

*Nicholas Fox Weber*

# Baladine, Rilke and, Balthus: Looking Through the Window

In his early adolescence—precisely the age he focused on in his art for the rest of his life—Balthazar Klossowski (not yet Balthus, although just then becoming, briefly, “Baltus”) came home from school on more than one occasion to the small apartment where he lived with his mother and older brother in Geneva to find his mother seated on the edge of the window sill, looking out in longing, and pining for her lover. Balthazar’s mother, Baladine, also wrote lengthy letters to the absent man, telling him specifically about the flowers in the window-box which she would look at while she pined for him, the fading of the blossoms and the changes of light on them signifying for her the fleetingness of so much in life. Windows—the openings through which we feel the larger world coming into our private existence, where we can most readily imagine distant places and people who are at a physical remove from us even if they feel emotionally close—figured significantly in letter after letter.

Baladine and her husband Erich Klossowski had first met the poet Rainer Maria Rilke in 1907, the year before Balthus was born. This is who her lover was. When they met he was thirty-two years old, while

she was twenty-one. He had been brought to the Klossowskis’ house in Paris by Ellen Key, a Swedish psychologist who had written *The Century of the Child*, which Rilke had reviewed enthusiastically. Except for an occasion when Baladine and Erich had visited Rilke in his apartment on the Rue Cassette and he had stood at his writing desk and read to them out loud from his *Livre d’heures*, they had only seen each other once, in a chance meeting when Baladine told the poet that she now had two “ravishing” young sons, until 1919, when Rilke decided to pay a visit to Baladine. He had fled a crowded household in Nyon and indulged his passion for grand hotels by booking into the Richemond in Geneva. Nostalgic for pre-war Paris, he looked up the tall, dark Baladine, whose name was the first in his address book. Having separated from her husband two years earlier, she had moved there to a modest flat. Rilke planned to be in Geneva for five days, but stayed for fifteen.

It was not long before Rilke and little Balthazar established a relationship of their own. When he was eleven years old, the boy had found and loved a cat that became part of his everyday life: it remained

alongside him in bed, on the dining-room table, and with the rest of the family staring at the candles on their Christmas tree. One day the cat ran away. Balthus made forty drawings that narrated the cat's story, from the discovery of the beguiling creature, through scenes of domestic bliss, to a final image of the little boy crying and wiping away his tears. It was a touching self-portrait, and Rilke was so moved by the series of well-drawn and articulate pen-and-ink drawings that he wrote about it.

The essence of the story, and of Rilke's essay—the first prose or poetry he ever wrote in French rather than German—was the same thing that gripped Baladine as she looked out of the window of the apartment, that sense of the fleetingness of everything. What Rilke wrote about the tale of "Mitsou"—little Balthus's name for the cat—was similar to what he wrote Baladine in response to her letters saying how much she missed him. "Finding. Losing. Have you really thought about what loss is? Is it not simply the negation of that generous moment that had granted an expectation you yourself had never sensed or suspected? For between that moment and that loss, there is always something that we call—the word is clumsy enough, I admit—possession."

Possession was a theme of Rilke's and Baladine's relationship. She wanted to be with him all the time, in his rural castle, Muzot, which she had found for him and helped him furnish, or at home with Balthus and his brother Pierre. For his part, Rilke insisted on solitude, which was essential for his writing. He tried to get his mistress to accept this, urging her to get beyond the sadness and longing she felt as she looked out at those flowers and beyond.

In his preface to *Mitsou*, he wrote, "Is she still alive? She lives within you, and the insouciant kitten's frolics that once diverted you now compel you; you fulfilled your obligations through your painstaking melancholy."

Rilke's conclusion, however, was meant to give the boy comfort and joy: "Don't worry: I am. Baltusz exists. Our world is sound. There are no cats."

It was Rilke who had added the "z" to the boy's name, to give it even more élan when the drawings

and his essay were published as a small book. Eventually, the youth's name would be transmogrified to Balthus. The names were like everything else, and like the world as observed through a window: with shifting boundaries, full of ambiguity, as rich as it is undefinable.

On one of the rare interludes when they were both staying at Muzot and enjoying a respite from the tumult of their separations, Rainer Maria Rilke and Baladine Klossowska made a journey through the mountains, in the course of which they decided to collaborate on a book in which his poems and her illustrations would appear side by side. Its theme was windows.

The slight, elegant volume was not published until 1927, the year after the poet's death. But with its fifteen poems dedicated to Baladine, and her ten etchings, it preserved the essence of their bond. The women created by Balthus's mother are all locked in trances. The first, in profile, is framed by window mullions. Fixing her hair, she is completely detached from the act, as if absorbed in private thoughts. Another woman rests with her hands on a windowsill, and looks off absently into the distance. She is in a spell, possessed by intense emotions of which we will never know the specifics. In one plate, a nude woman sprawls, seemingly overwhelmed, in a daybed. She is in a sensual paradise, with a vase of flowers at her side and birds visible through the skylight above. Elsewhere women lean and wave, or shutters remain closed keeping the vistas unseen.

The subjects are all transfixed. The women could have been uttering precisely what Baladine wrote Rilke during her own windowsill musings:

Often I dream in my dreams, and I see myself with you—far, far away on a long journey. Oh Rene, Rene, blessings on you! For seeing me before you when you leave me: as a fountain, as a tree, as a flower in your star shining above you—for you—I have kissed Balthus and told him, "This comes from far away."

Like her writing, the pleasant but flowery pictures Baladine made for the book appear to have been



I. Balthus  
*The Window*, 1933  
 Oil on canvas,  
 162.2 x 114.3 cm  
 Indiana University Art  
 Museum, Bloomington  
 IUAM70.62

drawn in a semi-hypnotic state of bliss. Although the manner and technique of Baladine's window illustrations probably had little value for Balthus by the time he became truly serious about making his own art in the early 1930s, his mother's imagery and arrangements would nonetheless appear repeatedly in his work throughout his life. Time and again, he would pose women identically to the way his mother had, surrounding them with many of the same details. His characters, too, would be in a state between reverie and agony. And

a lot of the mood of the paintings, while they were artistically of a far higher caliber than his mother's art, had to do with the overarching role of the window.

Rilke was obsessed with windows. He had decided in the early 1920s that a serious history of them ought to be published. He felt that their shape determines our idea of the world. They help provide clarity, put us in charge, and diminish the risk of loss. They offset the incapacity and tenuousness he lamented in the preface to *Mitsou*.

Whatever difficulties Balthus had with his mother, and Rilke had with her, there was an extraordinary rapport between the two men. Balthus copied Poussin's *Echo and Narcissus* at the Louvre in order to give it to the poet; Rilke wrote a poem for Balthus entitled "Narcissus." They exchanged warm letters. And Rilke often wrote about Balthus to his friends, among them Pierre Bonnard and André Gide. He adored the boy, and Balthus knew it.

It is in the way that Rilke writes about windows in those poems which accompanied Baladine's etchings that we get to the essence of the large canvases Balthus did at all periods of his art in which figures or objects are set before large open windows. Rilke wrote:

A lover's never so beautiful  
 as when we see her appear

framed by you; because, window,  
 you make her almost immortal.

All risks are canceled. Being  
 stands at love's center,  
 with this narrow space around,  
 where we are master. ...

She was in a window mood that day:  
 to live seemed no more than to stare.  
 from a dizzy-non existence she could see  
 a world coming to complete her heart.<sup>1</sup>

These windows as evoked by Rilke not merely add drama to the scenes for which they are the setting; they immortalize the characters, in part because of the quality of light they produce, and the way they frame the action. A process is taking place; characters are between inside and outside, a precariousness and a solidity. Above all, there is mystery more than fact. One senses numerous possibilities, rather than lots of information. There are elements of risk and of security, satisfaction and danger. And we are made to stop and observe, rather than move on.

Balthus's first painting of a window, done in 1933, a large canvas called *The Window* (ill. 1) shows a woman backed against a window sill as if she is at risk of being pushed over it and to her death. She raises her right hand as if to fight off her attacker, while supporting herself from falling with the left. Wide-eyed, with her eyebrows arched, she looks terrified. Her left breast is fully exposed, as if the neckline of her lace-trimmed, puff-sleeved striped blouse had just been torn forcibly.

Here the open window represents danger, and also the world that does not know about the violence which is taking place. One sees the windows of various apartments in the distant cityscape, but the panes are black; there is no neighbor looking out and gallantly about to come to the rescue. Is Balthus metaphorically pushing his mother out the window? (The woman has a slight resemblance to Baladine.) Did he imagine Rilke as the woman's torturer? What

<sup>1</sup> *The Complete French Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, translated by A. Poulin, Jr. (St. Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 1979).



2. Balthus  
*Lady Abdy*, 1935  
 Oil on canvas,  
 186.1 × 167.9 cm  
 Private collection

is it that has made him depict a young woman with a waistband pulled as tight as possible, a binding skirt, and her legs splayed in a position painful to occur? The woman who posed for the painting reported, years later, on the artist holding a knife. Danger, power, and attack all fascinated him. Ultimately, it was Balthus himself who has everyone else at gunpoint. He painted the woman as his victim, and he controls the public by his having painted something so provocative without offering either understanding of what is going

on, or a solution. The woman will be forever locked in this position of fending off danger, and while we feel that in another moment her attacker will be on top, of her or she will have gone overboard, we are left not knowing. All that is certain is that Balthus has gained a form of control he lacked when his cat ran away forever. He would rather be tyrannical than sad.

Balthus's next window painting came two years later. Only now the creature in distress appears about to fling herself over the will of her own volition.

This large, rich, dark canvas was a portrait of Lady Iya Abdy (ill. 2). The diaphanous creature with flowing blond hair is dressed stunningly in a long maroon gown, with billowing sleeves and a full, flowing skirt, by the French designer Madame Gres. Iya Abdy was playing the role of Beatrice, the principal character in *Les Cenci*, a play by Antonin Artaud for which Balthus made the sets and costumes. In the play, Beatrice is raped by her father and subsequently plots his murder.

Balthus had introduced the recently divorced Lady Abdy to Artaud, with whom he had a close, symbiotic friendship. She had done little acting, but this venture—the first play of Artaud's Theater of Cruelty—provided her with an opportunity to be on stage, something she was yearning to do.

In Balthus's painting of her, she has one foot elevated on the baseboard. The angel-like actress, look-

ing as if she has just alighted yet will soon fly off again, assumes a contrived gesture. Her pose is contorted, even by Balthus's standards. With her left hand, she pulls back a transparent, gauzy curtain. She leans awkwardly, her head pressed into her right forearm, her right hand holding a clump of her own wavy hair against the window casement. This is clearly painful. Lady Abdy is more demonic than terrorized, but like the woman in *The Window*, she looks as if she is being forcibly pulled by an invisible agent. That drama would not be possible without the setting of the full-size open window. It is key to the action, and the way it can evoke wither risk or escape is particularly its own. Here a different sort of stanza from Rilke's window poetry pertains:

You propose I wait, strange window;  
 your beige curtain nearly billows.  
 O window, should I accept your offer or,  
 window, defend myself? What should I wait  
 for?

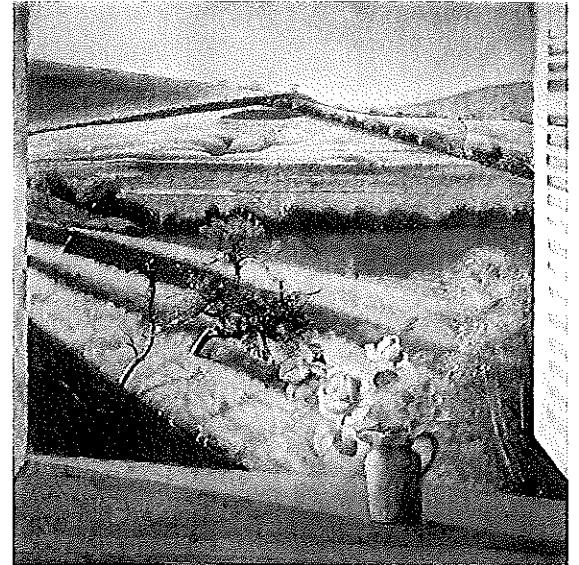
A window is the perfect vehicle for suggesting unanswered questions, for opening the way to a vastness that is rich in part because it will never be fully deciphered.

For the rest of his life, Balthus would periodically return to large open windows as the essence of his paintings. In the early 1950s, when he returned after the war to his studio in Paris on the Cour e Rohan, he did a simple and strong canvas that shows nothing but a table with three objects on it and then an open window and a distant building (cat. 68). In its simplicity, the successful penetration of space, and the authenticity of the textures—the wood of the wainscoting, the glass of the bottle filled with clear liquid—this is the sort of painting that made Picasso declare Balthus to be an unequalled painter of interiors. Giacometti said of this painting that for all of its apparent innocence, it had the eroticism of so much of Balthus's work—Giacometti thought that the dark windows across the way had elements of female genitalia, while the knife and pitcher with its

3. Balthus  
*Girl at a Window*, 1957  
Oil on canvas,  
160 × 162 cm  
Private collection



4. Balthus  
*Bouquet of Roses on a Window Sill*, 1958  
Oil on canvas,  
134 × 130,8 cm  
Indianapolis Museum  
of Art, Indianapolis



upward spout on the table had elements of the male's—but it also was, quite simply, a tour de force of painting.

A large canvas from 1957, *Girl at a Window* (ill. 3), a portrait from behind of Balthus's young mistress in the chateau he had in Burgundy, is also painted with particular skill. The way the light penetrates the open glass window-panes is perfect, as is the outline of sunlight that defines and moulds the girl we see only from behind. Because she is without features, because she is looking out, because she is facing a marvelous apple tree in full bloom and then the distant fields, we imagine a great deal—what she looks like, what she is seeing—while knowing very little. But what is certain is that the girl's hands perched on the windowsill suggest a state of longing, the equipoise brought on by standing still and looking out of a large window to a world that is totally different from the one in which we stand.

Balthus's 1958 *Bouquet of Roses on a Window Sill* (ill. 4), one of his masterpieces, offers a totally different world than the sinister ambiance of his *Theater of Cruelty* days; here the open shutter, bathed in sunlight, makes a focal point beyond which we see a fantastically rich landscape, a sequence of sun-drenched colors, while the sill in the foreground supports a marvelous simple pitcher with three roses in fullest bloom. That Balthus was drawn to a form of beauty beyond any of his shenanigans is more than

evident here. The blue sky is heavenly: nothing less. Light is miraculous. The workings of the earthy offer a panoply of splendors, and when Balthus wanted to show loveliness without anything other than a pure feeling of celebration, he could paint with a flare all his own. The window provides the opening to natural wonder.

That childhood with Rilke as his friend and admirer, providing him with problem-free adoration while forcing Balthus's mother into states of unfulfilment and anxiety, had an impact that remained with Balthus for the rest of his life. He had an eye for beauty and poetry, a profound sense of style, and an acceptance of mystery. He loved to see, and at the same time he liked keeping a lot hidden. Windows made it all possible.