke se complace en imaginar una supuesta bailarina de Goya en un "círculo de cercanos espectadores"' – meaning that he imagined a dancer 'supposedly' (or 'who might have been') by Goya surrounded by a circle of spectators – which is much nearer the mark.⁴³ Thiemann twice insists that the confusion has arisen because scholarship has misinterpreted a formulation of Rilke's in the letter of 26 April 1906 quoted earlier,⁴⁴ but the word 'goyesk' that she puts in quotation marks each time is not in fact what Rilke wrote; his formulation is 'die [...] Tänzerin Goyas'. Thiemann does not quote this letter and seems here to be glossing Ferreiro Alemparte's 'goyesca' rather than referring directly to Rilke.

Rilke's own formulation is certainly not unambiguous. If one reads the phrase 'die eng von Zuschauern umstandene Tänzerin Goyas war mehr' as referring to a painting – taking one's cue from the proper noun – then it does suggest either that he had in mind a portrait by Goya, or that he thought the painting of Carmen in the studio was by Goya rather than by Zuloaga. Both conclusions seem implausible, however, given Rilke's well-documented familiarity with his host's life and works. But reading the phrase as referring to 'Carmela' yields the perfectly plausible sense that Rilke was thinking of the *real* dancer (surrounded by Zuloaga's guests) as reminiscent of a typically Goya-esque figure. Thinking of Rilke's assertion that the dancer 'war mehr' as implying a comparison with '[e]s war ziemlich viel vom Klima [im] Atelier' (my stress) reinforces this reading: the gathering, the friends and artists, the very space itself – these all conveyed something authentic about Spain in a Parisian setting – but Rilke felt that the dancer did so even more authentically. This interpretation would confirm the view implied earlier that the more significant inspiration for 'Spanische Tänzerin' was not Zuloaga's or any other painting but the dancer at the baptismal celebration, who was, in the words of the poem, 'im Kreis naher Beschauer'.⁴⁵

Kramer-Lauff points out pertinently, however, that the circle of spectators is not the same as the circular movement of the dance itself, which she sees as ‘das Prinzip der Ordnung [...], da sich in ihr alle scheinbar ungeordneten Bewegungen zu einer Gesamtform vereinigen’, concluding that ‘das Gedicht selber hat sich als sprachlicher Vollzug dieses Tanzes dargestellt.’⁴⁶ The idea that overlaying the image-clusters of dance, fire and snake there is another referent, the poem itself, is articulated most clearly in the two moments of pivoting mentioned above, which operate as mutually reflective. The first, with Rilke’s idiosyncratic ‘dash-colon’ punctuation clearly draws attention to the traditional form of the simile, ‘X is like Y’, ‘like a match igniting, the dance begins’. The second, the isolated sixth line, just as clearly *represses* – or rejects, or denies – all suggestions of simile: ‘the dance suddenly *is* flame’. There is a third, less prominent pivot in line 10, the second use of ‘wie’, almost symmetrically reflecting the simile in the first stanza. Rilke is inviting us to think about how poetry works, about the nature of poetic comparison, and in particular about how he is changing the nature of metaphor. There are three ‘layers’ of comparison in this poem: the dance, the fire and the snake; the tongues are common to the fire and the snake; the circling is shared by the dance and the fire at the moment of ignition; the stretching gesture unites the flame and the snake; the energetic darting movement is common to all three – the match as it is struck, the snake’s tongue, and the initiation of the dance. In other words, even when he uses words like ‘wie’, in the manner of old-fashioned similes that subordinate one term to another, Rilke’s poetic procedure is quite different from that of the simple simile. He is not really saying ‘X is *like* Y (but not quite the same)’; he says ‘see X as Y, read dance as fire, read fire as snake, read dance as snake’, and the superimposition of these levels of seeing defines all three and, more importantly, this complex metaphorical layering constitutes something of what is ‘new’ about the *Neue Gedichte*.

One of the clearest examples of this is ‘Der Schwan’, in which Rilke uses the contrast between a swan’s clumsy movement on land and its serenity and sense of being ‘at home’ when in the water to give a sense of how to understand the transition between life and death. But is the poem about death, using the swan to explain it, or is it about a swan, using a metaphysical comparison to articulate something important about it? William Waters describes this aptly as ‘carefully prepared uncertainty’, and asks ‘what in this text is the foreground and what is the background?’⁴⁷ Tenor and vehicle are no longer clearly distinguishable.

Stefan Zweig could be remarkably obtuse about poetry sometimes, but in one of the early reviews of the *Neue Gedichte* he hits the nail on the head when he writes of how Rilke comprehends things ‘nur als Bilder [...], als ein stetes Aneinandererinnern der Dinge, und so wird das ganze Leben um ihn ein ungeheurer Zusammenschluß, ein ewiges Sicherläutern, ein wechselseitiges Ineinandergreifen.’⁴⁸ Every component of this sentence says something important: the world is comprehended as images, not merely as things, and things ‘continually remind one another of themselves’; the word ‘Zusammenschluß’ aptly describes what Rilke does when he writes ‘plötzlich ist er Flamme’, the shunting of one part of a comparison up against the other; the mutual ‘Ineinandergreifen’ elegantly evokes a cog-like interaction of images, in which the interlocking drives meaning. What Rilke does with his pivoting and paralleling in ‘Spanische Tänzerin’ is ‘ein Sicherläutern’ in another sense, too, a foregrounding of the poetological dimension of the poem. Reading poems as being about poetry is sometimes a knee-jerk critical reaction, but in this case I think we are genuinely confronted with a meta-poem, the fire / dance / snake all enacting how a poem comes into being. The gesture of victory at the end is the gesture of the poet who has both shown how language can flare suggestively and that he has tamed it within the form of the poem itself.

A gentle probing of one more word in Rilke's 'Spanische Tänzerin' reinforces this view. The smile on the dancer's face in line 18 is 'grüßend', which is an odd word to use when a snake is stamped on or a fire extinguished; a 'Gruß' is surely a gesture of welcome to – or acknowledgement of – something new, not a farewell of any kind. But it is less odd if one hears in 'ausstampfen' an echo of the phrase 'etwas aus dem Boden stampfen', to conjure something up out of nowhere – a gesture of mystical, almost magical demiurgy, akin to poetic creation. The phrase goes back to Plutarch's *Life of Pompey* and a story of how, when Julius Caesar was about to cross the Rubicon with his battle-hardened veterans, Pompey said (somewhat overconfidently) 'in whatever part of Italy I stamp upon the ground, there will spring up armies of foot and horse.'⁴⁹ Similar images of magisterial creativity in later writings offer useful perspectives on 'Spanische Tänzerin'. They include 'Der Magier' from 1924, whose first line has another instance of the unusual clipped form of 'zusammen':⁵⁰

Er ruft es an. Es schrickt zusamm und steht.
Was steht? Das Andre; alles, was nicht er ist,
wird Wesen. Und das ganze Wesen dreht
ein raschgemachtes Antlitz her, das mehr ist. (KA, II, p. 306)

The image of poet-as-magician, Prospero-like, is not uncommon. Rilke will have known Hofmannsthal's 'Ein Traum von großer Magie' (1895), which evokes 'die Gebärde / Des Magiers – des Ersten, Großen [...] Sein stolzes Nicken', and asserts at the end 'Doch Er ist Feuer uns im tiefsten Kerne.'⁵¹ This is not to say that Hofmannsthal's poem was in Rilke's mind or even his memory – the range of imagery used here is not unique to these poets – but it may have been. The topos of the poet-as-magus is not in fact a common feature of Rilke's works before the 1920s, but there is a clear hint of it in 'Spanische Tänzerin' in the use of the

word 'herrisch' in line 14 (which might not be everyone's first choice of word for a woman dancer), in her 'hochmütige Gebärde', and in the gesture of casting away in the previous line ('wirft es ab'). There is therefore just the ghost of a 'Magier' in Rilke's 'neues Gedicht', a fourth metaphorical dimension to join the dance, the fire and the snake.

Rilke may not have been conscious that this fourth dimension was in play when he wrote 'Spanische Tänzerin'. But in the 1920s he was more explicit about the link of poet and magus, and how both achieve insight into what 'Der Magier' terms a thing's 'ganzes Wesen'. He expatiated a little on the topos in a huge letter to Gräfin Sizzo on 16 December 1923, some two months before 'Der Magier' was written. In that letter he evoked a magical gesture in the context of a rhapsodic synaesthetic passage on shawls: 'Shawls: persische und turkestanische Kaschmir-Shawls [...] jeder eine Welt für sich, ja wahrhaftig, jeder ein ganzes Glück, eine ganze Seligkeit und vielleicht ein ganzer Verzicht.'⁵² In this letter he links the sensations he has in 1923 explicitly to Paris and his work from the middle of the first decade of the 20th century, and to *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* in particular. The passage has much in common with his expansive and equally synaesthetic appreciation of the shawls in Zuloaga's paintings quoted above – 'l'élouquence harmonique des couleurs, la cadence des tons, la souplesse des étoffes' – and I suspect there was a conscious memory of Zuloaga and his paintings as he wrote this. Rilke's letter to Margot Sizzo recalls the 41st 'Aufzeichnung' of *Malte* (KA, III, pp. 550-2):

Wie vor Jahren in Paris die Spitzen, so begriff ich plötzlich, vor diesen ausgebreiteten und abgewandelten Geweben, das Wesen des Shawls! Aber es *sagen*? Wieder ein Fiasko. Nur so vielleicht, nur in den Verwandlungen, die ein greifliches langsames Hand-Werk erlaubt, ergeben sich vollzählige, verschwiegene Äquivalente des Lebens, zu denen die Sprache immer nur umschreibend gelangt, es sei denn es gelänge ihr ab

und zu, *im magischen Ruf* zu erreichen, daß irgendein geheimeres Gesicht des Daseins uns, im Raume eines Gedichts, zugekehrt bleibt.⁵³

The transformations that a craft ('Hand-Werk') enables are those of the poem, the 'magic invocation' that once in a while succeeds in revealing a more secret aspect of existence.

Whether or not Rilke's writing in 1923 and 1924 was primed by memories of his experiences, thoughts and writing in and around 1906, in both these periods of his life he was convinced that '[das] geheimere Gesicht des Daseins' can be conjured up in a poem, and its gaze held. The 'süßes / grüßendes Lächeln' in lines 17-18 of 'Spanische Tänzerin' – perceptible as the dancer lifts her head – is, so to speak, the expression on that face.

Notes

1. Rainer Maria Rilke *Werke: Kommentierte Ausgabe in vier Bänden*, ed. Manfred Engel et al., Frankfurt a. M. 1996, I, p. 491. Further references to this edition are abbreviated to KA in the text.
2. When I was a young lecturer, John White, in whose honour the colloquium at which this paper was first presented took place, represented for me the very model of a scholar of modern, and often modernist, literature working from a fundamentally comparative perspective – in a university system that then still largely compartmentalised and departmentalised literary study. His example still inspires everything I write. For the present article I have been fortunate to have the help of the Longwall Library (Magdalen College, Oxford), who granted me access to important works on Zuloaga, and of Dr Dominic Moran (Christ Church, Oxford), who discussed with me a number of important details of Spanish language. Any remaining errors are, of course, my own responsibility.
3. See, for example, Annette Gerok-Reiter, *Wink und Wandlung: Komposition und Poetik in Rilkes 'Sonetten an Orpheus'*, Tübingen 1996, p. 203.
4. It has been suggested that 'flame' / 'Flamme' is related to the name of the dance, and although 'flamenco' is thought to derive from 'Fleming, native of Flanders' (which became a generic word for 'foreigners' and was thus applied to the gypsy dance), in its other meaning, 'flamingo', its etymology is linked to 'flamenco', 'flame-coloured'. These subtleties are probably of less importance than the obvious lexical similarity.
5. The first part of this poem and the octave of a sonnet respectively represent roughly 58% and 57% of the whole.

6. Gabriele Brandstetter, *Poetics of Dance: Body, Image, and Space in the Historical Avant-Gardes*, trans. Elena Polzer, Oxford 2015, p. 232. The original study, *Tanz-Lektüren: Körperbilder und Raumfiguren der Avantgarde*, appeared in 1995.
7. Dietmar Kramer-Lauff, *Tanz und Tänzerisches in Rilkes Lyrik*, Munich 1969, p. 11.
8. Gerok-Reiter, *Wink und Wandlung* (note 3), pp. 206-7.
9. See for example KA, I, 949; Kramer-Lauff, *Tanz und Tänzerisches* (note 7), p. 77 (wrongly dated 26 April); Brandstetter, *Poetics of Dance* (note 6), p. 202; Justus Lange, “‘Eine Quelle der Schönheit, der Freude, – der Ewigkeit’”: Rilkes Begegnung mit den Werken Ignacio Zuloagas in Dresden’, *Blätter der Rilke-Gesellschaft*, 29 (2008): *Rilkes Dresden – Das Buch der Bilder*, pp. 66-89 (p. 84); Gerok-Reiter, *Wink und Wandlung* (note 3), p. 202.
10. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1902 bis 1906*, ed. Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber, Leipzig 1930, p. 317.
11. See Jaime Ferreiro Alemparte, *España en Rilke*, Madrid 1966, p. 34, and for further details Enrique Lafuente Ferrari, *The Life and Work of Ignacio Zuloaga*, 3rd edn, tr. coordinated by Thomas Molloy, Barcelona 1991, pp. 97-8 (subsequently: LF).
12. The first inscribed ‘A Ignacio Zuloaga, à son œuvre, avec toute mon admiration’, the second ‘Credo. A Ignacio Zuloaga, à son œuvre’ (LF, p. 171, nn. 259-60).
13. See the picture of him about to kill a young bull in LF, p. 45 (fig. 11).
14. See Rilke’s reference (‘chez Schulte’) in a letter to Zuloaga of 6 March 1903, and Lange, “‘Eine Quelle’” (note 9), p. 66. All nine of Rilke’s extant letters to Zuloaga are published in Hans Gebser, *Rilke und Spanien*, Zurich and New York 1940, here p. 57.
15. Lange, “‘Eine Quelle’” (note 9), pp. 74-5, lists the ten paintings believed to have been shown there (LF cat. 84, 94, 96, 106-9, 112, 114-15). Those of greatest interest for present purposes are ‘La enana Doña Mercedes’ [Doña Mercedes the Dwarf, 1899, LF cat. 94],

‘Coquetería de Gitana’ [A Gypsy Woman’s Coquetry, 1900, LF cat. 106] and ‘Lola, La Gitana’ [Lola, the Gypsy Woman, 1900, LF cat. 114].

16. Letter of May 1901, quoted in Eduard Hindelang (ed.), *Die Bildhauerin Clara Rilke-Westhoff 1878-1954*, Sigmaringen 1988, p. 90. Lange is surely wrong to see in the use of the word ‘wunderbar’ here an indication that they had been surprised by the paintings or had come upon them unawares; “‘Eine Quelle” (note 9), p. 66.

17. LF cat. 106-108 and 112.

18. ‘Retrato de la actriz Consuelo’ (1901, LF cat. 120); the other two were ‘Antes del paseo’ [Getting Ready for the Evening Walk, 1900, LF cat. 104] and ‘Ansotanas. Vendedoras de Té’ [Women from Ansó. Tea Sellers, 1901, LF cat. 119]. See also *Offizieller Katalog der Internationalen Kunstausstellung Dresden 1901*, Dresden-Blasewitz 1901, p. 57 (cat. nos 782-8).

19. Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Ernst Zinn, 6 vols, Frankfurt a. M. 1987, III, pp. 405-9 (‘Zur Einweihung der Kunsthalle’).

20. Rilke, *Briefe 1902-1906* (note 10), p. 50.

21. Gebser, *Rilke und Spanien* (note 14), p. 55. A number of insignificant errors in the French have been silently corrected here and in the following quotations.

22. He appears to refer to this in a letter to Clara from Viareggio, 8 April 1903 (‘der spanische Plan’), Rilke, *Briefe 1902-1906* (note 10), p. 83.

23. Rainer Maria Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Ernst Pfeiffer, Zurich and Wiesbaden 1952, p. 160. See also a letter to Clara written on 10 April 1903: ‘weil ich gerade zur Post gehe mit einem langen Brief an Zuloaga: es wäre doch schön: ein Buch über ihn – und mir ist, als käme es einmal dazu, wenn nicht in diesem Jahr, im nächsten’, quoted from

Ingeborg Schnack, *Rilke-Chronik*, extended edn by Renate Scharffenberg, Frankfurt a. M., 2009, p. 171.

24. Rilke / Andreas-Salomé, *Briefwechsel* (note 23), p. 160.

25. See for example a letter of 23 November 1905 to Lou Andreas-Salomé: ‘Sonnabend sehe ich Zuloaga, der endlich für eine Weile nach Paris arbeiten gekommen ist’, *Briefwechsel* (note 23), p. 217. Rilke wrote to Zuloaga himself on 22 June 1903, ‘je veux [...] vous remercier de tout mon cœur , que vous êtes venu chez nous’, Gebser, *Rilke und Spanien* (note 14), pp. 62-3, and reported another such visit to Clara on 2 April 1906: ‘mittags Gäste: Zuloaga [...]’, Rilke, *Briefe 1902-1906* (note 10), p. 304.

26. Gebser, *Rilke und Spanien* (note 14), p. 63.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 57. For the total number of letters, cf. p. 14. A comment in LF, p. 171, n. 258 (to the effect that only another five or six were lost) may rest on a misreading of Gebser’s German here.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60. Lange notes similarities in emphasis between Rilke’s writing here and a 1902 article on Zuloaga by Hugo von Tschudi in the *Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst*, “‘Eine Quelle” (note 9), p. 28.

30. See Birgit Thiemann, ‘Carmen in der Malerei von Sargent und Zuloaga: Funktionalisierte Weiblichkeits-Imaginationen und Spanien-Mythos’, *kritische berichte: Zeitschrift für Kunst- und Kulturwissenschaften*, 24/3 (1996), 37-48 (p. 39, n. 49).

31. Gebser, *Rilke und Spanien* (note 14), p. 64.

32. Rilke, *Briefe 1901-1906* (note 10), p. 132.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

34. Rilke, *Briefe 1902-1906* (note 14), p. 185.

35. KA, I, 949; August Stahl, *Rilke – Kommentar zum lyrischen Werk*, Munich 1978, p. 206.

36. Thiemann, 'Carmen in der Malerei von Sargent und Zuloaga' (note 30), p. 43. KA, I, 949 dates the poem to June 1906 rather than April.

37. H. Board, 'Die Internationale Kunstausstellung zu Düsseldorf', *Die Kunst für Alle*, 11.23 (1904), 534, quoted in Birgit Thiemann, 'El estereotipo de la mujer española: Las

Imaginaciones de Ignacio Zuloaga en comparación con su prototipo francés', in *La mujer en el arte español: VIII Jornadas de Arte*, Madrid 1997, pp. 401-9 (p. 406). The painting is large, 181 x 102 cm, oil on canvas, and was bought by Juan Gironde from the artist in 1911 before being donated in 1933 to the Museo de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires where it currently resides.

38. Thiemann, 'El estereotipo' (note 37), p. 408; 'Carmen in der Malerei' (note 30), p. 43.

The picture was exhibited in Paris (by Georges Petit) in 1902, and in Düsseldorf and Dresden in 1904.

39. 'Ignacio Zuloaga', *Figaro illustré*, 161 (August 1903), [p. 2]. The photograph shows the painting not quite complete (adjustments were later made to the way the shawl hangs, for example).

40. One further image that might come into the frame, as it were, as an inspiration for Rilke's poem is 'Bailarinas andaluzas' [Andalucian Dancers, 1903, LF cat. 168], which won Zuloaga the gold medal at the 1903 Venice Biennale, where Rilke will have seen it. But again, the two Andalusian dancers here are not surrounded by spectators, so if any specific painting was important to the genesis of Rilke's 'Spanische Tänzerin', it will have been 'Carmen la Gitana'.

41. Kramer-Lauff, *Tanz und Tänzerisches* (note 7), p. 77, n. 14.

42. Brandstetter, *Poetics of Dance* (note 6), p. 232 (n. 91); Gerok-Reiter, *Wink und Wandlung* (note 3), p. 202, n. 18.
43. Ferreiro Alemparte, *España en Rilke* (note 11), p. 34 (my stress).
44. '[Rilkes] *especificación* "goyeska" causó en la literatura alemana la equivocación de que había visto una bailarina pintada por Goya': Thiemann, 'El estereotipo' (note 37), p. 408 (my stress). Cf. also 'Die dortige [i.e. in *Briefe 1902-1906* (note 10), p. 317] *Formulierung* "goyesk" führte in der deutschen Literature zu dem Mißverständnis, es habe sich um ein Werk Goyas gehandelt': Thiemann, 'Carmen in der Malerei' (note 30), p. 47, n. 27 (my stress).
45. It is perhaps significant that, when comparing this poem to one on a similar theme by José Martí, and without recourse to Rilke's letters, it does not occur to José Prats Sariol to imagine anything other than the dancer as a stimulus: 'Martí, Rilke y la bailarina española', in *Estudios sobre poesía cubana*, Havana 1980, pp. 11-24.
46. Kramer-Lauff, *Tanz und Tänzerisches* (note 7), pp. 10-11.
47. William Waters, 'The New Poems', in *The Cambridge Companion to Rilke*, ed. Karen Leeder and Robert Vilain, Cambridge 2010, pp. 59-79 (pp. 63-4).
48. Stefan Zweig, 'Rilkes Neue Gedichte', in *Das literarische Echo: Halbmonatsschrift für Literaturfreunde*, 11 (15 December 1908), cols 416-18 (cols 417-18).
49. Plutarch, *The Parallel Lives, V: The Life of Pompey*, tr. Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, MA and London 1917, p. 267.
50. The concordance to Rilke's poetry lists only twelve instances of this: Ulrich K. Goldsmith et al., *Rainer Maria Rilke: A Verse Concordance to his Complete Lyrical Poetry*, Leeds 1980. This coincidence alone would not permit one to claim that Rilke had his earlier poem in mind when he wrote 'Der Magier', but the use of the verb 'drehen' here echoes 'dreht auf einmal

[...] ihr ganzes Kleid', and 'das mehr ist' in line 4, without a point of comparison, echoes a similarly idiosyncratic use in Rilke's letter to Clara about Zuloaga's son's baptism ('die eng von Zuschauern umstandene Tänzerin Goyas war mehr'). I do think, therefore, that Rilke was recalling the earlier work when writing 'Der Magier', although this cannot be certain.

51. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Rudolf Hirsch, Frankfurt a. M. 1979, *Gedichte. Dramen I, 1891-1898*, pp. 24-5.

52. Rilke, *Briefe an Gräfin Sizzo, 1921-1926*, ed. Ingeborg Schnack, Frankfurt a. M. 1985, p. 79.

53. *Ibid.* (my stress).