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SONNETS TO ORPHEUS

By the Same Author

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REQUIEM

LAST POEMS

Translated by J. B. Leishman

DUINO ELEGIES

Translated by J. B. Leishman
and Stephen Spender

*

The Hogarth Press

RAINER MARIA RILKE

SONNETS TO ORPHEUS

Written as a monument for
Wera Ouckama Knoop

THE GERMAN TEXT, WITH AN ENGLISH
TRANSLATION, INTRODUCTION & NOTES BY
J. B. LEISHMAN

THE HOGARTH PRESS
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PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

I SHOULD like to thank all the friends, English and German, who have read these translations in MS. and helped me with many valuable criticisms and suggestions: but, above all, I express my sincere gratitude to those two generous and unwearied collaborators (for they have been nothing less), Ernst Zinn, of Munich, and Paul Obermüller, of Freiburg, from whose lips, many years ago, I first heard the name of Rainer Maria Rilke.

J. B. L.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

SINCE this translation was first published in 1936 I have revised it so often and so thoroughly that what is now presented may be regarded almost as a new version. If a less inadequate transmutation into English of the form and substance of the original seems to have been but slowly attained, and if, moreover, it seems to pass a silent condemnation upon its predecessor, I can only plead that verse translation is perhaps the most difficult of all literary undertakings, and that one who accepts the responsibility of presenting to his countrymen the work of a great contemporary poet should take as his maxim, not 'What I have written I have written', but

Vingt fois sur le métier remettez votre ouvrage.

I am most grateful to all the friends who have read through my successive revisions and offered me their criticisms and suggestions, but I owe a very special debt to the generous co-operation of Mrs. Elizabeth Gundolf.

J. B. L.

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SONNETS TO ORPHEUS

'O frati,' dissi, 'che per cento milia
perigli siete giunti all' occidente,
a questa tanto picciola vigilia

de' vostri sensi, ch'è del rimanente,
non vogliate negar l'esperienza
di retro al sol, del mondo senza gente.

Considerate la vostra semenza;
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza.'

INTRODUCTION

WHEN Rilke established himself in the Château de Muzot, near Sierre, in August 1921, he was nearing the end of his long and lonely struggle to re-establish contact with the past, to recover that continuity of being which had been so terribly interrupted by the War, and to complete what had been begun when the first two Elegies were 'given' to him at Schloss Duino in 1912. After months of solitary concentration, utterance and release came to him in February 1922, when, in a tempest of creative activity with which there is no parallel, except, perhaps, in the lives of some of the great musicians, the Elegies were completed[1] and the fifty-five Sonnets to Orpheus were written within three weeks.

The task for which he had prepared himself had been the completion of the Elegies; the Sonnets presented themselves to him quite suddenly, as a surprise; they were begun shortly after the inception, and finished shortly after the completion, of what Rilke himself (although, perhaps, not all readers will share his opinion) considered to be the greater work. *You mention the Sonnets to Orpheus*, he wrote, a year later, to a friend: *Now and then they may show some lack of consideration for the reader. Even to me, in their rising up and imposing themselves upon me, they are perhaps the most mysterious, most enigmatic, dictation I have ever endured and performed; the whole first part was written down in a single breathless obedience, between the 2nd and the 5th of February 1922, without one word's being in doubt or requiring to be altered. And that at a time when I had got myself ready for another large work and was already busy with it. How can one but increase in reverence and infinite gratitude for such experiences within one's own existence? I myself am just penetrating more and more into the spirit of this message, which is what the Sonnets reveal themselves to be.*[2]

To another friend, to whom he was sending copies both of

[1] The Fifth, Seventh, and Eighth Elegies were written entirely at Muzot, and so, except for a few lines that already existed, were the Ninth and Tenth.

[2] *Briefe aus Muzot*, 195.

the Elegies and the Sonnets, he wrote: *But it is of the very essence of these poems, their condensation and abbreviation (frequently stating lyrical totals, instead of adding up the items necessary to the result), that they seem intended rather to be grasped as a whole, through the inspiration of one who is like-minded, than by what is called 'understanding'.*[1]

Where a darkness remains, it is of a kind that requires not explanation but inclination,[2] he wrote of the Sonnets;[3] and he admitted that *without a knowledge of certain assumptions, and some information about my attitude to love and death, much in these poems may be hard to comprehend.*[4]

I have quoted these passages in order to suggest to the reader the most helpful approach to these very difficult poems. To put the matter very briefly, and to anticipate much that will require further explanation, they are the record of a vision, or intuition, into what the old Greek philosophers called the Nature of Being. They are the ultimate expression of a long and sustained attempt to regard all phenomena, life and death, man, with all his possible activities and experiences, as parts or aspects of one great timeless cosmological process, or event. On the one hand, we see Rilke trying to penetrate into what Plato called 'the further side of being', and, on the other hand, we see him returning and proclaiming that all being is one. In order to share this intuition we must, at any rate for a time, become 'like-minded': we shall then *receive* from the poems an 'inspiration' that will help us to interpret them: a tension, an interchange, a circulation will be set up between us and them. But Rilke himself admits that most of us will find it difficult to become 'like-minded', *without a knowledge of certain assumptions, and some information about my attitude to love and death.* These assumptions and this attitude may be seen growing and developing throughout all Rilke's earlier works, above all, in the terrible and piercing questions of *Requiem* and *Malte Laurids Brigge*; they appear, more and more vividly, directly, and impressively, in his letters, and they are concentratedly ex-

[1] *Briefe aus Muzot*, 220. [2] *dass es nicht Auf-Klärung fordert, sondern Unterwerfung.* [3] *Briefe aus Muzot*, 198. [4] *Briefe aus Muzot*, 190.

pressed in the contemporary Elegies. No interpretative criticism can supply the place of a long and loving study of all these works, for they are really *one* work, and form, together with the recollections of his personal friends, the Testament of Rainer Maria Rilke. Although I can think of no artist who so completely dedicated himself, so completely subordinated himself, to his art, I can think of no art of this stature which the artist seems so often and so greatly to transcend; no art that seems, so humbly and yet so superbly, to confess its limitations, as though it were, after all, but the necessarily imperfect record of some tremendous spiritual adventure, which our present means of communication may hint at, but are not yet sufficiently developed to express. Again and again I feel, in reading him, that we have come round the spiral to another 'dawn of consciousness', where language is in the making, and where myth and symbol must often supply the place of not yet thinkable thoughts. No other writer is so full of the future; no other gives us such thrilling intimations of that inheritance on whose threshold we are standing, and which our civilization may be about to enter, if it does not perish through its own destructive forces. It is because his later works are the most profound and concentrated expression of this great pioneering spirit that they appear, at first, to most readers (German as well as English), so impossibly difficult. 'What is it all *about*?' asks the reader, feeling that he has no key to Rilke's 'lyrical totals'. In a sense, these later works are not self-contained and self-sufficient—in a sense, like the last act of a drama or the last chapters of a philosophical treatise, they presuppose much that has gone before. Nevertheless, although the Sonnets to Orpheus are part of what I have called Rilke's Testament, and although a fairly complete knowledge of that Testament is the best preparation for them, I believe that a careful study of some of Rilke's own remarks upon them will go a great way towards helping the reader to become 'like-minded'. After all, there are no fixed routes and time-tables for these journeys, and often from a very small segment a sensitive reader will be able to reconstruct a circle.

Rilke himself has spoken of the numerous external influences that may start precipitation when once the artist has been inwardly prepared.[1] We happen to know that the Sonnets to Orpheus were immediately occasioned by two such influences. At the beginning of January 1922 his friend Frau Gertrud Ouckama Knoop sent him a journal she had kept during the long and fatal illness of her daughter Wera, who died at the age of eighteen or nineteen, and whom Rilke had only seen once or twice when she was a child. *This lovely child*, he wrote, *who began with dancing and excited wonder in all who then saw her through her body's and mind's inborn art of motion and transformation, unexpectedly declared to her mother that she neither could nor would dance any longer; . . . (this was just at the passing of childhood) her body strangely altered, became, without losing its beautiful eastern contours, strangely heavy and massive . . . (which was already the beginning of that mysterious glandular disease which was so quickly to bring on death) . . . During the time that still remained for her Wera pursued music, finally she did nothing but sketch—as though the dancing which had been denied were, more and more gently, more and more discreetly, still issuing from her.*[2] In a letter he wrote to Wera's mother we may see how deeply Rilke had been moved by these pages, for his words suggest that the girl's life and death had concentrated, focussed, and come to symbolize for him some of his own deepest feelings and convictions about life and death. *How very, very, very much she was all that*, he wrote, *that of which these recollections of your grief bear so deep, so irrevocable a witness—and (don't you agree?) how wonderful, how unique, how incomparable is a human being! Now, suddenly, when everything was allowed to consume itself, there arose what might otherwise have sufficed for a long here-(where?) after, there arose this excess of light in the girl's heart, and within it appear, so infinitely illuminated, the two extreme borders of her pure insight; this, that pain is a mistake, an obtuse misunderstanding springing up in the physical, that drives its wedge, its stony wedge, into the unity of heaven and earth—and, on the*

[1] *Briefe aus Muzot*, 64-5.

[2] Letter to Countess Margot Sizzo, April 12th, 1923, printed in the *Insel Almanach* for 1937, 113-14.

other hand, this intimate oneness of her universally open heart with this unity of existing and persisting world, this acceptance of life, this joyful, this affectionate, this to the last degree capable appropriation of herself into the here and now—ah, only into the here and now?! No (what she could not know in these first attacks of upheaval and parting!)—into the whole, into a far more than here. Oh, how, how she loved, how she reached out with the antennæ of her heart beyond all that is comprehensible and embraceable here—during those sweet hovering pauses in pain that, full of the dream of recovery, were still granted her. . . It appears, dear friend, that destiny has felt it worthwhile to lead you out, time and again, beyond the ordinary border—as it were, to an overhanging crag of life, to the ravine of death, and with heart laid ever barer. You now live and look on and feel out of infinite experience.[1]

When the Kippenbergs visited Rilke at Muzot, in the summer of 1922, they noticed in his dining-room a little engraving of Orpheus with his lyre, *and Rilke said how his glance had happened to fall upon it in a shop-window, and how, in a flash, the Sonnets had grouped themselves around this figure and given themselves its name, to lead on to the girl who died young and her monument.*[2]

Although only two of them (the twenty-fifth in the First Part and the twenty-eighth in the Second) are directly addressed to her, Rilke told Kippenberg that the Sonnets had lightly attached themselves to the vanished figure of young Wera Knoop, and that he perceived this more and more as he wrote them.[3]

Wera, whose fullness of life, love of life, surrender to life seemed to reach their highest intensity at the moment when life was passing into death; Orpheus, the mediator, at home in the kingdoms both of the living and of the dead, who, because he has raised his lyre among the shadows in Hades, has earned the right to proffer some surmising report of heaven

[1] *Briefe aus Muzot*, 83-4.

[2] Katharina Kippenberg, *Rainer Maria Rilke, Ein Beitrag*, 1st ed., 1935, 185-6; 2nd ed., 1938, 321.

[3] *Briefe an seinen Verleger*, 360.

—is not something of the significance these two figures came to have for Rilke already plain? And is it not already much easier to understand the following words from a letter that accompanied a gift of the Sonnets and the Elegies?—*Two innermost experiences were decisive for their production: the more and more deeply growing resolve to keep life open towards death, and, on the other hand, the intellectual necessity of instating the transformations of love within this extended whole otherwise than was possible within the narrower orbit of life (which simply excluded death as the Other).*[1]

This conception of existence as a wider orbit, including both life and death, necessitated (or implied) a revaluation of all experience, and particularly of love. *Oh, how, how she loved, how she reached out with the antennæ of her heart beyond all that is comprehensible and embraceable here,* he had (as we have seen) written of Wera; and what he felt might be the ultimate meaning and purpose of love may be suggested (far better than it can be described) by quoting one of his last poems, *Soul in Space*:

Here I am, here I am, wrested,
reeling.
Can I dare? Can I plunge?

Even where I first intruded
many were capable. Now,
where the meanest are fully fulfilling might
in muteness of mastery:—
Can I dare? Can I plunge?

True, I endured through the timid body
nights; I befriended it,
finite earthen stuff, with infinity;
sobbingly
its simple heart
overflowed when I left.

[1] *Briefe aus Muzot*, 220

But now,
who'd be impressed if I said
'I am the soul'?
I must suddenly grow eternal,
freed from the clinging opposite, freed from
comforting; feeling with nothing but
heaven.

Secret no more;
merely among the all-
open secrets
a tremulous one.

O this procession of mighty embracings! Which
will encircle me, pass me on,
me, the clumsy
embracer?

Or have I forgotten, and can?
Forgot the exhaustive riot
of those hard-lovers? Hark,
hurtle upwards, and can ?[1]

For Rilke, at any rate, desires do not, or should not, 'terminate upon their objects'. For him, love, like every other experience, is valuable in proportion to its capacity for what he called 'transformation', as a fuel or charge for some tremendous rocket into unknown space. In a remarkable letter, written in 1922, he declared that to rediscover a true attitude to sex, and to relate to some new divinity experiences which ossified religions had driven into the periphery, was perhaps *the* great problem of our time. *Renunciation or fulfilment, both are only then miraculous and incomparable when the whole experience of love, with all its hardly distinguishable raptures (which so alternate among themselves that precisely there spiritual and physical can no longer be separated), is allowed to assume a central position; there, indeed, (in the ecstasy*

[1] *Späte Gedichte*, 60; *Later Poems*, 94.

of certain lovers or saints of all times and all religions) renunciation and fulfilment are one. Where the Infinite entirely enters (whether as minus or as plus), the sign, alas, the so human sign, falls away, as the way that has now been travelled; and what remains is being there, Being![1]

We have now learnt something of Rilke's attitude to love and death, so important for the understanding of his later work; although it is true that love between men and women, the personal aspect of love, figures more largely in the Elegies, while the love described or implied in the Sonnets is a transformation or universalization of this, a love like Wera's, extending itself to the whole creation and beyond. The Elegies, perhaps we may say, are more concerned with problem and process, the Sonnets with implication and result. There remains to be considered Rilke's attitude to a third fundamental conception, that of tradition.

In 1923 he wrote to a friend, who had published a memoir of one of his ancestors, that to continue tradition, in the highest and deepest sense, was perhaps the chief task of their generation, a generation that was being sacrificed to a period of transition, and that it was an impulse to make some contribution of his own to this task which had occasioned the Sonnets to Orpheus. *Moreover, my inclination* [which his friend shares] *to establish just that connexion with what is greatest and most powerful in tradition, my obedience to an inner direction to set this attempt above every other within my work, will help you to an explanation of many a passage that denies itself at first or second sight; and, looked at from this point of view, the structure of the whole (undesigned, founded entirely within the inner dictation), together with the parallelisms of the first and second parts, may grow more comprehensible.*[2]

Orpheus, the ideal poet (and for Rilke, perhaps, the ideal man) mediates, not only between life and death, but between past and present, experiencing the whole of human history and achievement as one single, timeless, and divine *event.* In one of the most profound and penetrating of his letters, where he tries to persuade a correspondent who has interested herself in

[1] *Briefe aus Muzot*, 128. [2] *Briefe aus Muzot*, 190-1.

spiritualism that its phenomena are not in themselves more mysterious or wonderful than a thousand others, Rilke declares that he feels more and more that our normal consciousness inhabits the apex of a pyramid, and that, from his earliest years, he has felt that in some deeper layer of that pyramid it might be possible to experience as immediate and uninterrupted being what at the apex is only experienced as transition.[1]

What I have so far said about Rilke's attitude to love and death and tradition has been nothing but a preparation for what I think the reader will find to be by far the most important and valuable part of this introduction—the translation of a letter on the significance of the Elegies and Sonnets, sent to his Polish translator in November 1925.

And am I the one to give their correct interpretation to the Elegies? They reach out infinitely beyond me. I regard them as a further shaping out of those essential presuppositions which were already given in the 'Stundenbuch', which in the two parts of the 'Neue Gedichte' make a playful and experimental use of the world-picture, and then, in Malte, conflictively concentrated, strike back into life, and there almost lead to the demonstration that this so bottomlessly suspended life is impossible. In the 'Elegies', from the same premisses, life becomes possible again; indeed, it is here given that ultimate affirmation to which young Malte, although on the right, hard road 'des longues études', was not yet able to conduct it. In the 'Elegies' affirmation of life AND affirmation of death reveals itself as one. To concede the one without the other is, as is here experienced and celebrated, a restriction that finally excludes all infinity. Death is that side of life which is turned away from us, unilluminated by us: we must try to achieve the greatest possible consciousness of our existence, which is at home in both of these unlimited provinces, inexhaustibly nourished out of both . . . The true form of life extends through both regions, the blood of the mightiest circulation pulses through both; there is neither a here nor a beyond, but only the great unity, in which the 'Angels', those beings that surpass us, are at home. And now for the place of the love-problem in this more than doubled, this now first whole, first hale world. It surprises me that the 'Sonnets to Orpheus',

[1] *Briefe aus Muzot*, 280.

which are at least equally 'difficult', and which are filled with the same essence, are not more helpful to you for the understanding of the 'Elegies'. These were begun in 1912 (at Duino), and continued—fragmentarily—in Spain and Paris until 1914; the War completely interrupted this, my greatest, work; when I ventured to resume it in 1922 (here) the new Elegies and their conclusion were anticipated by the few days' tempestuous self-imposition of the 'Sonnets to Orpheus' (which were not in my plan). They are, as could not be otherwise, of the same 'litter' as the 'Elegies', and the fact that they suddenly, without my willing it, arose in connexion with a girl who died young, removes them still further towards the fountain of their origin; this connexion is one more relation towards[1] *the centre of that realm whose depth and influence we, everywhere unbounded as we are, share with the dead and with those who are yet to come. We, local and ephemeral as we are, are not for one moment contented in the world of time nor confined within it; we keep on crossing over and over to our predecessors, to our ancestry, and to those who apparently come after us. In that greatest 'open' world all are, one cannot say 'contemporary', for it is the very abolition of time that makes them all be. Transitoriness is everywhere plunging into a profound being. And therefore all the forms of the here and now are not merely to be used in a time-limited way, but, so far as we can, instated within those superior significances in which we share. But not in the Christian sense (from which I more and more passionately withdraw), but, in a purely terrestrial, deeply terrestrial, blissfully terrestrial consciousness, to instate what is here seen and touched within the wider, within the widest orbit– that is what is required. Not within a Beyond, whose shadow darkens the earth, but within a whole, within the whole. Nature, the things we associate with and use, are provisional and perishable; but, so long as we are here, they are our possession and our friendship; sharers in our trouble and gladness, just as they have been the confidants of our ancestors. Therefore, not only must all that is here not be vilified or degraded, but, just because of that very provisionality they share with us, all these appearances and things should be, in the most fervent sense, comprehended by us and transformed. Transformed? Yes, for our task is to stamp this*

[1] *ein Bezug mehr nach der Mitte:* the 'relation' conceived of as something put out, or stretched out, like a tentacle.

provisional, perishing earth into ourselves so deeply, so painfully and passionately, that its being may rise again, 'invisibly', in us. We are the bees of the Invisible. Nous butinons éperdument le miel du visible, pour l'accumuler dans la grande ruche d'or de l'Invisible. The 'Elegies' show us at this work, this work of the continual conversion of the dear visible and tangible into the invisible vibration and agitation of our own nature, which introduces new vibration-numbers into the vibration-spheres of the universe. (For, since the various materials in the cosmos are only the results of different rates of vibration, we are preparing in this way, not only intensities of a spiritual kind, but—who knows?—new substances, metals, nebulæ and stars.) And this activity is peculiarly supported and urged by the ever swifter vanishing of so much that is visible, whose place will not be supplied. Even for our grandparents a 'House', a 'Well', a familiar tower, their very dress, their cloak, was infinitely more, infinitely more intimate: almost everything a vessel in which they found and stored humanity. Now there come crowding over from America empty, indifferent things, pseudo-things, dummy-life. . . A house, in the American sense, an American apple or vine, has nothing in common with the house, the fruit, the grape into which the hope and pensiveness of our forefathers would enter. . . The animated, experienced things that share our lives are coming to an end and cannot be replaced. We are perhaps the last to have still known such things. On us rests the responsibility of preserving not merely their memory (that would be little and unreliable), but their human and laral worth. ('Laral' in the sense of household-gods.) The earth has no other refuge except to become invisible: in us, who, through one part of our nature, have a share in the Invisible, or, at least, share-certificates,[1] *and can increase our holding in invisibility during our being here,—only in us can this intimate and enduring transformation of the visible into an invisible no longer dependent on visibility and tangibility be accomplished, since our own destiny is continually growing at once MORE ACTUAL AND INVISIBLE within us. The Elegies set up this norm of existence: they attest, they celebrate, this consciousness. They cautiously relate it to its origins, claiming primeval traditions and rumours of*

[1] By which, if he likes, the reader may understand, 'death-certificates'.

traditions as support for this conjecture, invoking even in the Egyptian cult of the dead a foreknowledge of such relationships. (Although the 'Lament-land', through which the elder 'Lament' guides the dead youth, is not to be identified with Egypt, but only to be regarded as a kind of reflexion of the Nile country into the desert-clarity of the dead's consciousness.) By making the mistake of applying Catholic conceptions of death, of the hereafter, and of eternity to the Elegies or Sonnets, one is withdrawing oneself completely from their point of departure, and preparing for oneself a more and more fundamental misunderstanding. The 'Angel' of the Elegies has nothing to do with the angel of the Christian heaven (rather with the angelic figures of Islam). . . The Angel of the Elegies is the creature in whom that transformation of the visible into the invisible we are performing already appears completed. For the Angel of the Elegies all past towers and palaces are existent because they have long been invisible, and the still remaining towers and bridges of our existence are already invisible, although still (for us) physically enduring. The Angel of the Elegies is the being who vouches for the recognition of a higher degree of reality in the invisible.—Therefore 'terrible'[1] to us, because we, its lovers and transformers, still cling to the visible.—All the worlds of the universe are plunging into the invisible as into their next-deepest reality; some stars have an immediate waxing and waning in the infinite consciousness of the Angels,—others are dependent on beings that slowly and laboriously transform them, in whose terrors and raptures they attain their next invisible realization. We, let it be once more insisted, we, in the context of the Elegies, are these transformers of the earth, our whole existence, the flights and plunges of our love, all fit us for this task (beside which there is, essentially, no other). (The Sonnets show details from this activity, which here appears under the name and protection of a dead girl, whose incompletion and innocence hold the gates of the grave open, so that, although she has gone from here, she has become one of those powers that keep half of life fresh, and open towards the other, wound-open, half.) Elegies and Sonnets support each other continually,—and I see

[1] *Jeder Engel ist schrecklich* (every angel is terrible) is the beginning of the Second Elegy.

an infinite grace in the fact that I was permitted to fill these two sails with the same breath: the little rust-coloured sail of the Sonnets and the gigantic white canvas of the Elegies.[1]

No other single passage, I think, whether in the works of Rilke or his commentators, contains so full and clear an expression of that aspect of his mature *Weltanschauung* which predominates in the Sonnets to Orpheus. If a reader, unfamiliar with the rest of his work, asked me for some of that 'information' Rilke himself thought necessary, I should point to this passage, and to the Ninth of the Duino Elegies, where Rilke, nearing the end of his long posing and answering of that more and more urgent question, What *are* we?, after suggesting that we can only take over with us into the other state of being purely 'untellable' experiences, suddenly turns upon himself, and offers a humbler and simpler explanation of man's place and purpose:

Yet the wanderer does not bring from mountain to valley
a handful of earth, of for all untellable earth, but only
a word he has won, pure, the yellow and blue
gentian. Are we perhaps *here* just for saying: House,
Bridge, Fountain, Gate, Jug, Fruit-tree, Window,—
possibly: Pillar, Tower? . . . but for *saying*, remember,
oh, for such saying as never the things themselves
hoped so intensely to be. Is not the secret purpose
of this sly earth, in urging a pair of lovers,
just to make everything leap with ecstasy in them?
Threshold: how much it means
to a pair of lovers, that they should be wearing their own
worn threshold a little, they too, after the many before,
before the many to come, . . . as a matter of course!

Here is the time for the Tellable, *here* is its home.
Speak and proclaim. More than ever
things we can live with are falling away, for that
which is oustingly taking their place is an imageless act.

[1] *Briefe aus Muzot*, 332-38.

Act under crusts, that will readily split as soon
as the doing within outgrows them and takes a new outline.

Between the hammers lives on
our heart, as between the teeth
the tongue, which, in spite of all,
still continues to praise.

Praise this world to the Angel, not the untellable: you
can't impress him with the splendour you've felt; in the cosmos
where he more feelingly feels you're only a novice. So show him
some simple thing, refashioned by age after age,
till it lives in our hands and eyes as a part of ourselves.
Tell him *things*. He'll stand more astonished: as you did
beside the roper in Rome or the potter in Egypt.
Show him how happy a thing can be, how guileless and ours;
how even the moaning of grief purely determines on form,
serves as a thing, or dies into a thing,—to escape
to a bliss beyond the fiddle. These things that live on departure
understand when you praise them; fleeting, they look for
rescue through some thing in us, the most fleeting of all.
Want us to change them entirely, within our invisible hearts,
into—oh, endlessly,—into ourselves! Whosoever we are.

Earth, is it not just this that you want: to arise
invisibly in us?—Is not your dream
to be one day invisible?—Earth! invisible!
What is your urgent command, if not transformation?
Earth, you darling, I will! Oh, believe me, you'd need
no more of your spring-times to win me over: a single one,
ah, one, is already more than my blood can endure.
Beyond all names I am yours, and have been for ages.
You were always right, and your holiest inspiration
is Death, that friendly Death.

Look, I am living. On what? Neither childhood nor future
are growing less. . . Supernumerous existence
wells up in my heart.

The lines—

More than ever
things we can live with are falling away, for that
which is oustingly taking their place is an imageless act.
Act under crusts, that will readily split as soon
as the doing within outgrows them and takes a new outline

are reminiscent of a phrase in the *Requiem* for Kalckreuth:

The great words from the ages when as yet
happening was visible are not for us.

Rilke, like many other commentators on modern life, has been struck by the fact that so much of our activity is purely provisional, purely means to an end, without value or beauty or significance in itself, and by the fact that our lives have become more and more internal, our really important experiences less and less capable of external imagination. Some builders of utopias and foretellers of the future, notably, Mr. Shaw in *Back to Methuselah*, seem to regard a growing indifference to the visible world, and a growing preoccupation with abstractions, as marks of progress and superior civilization; Rilke, however, is profoundly disturbed by this increasing destruction and devaluation of the visible. Is there not an inconsistency here? the reader may ask; how are we to reconcile with his assertion that the Angel must recognize a higher reality in the invisible than in the visible, his lament over the disappearance of the visible, his fear of the increase of the invisible? The answer would seem to be that the invisible *depends* on the visible as its necessary material, and that there can be no transformation without material to be transformed. In Rilke, with his constant assertion that we are 'only just where we persist in praising',

there is no trace of the 'villainous saltpetre' fallacy,[1] no merely æsthetic shrinking from the ugliness, sometimes the only superficial ugliness, of modern life. The machine, he declares, has come to stay, and demands its meed of praise. Nevertheless, he often seems to feel doubtful whether, mythologically speaking, the Russian worker, for example, will be able to 'say' his dynamo to the Angel as significantly as his ancestor was able to 'say' Ivan Velikij, the great bell at Moscow, that had struck Rilke in the darkness, stroke on stroke, as he stood among the pilgrims, years ago. He feels that the visibility available to most people in our industrialized world is only capable of transformation into a thin, unsatisfying invisibility, and he therefore tries to hand on to us, from the days when there was a fuller and richer relationship between seeing and saying, a re-created, 'invisible' world, that may enrich our inner lives, and serve as a pattern according to which the balance between inner and outer may be restored.

The fierce hostility to Christianity and to the Catholic Church expressed in the letter to his Polish translator is due to the fact that the Church, at any rate in Rilke's experience of it, has encouraged people to neglect, even to despise, the visible world, the here and now, in favour of an imaginary future world, to which this world is regarded merely as a place of passage and pilgrimage, as a 'vale of tears'; for to what one may regard as more essential and important aspects of Christianity he responded ardently and deeply, and one of the most beautiful of his letters is written to his mother on Christmas Eve, about what he calls 'the mystery of the kneeling man'.[2] He

[1] And that it was great pity, so it was,
This villainous salt-petre should be digg'd
Out of the bowels of the harmless earth,
Which many a good tall fellow had destroy'd
So cowardly ; and, but for these vile guns,
He would himself have been a soldier.
(*Henry IV, Part I*, I iii 59.)

[2] *It is so truly the mystery of the kneeling, of the deeply kneeling, man—the fact that he is spiritually greater than the man who stands—that is being celebrated to-night* (*Briefe aus Muzot*, 221-3).

rejected 'otherworldliness' because the fact that we are in this particular world was, for him, the most important fact about us, not a subsidiary and accidental fact. The world, that remains, is more important than we, who pass. It is not here for our sakes, we are here for its sake. Our reality, the purpose of our existence, our τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι, is to be sought, not outside it, but in it, in relation to it. By what he calls 'transforming the visible into the invisible', by 'saying' things, naming them, exercising our great gift of speech, we both realize the world and realize ourselves. To become 'a mouth for Nature', through which, if you will (though Rilke would not have used such language[1]), creation may praise the Creator—that is what we are here for, that is the meaning and destiny of the human race.

Homo naturae interpres[2]—there have been several minds whose conception of human destiny might be summarized by that

[1] The name of God appears on almost every page of the *Stundenbuch*, but only once in the *Elegies* (I, l. 58), and not at all in the *Sonnets*: the 'Angels' are enough, more than enough—what may lie beyond them is not for us—not yet.

I began with things [he wrote, in 1923, in a letter to a young girl] *which were the real confidants of my lonely childhood, and it is saying a great deal that I was able to get so far as animals without other help. . . Then Russia revealed herself to me and gave me brotherliness and the darkness of God, in whom only there is community. So I named him then, the God who had broken upon my day, and lived for a long while in the ante-chamber of his name, on my knees. . . Now you would hardly ever hear me name him, there is an indescribable discretion between us, and where once were proximity and penetration stretch new distances, just as in the atom, which modern science also conceives of as a universe in little. What is apprehensible escapes, transforms itself, one learns relationship instead of possession, and there arises a namelessness, that must begin once more in our relations with God, if we are to be perfect and free from subterfuge. The experience of feeling him withdraws behind an infinite delight in all that can be felt . . . his properties are taken away from God, the no longer sayable; fall back to the creation, to love and death. . .* (*Briefe aus Muzot*, 185).

[2] The phrase (whether Pico's or not) was certainly appropriated by Bacon, *Nov. Org.*, Bk. i, App. i: *Homo naturae minister et interpres, tantum facit et intellegit, quantum de naturae ordine, re vel mente observaverit; nec amplius sciet aut potest.*

phrase of Pico della Mirandola's, although no one has *experienced* the conception so intensely, so imagined it into all its possible implications, as Rilke. It appears, now and then, and as but one aspect of their thought, in many writers: in Hegel, for example, in Wordsworth and Coleridge, in Keats (in the wonderful letter on the world as a 'Vale of Soul-making'); but I can think of only two works which it dominates and interpenetrates: Traherne's *Centuries of Meditations* and Bernard Bosanquet's Gifford Lectures, *The Principle of Individuality and Value* and *The Value and Destiny of the Individual*; although Bosanquet's emphasis is rather on the individual who realizes himself through transmutation than on the 'externality' he transmutes. No view of life could be less anthropocentric than Rilke's, or more contrary to that absorption in man and his passions and ambitions which has expressed itself in European art and thought since the Renaissance. At times, one feels, he is nearer to the East than to the West— to the East from which we might still learn so much. Some remarks of Mr. Laurence Binyon's about the Chinese painters are peculiarly applicable to him:

One might have thought that this identification of the life of man with the life of nature would have produced falsities of apprehension; that human attributes would have been read into non-human existences. But no, it is European art that has done this. And why?

For how many centuries, with us, was man regarded as lord of the earth, the centre of the universe, and the rest of nature as but existing to minister to his needs and his desires!

One might say that man has been a monarch, looking to his subject-world only for service and for flattery, and just because of this lordly attitude he has failed to understand that subject-world, and, even more, has failed to understand himself.

There is a prose-poem of Turgenev which describes a dream in the underworld. The dreamer found himself in a vast subterranean hall where sat a tremendous figure, deeply pondering. He recognized that this was Nature herself. 'What occupies your thought,' he cried, 'what deep problem knits your forehead? Doubtless you ponder the great future of man, you scheme the steps by which he may arrive at his ultimate

perfection. Unfold, then, his glorious destiny to me.' But the figure answered: 'I know not of what you speak. There is a point at which the equilibrium between attack and defence has been lost, and the balance must be restored. The problem that absorbs me is how to give greater strength to the muscles on the leg of the flea.'

This was the disillusion and dethronement which nineteenth-century science prepared for the proud spirit of the European man. But for the Chinese philosopher no such disillusionment could happen. He needed no discovery of science to enlighten him; that enlightenment was part of his philosophy, his religion. He understood the continuity of the universe; he recognized the kinship between his own life and the life of animals and birds and trees and plants. And so he approached all life with reverence, giving each existence its due value. . . Man is lord of the world, but only because he has gone out into humbler existences than his own and has understood them, and returning to his own life, has found in that the supreme expression of the life which animates all things.[1]

How far may such a view of human destiny be regarded as satisfying and comprehensive? Perhaps the first criticism that suggests itself is that expressed in Cicero's reply to the lyre-player who declared that the soul was a harmony: *Hic ab arte sua non recessit.* Is not this, one may ask, an essentially artistic, an essentially æsthetic, view of life, and is not Rilke, after having wrestled with the problems of what most of us call 'real' life, once more (perhaps unconsciously) finding refuge in art, identifying art with life, and declaring that all men must become artists, creators, or re-creators, just as Plato insisted that there could be no happiness for humanity until philosophers became kings or kings philosophers? Rilke, however, never pretended to be a systematic thinker or philosopher, although he was sometimes so entirely possessed by particular intuitions that he often expressed them as though they represented all he had ever thought and felt; and it must be remembered that the view of life I have been trying to outline, which finds its most complete expression in the letter to his Polish translator and in the Sonnets to Orpheus, is to some

[1] *The Flight of the Dragon*, 25-7.

extent a reaction from the gloom and terror of the Elegies,—a reply (and, although, at the moment, he seems to have found it entirely satisfying), perhaps only a provisional reply, to their anxious probings and questionings. Indeed, he might almost have described the Elegies and the Sonnets, as Blake described the Songs of Innocence and of Experience, as representing 'the two states of the human soul', the Elegies representing it as sorrowful, the Sonnets as yet always rejoicing, the Elegies expressing its Lamentation, the Sonnets its Jubilation and Praise. *Just now I am more than ever in one-sidedness*, he wrote, shortly after he had completed the first two Elegies, to a young admirer, warning her that what she called his 'world' was still incomplete: *lamentation has frequently preponderated; yet I know that one is only entitled to make such full use of the strings of lamentation if one has resolved to play on them, by means of them, later, the whole of that triumphant jubilation that swells up behind everything hard and painful and endured, and without which voices are incomplete.*[1] Nevertheless, although it does not represent the whole of Rilke's mind and experience, to criticize even the outlook of the Sonnets adequately, one would have to delve very deeply into some of the most fundamental problems of life and thought. For Rilke, as for Aristotle, what Aristotle calls happiness and what Rilke calls 'reality'[2] is an ἐνέργεια τῆς ψυχῆς, an activity of the spirit, and the highest kind of activity is that impassioned contemplation, θεωρία, where thought becomes resolved into the thing it contemplates. One would have to decide such questions as these: Is thought superior to action? Is there a fundamental distinction between thought and action? Is theoretical activity impossible without the conditions which only practical activity can provide? Can we maintain that one kind of activity is superior to all others, is, in fact, the specifically human activity, and yet declare that it is neither possible nor desirable for all men to share it?

Phrases like *the hearers, the sayers, the receivers, the transmuters,*

[1] *Briefe aus den Jahren, 1907-1914*, 254.

[2] He defines 'Being' as 'the experiencing of the completest possible inner intensity' (*Briefe aus Muzot*, 128).

which Rilke uses continually, suggest a conception of man's reality, meaning, destiny—of man's very self, in fact—as being essentially *relative*, inseparably related to some *other* that he hears, says, receives, and transmutes—a conception as far as possible removed from the Renaissance conception of man as an isolated and self-centred individual with the world for his oyster, a defier of fate, a captain of his soul. Can it be doubted that Rilke's conception is more appropriate to the man of modern biology in the world of modern physics? Again, at last, as in the 'Ages of Faith', though with an indescribable difference, man is represented as the member of an *order*.[1]

It is no merely passive conception, for saying is complementary to hearing and transmuting to receiving, and no merely æsthetic and eclectic one, for again and again Rilke declares that we are only just where we persist in praising: indeed, the phrase *dennoch preisen* (praising in spite, praising nevertheless) is one of his most characteristic inventions. No exponent of 'realism' or 'naturalism' ever grappled more directly and relentlessly with terror and horror and ugliness than did the author of *Malte Laurids Brigge*, for whom Baudelaire's *Une Charogne* was a perpetual inspiration and example; no other affirmation is supported by a greater weight of what I have elsewhere called 'conquered negation'. 'In what is important and essential there is no injustice on the whole earth', he had written as early as 1901,[2] and his resolution to

[1] To say that we are trying to get round and up the spiral, to put the isolated, the finally desperate and destructive, Individual *in his place*, is perhaps the shortest way of expressing the central problem of our time. Rilke deals with half of this problem, perhaps the more important half, that of putting him religiously, philosophically, emotionally in his place ; the other half of the problem, that of putting him socially and politically in his place, has already, through our attempts to avoid it or circumvent it, involved us in vast expense of blood and tears. The solution of the first half will be *useless*—in the sense that there will be no civilization left to which it might be useful—without the solution of the second, and the solution of the second will be *worthless* except as a basis and preparation for the solution of the first.

[2] *Briefe und Tagebücher aus der Frühzeit 1899-1902*, 123.

accept and praise *everything* sometimes leads to very hard sayings—to the eleventh sonnet of the Second Part, for example, whose conclusion, I say it in all humility, has remained a hard saying for me. Is there not some deep inconsistency here, one may perhaps be tempted to ask; do we not feel throughout all Rilke's work, and particularly throughout his later work, on the one hand, a more and more urgent *exhortation*, and, on the other hand, something very like an assertion that whatever is, is right? Has he not forgotten something, as Prospero, at the moment when his triumph seemed complete, had forgotten something?—

> I had forgot that foul conspiracy
> Of the beast Caliban and his confederates
> Against my life.

'Saying' may indeed be the thing we are here for, but what of him whose only profit from language is that he knows how to curse? Receiving and transmuting may be our highest duties, but must we be content to receive what Caliban and his confederates leave us, to transmute what they have spoiled, and to 'persist in praising' until we feel their fingers round our throats? My ultimate (or, shall I say, my present?) feeling about the importance of Rilke and his testament is this: although I sometimes feel that there are serious limitations, omissions, and contradictions in his view of life (some of the gravest of which I have hinted at in my notes), I still believe that he has shown us, more clearly and profoundly than any other modern writer, our destiny, and that *reine Wohin*, that pure Whither, without which all political and revolutionary activity is but a raising of dust and a beating of the air. On the other hand, I believe that the conditions under which we can best fulfil that destiny can only be achieved and maintained by a kind of activity in which Rilke took little interest.[1] The distinction between theoretical and

[1] His attitude to political and social reform is expressed with crystal clarity in a letter written in 1924 to Professor Pongs, who published it in *Dichtung und Volkstum*, 1. Heft, 1936, 111-12. He admits that a feeling of brotherliness and community must have

practical activity may not, perhaps, be an ultimate one, but it is, and must for a long time remain, a very real and important one for us. Nevertheless, although we cannot afford to neglect practical means and material preconditions and to concentrate solely upon ends, and although we must keep an eye upon the doings of Caliban and his confederates as well as upon the stars, there is always a danger that, in our preoccupation with mere means, we may forget the ends they were originally intended to promote. Here, then, is the great value of Rilke, a poet who is always asking, and encouraging us to ask. What is life? What is the purpose of living? What is man's chief end?

been in his nature from the first, in order to have been so powerfully developed under the influence of Russia. *But what distinguishes such a joyful and natural responsiveness from social reform, as we understand it to-day, is a complete unwillingness, nay, repugnance, to alter any one's position, or, as the saying is, to improve it. Nobody's position in the world is such that it might not come to be of peculiar benefit to his soul. . . And I must confess that, whenever I have been compelled to share in the destiny of another, what, above all, seemed to me important and urgent was this : to help the afflicted one to recognize the peculiar and special conditions of his distress—an act which, every time, is not so much one of consolation as of (at first inconspicuous) enrichment. It seems to me that nothing will be established but disorder if the general endeavour (which is also an illusion!) presumes to attempt a schematic mitigation or removal of distresses—an attempt that encroaches on the other person's freedom far more powerfully than distress itself, which, with indescribable accommodations and almost tenderly, imparts to those who confide in it directions for escaping from it, if not externally, then internally. The desire to improve a person's position presupposes an insight into his circumstances such as not even the poet has into a creature of his own invention.*

Here, surely, we have an example of that hypostatization of the actual towards which Rilke's *dennoch preisen*, like Absolute Idealism, naturally tends. Nevertheless, although I cannot accept the letter of this faith, I think I can accept its spirit, and I would warn ardent socialists not to be too hasty with their judgements, to remember the commandment, 'Judge not, that ye be not judged.' For Rilke is here speaking of something too often forgotten by socialists and planners and politicians, of something which he, like those Russian novelists he loved, calls 'the soul'.

SONNETS TO ORPHEUS

FIRST PART

I

Da stieg ein Baum. O reine Übersteigung!
O Orpheus singt! O hoher Baum im Ohr!
Und alles schwieg. Doch selbst in der Verschweigung
ging neuer Anfang, Wink und Wandlung vor.

Tiere aus Stille drangen aus dem klaren
gelösten Wald von Lager und Genist;
und da ergab sich, daß sie nicht aus List
und nicht aus Angst in sich so leise waren,

sondern aus Hören. Brüllen, Schrei, Geröhr
schien klein in ihren Herzen. Und wo eben
kaum eine Hütte war, dies zu empfangen,

ein Unterschlupf aus dunkelstem Verlangen
mit einem Zugang, dessen Pfosten beben,—
da schufst du ihnen Tempel im Gehör.

A TREE ascending there. O pure transcension!
O Orpheus sings! O tall tree in the ear!
All noise suspended, yet in that suspension
what new beginning, beckoning, change, appear!

Creatures of silence pressing through the clear
disintricated wood from lair and nest;
and neither cunning, it grew manifest,
had made them breathe so quietly, nor fear,

but only hearing. Roar, cry, bell they found
within their hearts too small. And where before
less than a hut had harboured what came thronging,

a refuge tunnelled out of dimmest longing
with lowly entrance through a quivering door,
you built them temples in their sense of sound.

II

Und fast ein Mädchen wars und ging hervor
aus diesem einigen Glück von Sang und Leier
und glänzte klar durch ihre Frühlingsschleier
und machte sich ein Bett in meinem Ohr.

Und schlief in mir. Und alles war ihr Schlaf.
Die Bäume, die ich je bewundert, diese
fühlbare Ferne, die gefühlte Wiese
und jedes Staunen, das mich selbst betraf.

Sie schlief die Welt. Singender Gott, wie hast
du sie vollendet, daß sie nicht begehrte,
erst wach zu sein? Sieh, sie erstand und schlief.

Wo ist ihr Tod? Oh, wirst du dies Motiv
erfinden noch, eh sich dein Lied verzehrte?—
Wo sinkt sie hin aus mir? . . . Ein Mädchen fast. . .

II

And almost maiden-like was what drew near
from that twin-happiness of song and lyre,
and shone so clearly through her spring attire,
and made herself a bed within my ear.

And slept in me sleep that was everything:
the trees I'd always loved, the unrevealed,
treadable distances, the trodden field,
and all my strangest self-discovering.

She slept the world. O singing god, and stayed,
while you were shaping her, with no desire
to wake, and only rose to fall asleep?

Where is her death? Oh, shall you find this deep
unsounded theme before your song expire?
Sinking to where from me? . . . Almost a maid. .

III

Ein Gott vermags. Wie aber, sag mir, soll
ein Mann ihm folgen durch die schmale Leier?
Sein Sinn ist Zwiespalt. An der Kreuzung zweier
Herzwege steht kein Tempel für Apoll.

Gesang, wie du ihn lehrst, ist nicht Begehr,
nicht Werbung um ein endlich noch Erreichtes;
Gesang ist Dasein. Für den Gott ein Leichtes.
Wann aber sind wir? Und wann wendet er

an unser Sein die Erde und die Sterne?
Dies ists nicht, Jüngling, daß du liebst, wenn auch
die Stimme dann den Mund dir aufstößt,—lerne

vergessen, daß du aufsangst. Das verrinnt.
In Wahrheit singen, ist ein andrer Hauch.
Ein Hauch um nichts. Ein Wehn im Gott. Ein Wind.

III

A GOD can do it. But can a man expect
to penetrate the narrow lyre and follow?
His sense is discord. Temples for Apollo
are not found where two heart-ways intersect.

For song, as taught by you, is not desire,
not wooing of something finally attained;
song is existence. For the god unstrained.
But when shall we *exist*? And he require

the earth and heavens to exist for us?
It's more than being in love, boy, though your ringing
voice may have flung your dumb mouth open thus:

learn to forget those fleeting ecstasies.
Far other is the breath of real singing.
An aimless breath. A stirring in the god. A breeze.

IV

O IHR Zärtlichen, tretet zuweilen
in den Atem, der euch nicht meint,
laßt ihn an eueren Wangen sich teilen,
hinter euch zittert er, wieder vereint.

O ihr Seligen, o ihr Heilen,
die ihr der Anfang der Herzen scheint.
Bogen der Pfeile und Ziele von Pfeilen,
ewiger glänzt euer Lächeln verweint.

Fürchtet euch nicht zu leiden, die Schwere,
gebt sie zurück an der Erde Gewicht;
schwer sind die Berge, schwer sind die Meere.

Selbst die als Kinder ihr pflanztet, die Bäume,
wurden zu schwer längst; ihr trüget sie nicht.
Aber die Lüfte. . . aber die Räume. . .

IV

STEP now and then, you gentle-hearted,
into the breath not breathed for you,
let it blow over your cheeks, and, parted,
quiver behind you, united anew.

Blissful spirits no conflict harrows,
starters, surely, of many a heart.
Bows for arrows and targets for arrows,
divinelier smiling through tears that smart.

Be not afraid of suffering, render
heaviness back to the earth again;
mountains are heavy, and seas, and the tender

trees that in childhood you set in their places
have grown too heavy for you to sustain.
Ah, but the breezes. . . ah, but the spaces. . .

ERRICHTET keinen Denkstein. Laßt die Rose
nur jedes Jahr zu seinen Gunsten blühn.
Denn Orpheus ists. Seine Metamorphose
in dem und dem. Wir sollen uns nicht mühn

um andre Namen. Ein für alle Male
ists Orpheus, wenn es singt. Er kommt und geht.
Ists nicht schon viel, wenn er die Rosenschale
um ein paar Tage manchmal übersteht?

O wie er schwinden muß, daß ihrs begrifft!
Und wenn ihm selbst auch bangte, daß er schwände.
Indem sein Wort das Hiersein übertrifft,

ist er schon dort, wohin ihrs nicht begleitet.
Der Leier Gitter zwängt ihm nicht die Hände.
Und er gehorcht, indem er überschreitet.

RAISE no commemorating stone. The roses
shall blossom every summer for his sake.
For this is Orpheus. His metamorphosis
in this one and in that. We should not take

thought about other names. Once and for all,
it's Orpheus when there's song. He comes and goes.
Is it not much if sometimes, by some small
number of days, he shall outlive the rose?

Could you but feel his passing's needfulness!
Though he himself may dread the hour drawing nigher.
Already, when his words pass earthliness,

he passes with them far beyond your gaze.
His hands unhindered by the trellised lyre,
in all his over-steppings he obeys.

VI

Ist er ein Hiesiger? Nein, aus beiden
Reichen erwuchs seine weite Natur.
Kundiger böge die Zweige der Weiden,
wer die Wurzeln der Weiden erfuhr.

Geht ihr zu Bette, so laßt auf dem Tische
Brot nicht und Milch nicht; die Toten ziehts—.
Aber er, der Beschwörende, mische
unter der Milde des Augenlids

ihre Erscheinung in alles Geschaute;
und der Zauber von Erdrauch und Raute
sei ihm so wahr wie der klarste Bezug.

Nichts kann das gültige Bild ihm verschlimmern;
sei es aus Gräbern, sei es aus Zimmern,
rühme er Fingerring, Spange und Krug.

VI

Does he belong here? No, his spreading
nature from either domain has sprung.
Withes would they weave in a cunninger wedding,
hands to which roots of the willow had clung.

Going to bed, never leave on the table
bread or milk, forcing the dead to rise.—
He shall invoke them, he who is able
to mingle in mildness of closing eyes

their appearance with all that we view;
he for whom magic of earth-smoke and rue
shall be clear as the clearest link between things.

Nothing can weaken the image he saves,
whether from dwellings, whether from graves,
glorifying pitchers or bracelets or rings.

VII

RÜHMEN, das ists! Ein zum Rühmen Bestellter,
ging er hervor wie das Erz aus des Steins
Schweigen. Sein Herz, o vergängliche Kelter
eines den Menschen unendlichen Weins.

Nie versagt ihm die Stimme am Staube,
wenn ihn das göttliche Beispiel ergreift.
Alles wird Weinberg, alles wird Traube,
in seinem fühlenden Süden gereift.

Nicht in den Grüften der Könige Moder
straft ihm die Rühmung Lügen, oder
daß von den Göttern ein Schatten fällt.

Er ist einer der bleibenden Boten,
der noch weit in die Türen der Toten
Schalen mit rühmlichen Früchten hält.

VII

PRAISING, that's it! As a praiser and blesser
he came like the ore from the taciturn mine.
Came with his heart, oh, transient presser,
for men, of a never-exhaustible wine.

Voice never fails him for things lacking lustre,
sacred example will open his mouth.
All becomes vineyard, all becomes cluster,
warmed by his sympathy's ripening south.

Crypts and the mouldering kings who lie there
do not belie his praising, neither
doubt, when a shadow obscures our days.

He is a messenger always attendant,
reaching far through their gates resplendent
dishes of fruit for the dead to praise.

VIII

Nur im Raum der Rühmung darf die Klage
gehn, die Nymphe des geweinten Quells,
wachend über unserm Niederschlage,
daß er klar sei an demselben Fels,

der die Tore trägt und die Altäre.—
Sieh, um ihre stillen Schultern früht
das Gefühl, daß sie die jüngste wäre
unter den Geschwistern im Gemüt.

Jubel weiß, und Sehnsucht ist geständig,—
nur die Klage lernt noch; mädchenhändig
zählt sie nächtelang das alte Schlimme.

Aber plötzlich, schräg und ungeübt,
hält sie doch ein Sternbild unsrer Stimme
in den Himmel, den ihr Hauch nicht trübt.

VIII

ONLY Praise's realm may Lamentation
traverse, naiad of the weeping spring;
watching over our precipitation,
till our tears are crystals, blazoning

that same rock that bears the gates and altars.
Round her quiet shoulders, as she broods,
look, a tiny dawn of feeling falters
she's the youngest of the sister-moods.

Triumph knows, and Longing makes confession,-
Lamentation learns: in nightly session
counts, with maiden-hands, old tribulation.

Then, however inexpertly limned,
lifts our voices in a constellation
to the sky her breathing has not dimmed.

IX

Nur wer die Leier schon hob
auch unter Schatten,
darf das unendliche Lob
ahnend erstatten.

Nur wer mit Toten vom Mohn
aß, von dem ihren,
wird nicht den leisesten Ton
wieder verlieren.

Mag auch die Spieglung im Teich
oft uns verschwimmen:
Wisse das Bild.

Erst in dem Doppelbereich
werden die Stimmen
ewig und mild.

IX

ONLY by him with whose lays
shades were enraptured
may the celestial praise
faintly be captured.

Only who tasted their own
flower with the sleeping
holds the most fugitive tone
ever in keeping.

Make but the mirroring pond
's fleetingly tendered
image endure!

Not till both here and beyond
voices are rendered
lasting and pure.

EUCH, die ihr nie mein Gefühl verließt,
grüß ich, antikische Sarkophage,
die das fröhliche Wasser römischer Tage
als ein wandelndes Lied durchfließt.

Oder jene so offenen, wie das Aug
eines frohen erwachenden Hirten,
—innen voll Stille und Bienensaug—
denen entzückte Falter entschwirrten;

alle, die man dem Zweifel entreißt,
grüß ich, die wiedergeöffneten Munde,
die schon wußten, was schweigen heißt.

Wissen wirs, Freunde, wissen wirs nicht?
Beides bildet die zögernde Stunde
in dem menschlichen Angesicht.

X

WELCOME, whose meaning in me so long,
coffins of stone, has been quietly growing,-
you the Romans' gladdening water's flowing
through to-day as a wandering song;

you also, as open to all delight
as a wakening shepherd's eyes,
full of stillness and flowering nettle and flight
of delirious butterflies;

welcome to all we have snatched like this
from doubt, the mouths re-endowed with power
of speech, after knowing what silence is.

Knowing it or not, friends—which is our case?—
Both alike has the lingering hour
graved in the human face.

XI

Sieh den Himmel. Heißt kein Sternbild „Reiter"?
Denn dies ist uns seltsam eingeprägt:
dieser Stolz aus Erde. Und ein zweiter,
der ihn treibt und hält und den er trägt.

Ist nicht so, gejagt und dann gebändigt,
diese sehnige Natur des Seins?
Weg und Wendung. Doch ein Druck verständigt.
Neue Weite. Und die zwei sind eins.

Aber sind sie's? Oder meinen beide
nicht den Weg, den sie zusammen tun?
Namenlos schon trennt sie Tisch und Weide.

Auch die sternische Verbindung trügt.
Doch uns freue eine Weile nun,
der Figur zu glauben. Das genügt.

XI

SEARCH the heavens. Is no 'Horse-man' reckoned
there in starry outline? For we share
much with that proud earth. And with a second,
driving, curbing, whom it has to bear.

Is not this, first hunted and then broken,
just the nature of the course we run?
Turf and turning. Pressure, nothing spoken.
New horizons. And the two are one.

Are they though? Or are they never able
both to choose the way they both pursue?
Severingly unlike are field and table.

Even those uniting stars beguile.
Still, it gladdens and suffices too
to believe the symbol for a while.

XII

Heil dem Geist, der uns verbinden mag;
denn wir leben wahrhaft in Figuren.
Und mit kleinen Schritten gehn die Uhren
neben unserm eigentlichen Tag.

Ohne unsern wahren Platz zu kennen,
handeln wir aus wirklichem Bezug.
Die Antennen fühlen die Antennen,
und die leere Ferne trug. . .

Reine Spannung. O Musik der Kräfte!
Ist nicht durch die läßlichen Geschäfte
jede Störung von dir abgelenkt?

Selbst wenn sich der Bauer sorgt und handelt,
wo die Saat in Sommer sich verwandelt,
reicht er niemals hin. Die Erde schenkt.

XII

HAIL, the spirit able to unite!
For we truly live our lives in symbol,
and with tiny paces move our nimble
clocks beside our real day and night.

Still we somehow act in true relation,
we that find ourselves we know not where.
Distant station feels for distant station—
what seemed empty space could bear. . .

purest tension. Harmony of forces!
Do not just our limited resources
keep all interference from your flow?

Does the farmer, anxiously arranging,
ever reach to where the seed is changing
into summer? Does not Earth bestow?

XIII

Voller Apfel, Birne und Banane,
Stachelbeere. . . Alles dieses spricht
Tod und Leben in den Mund. . . Ich ahne. . .
Lest es einem Kind vom Angesicht,

wenn es sie erschmeckt. Dies kommt von weit.
Wird euch langsam namenlos im Munde?
Wo sonst Worte waren, fließen Funde,
aus dem Fruchtfleisch überrascht befreit.

Wagt zu sagen, was ihr Apfel nennt.
Diese Süße, die sich erst verdichtet,
um, im Schmecken leise aufgerichtet,

klar zu werden, wach und transparent,
doppeldeutig, sonnig, erdig, hiesig—:
O Erfahrung, Fühlung, Freude—, riesig!

XIII

BANANA, rounded apple, russet pear,
gooseberry. . . Does not all this convey
life and death into your mouth? . . . It's there! . .
Read it on a child's face any day,

when it tastes them. What infinity!
Can't you feel inside your mouth a growing
mysteriousness, and, where words were, a flowing
of suddenly released discovery?

Dare to say what 'apple' has implied!
Sweetness, concentrated, self-repressing,
slowly yielding to the tongue's caressing,

growing awake, transparent, clarified,
double-meaning'd, sunshine-full, terrestrial:—
O experience, feeling, joy,—celestial!

XIV

Wir gehen um mit Blume, Weinblatt, Frucht.
Sie sprechen nicht die Sprache nur des Jahres.
Aus Dunkel steigt ein buntes Offenbares
und hat vielleicht den Glanz der Eifersucht

der Toten an sich, die die Erde stärken.
Was wissen wir von ihrem Teil an dem?
Es ist seit lange ihre Art, den Lehm
mit ihrem freien Marke zu durchmärken.

Nun fragt sich nur: tun sie es gern? . . .
Drängt diese Frucht, ein Werk von schweren Sklaven,
geballt zu uns empor, zu ihren Herrn?

Sind sie die Herrn, die bei den Wurzeln schlafen,
und gönnen uns aus ihren Überflüssen
dies Zwischending aus stummer Kraft und Küssen?

XIV

Our life-long neighbours, flower, vine-leaf, fruit,
they do not merely speak the season's speech.
These things so brightly manifest, that reach
from darkness, gleam, it may be, with the mute

envy of those through whom the earth grows strong.
What do we know about the part they play?
To mix their unused marrow with the clay
has been their second-nature for so long.

But do they do it of their own accords?
Is it by sullen slaves that these clenched fruits
are laboured and thrust forth to us, their lords?

Are *they* the lords, who sleep beside the roots,
and grant us, what their plenty never misses,
this middle-thing, made of dumb strength and kisses?

XV

WARTET . . . , das schmeckt. . . Schon ists auf der Flucht.
. . . Wenig Musik nur, ein Stampfen, ein Summen—:
Mädchen, ihr warmen, Mädchen, ihr stummen,
tanzt den Geschmack der erfahrenen Frucht!

Tanzt die Orange. Wer kann sie vergessen,
wie sie, ertrinkend in sich, sich wehrt
wider ihr Süßsein. Ihr habt sie besessen.
Sie hat sich köstlich zu euch bekehrt.

Tanzt die Orange. Die wärmere Landschaft.
werft sie aus euch, daß die reife erstrahle
in Lüften der Heimat! Erglühte, enthüllt

Düfte um Düfte! Schafft die Verwandtschaft
mit der reinen, sich weigernden Schale,
mit dem Saft, der die glückliche füllt!

XV

STAY, . . . this is good. . . But already it's flown.
. . . Murmurs of music, a footing, a humming:-
Maidens, so warm, so mute, are you coming
to dance the taste of this fruit we've known?

Dance the orange. Who can forget it,
the way it would drown in itself,—how, too,
it would struggle against its sweetness. And yet it
's been yours. Been deliciously changed into you.

Dance the orange. The landscape, create it
warm from yourselves, till its airs be enfolding
again the splendour they ripened! Loose,

glowingly, fragrance on fragrance! Relate it
all to the peel, so chastely withholding,
all to the joyfully plentiful juice!

XVI

Du, mein Freund, bist einsam, weil. . .
Wir machen mit Worten und Fingerzeigen
uns allmählich die Welt zu eigen,
vielleicht ihren schwächsten, gefährlichsten Teil.

Wer zeigt mit Fingern auf einen Geruch?—
Doch von den Kräften, die uns bedrohten,
fühlst du viele. . . Du kennst die Toten,
und du erschrickst vor dem Zauberspruch.

Sieh, nun heißt es zusammen ertragen
Stückwerk und Teile, als sei es das Ganze.
Dir helfen, wird schwer sein. Vor allem: pflanze

mich nicht in dein Herz. Ich wüchse zu schnell.
Doch meines Herrn Hand will ich führen und sagen:
Hier. Das ist Esau in seinem Fell.

XVI

THE reason, friend, you feel so alone. . .
With our words and our pointings, little by little,
we're making—who knows?—perhaps the most brittle,
most perilous part of the world our own.

Who among us can point to a smell?—
Yet there's many a power we obscurely dread
which you can feel. . . You're aware of the dead,
and you shrink away from the conjurer's spell.

Look, our tasks are really the same:
dealt out a puzzle of parts, to endeavour
to make it a whole. Hard to help you. Never

plant me in your heart. I should grow too well.
But I will guide *my* master's hand and exclaim:
This is Esau here in his own rough fell.

XVII

Zu unterst der Alte, verworrn,
all der Erbauten
Wurzel, verborgener Born,
den sie nie schauten.

Sturmhelm und Jägerhorn,
Spruch von Ergrauten,
Männer im Bruderzorn,
Frauen wie Lauten. . .

Drängender Zweig an Zweig,
nirgends ein freier. . .
Einer! o steig. . . o steig. . .

Aber sie brechen noch.
Dieser erst oben doch
biegt sich zur Leier.

XVII

UNDERMOST he, the earth-bound
root of uprearing
multitudes, source underground,
never appearing.

Helmet and hunting-horn,
words of the aging,
rage between brothers-born,
women assuaging.

Branch on branch, time on time,
vainly they spire. . .
One free! Oh, climb. . . oh, climb. .

One, though the others drop,
curves, as it scales the top,
into a lyre.

XVIII

Hörst du das Neue, Herr,
dröhnen und beben?
Kommen Verkündiger,
die es erheben.

Zwar ist kein Hören heil
in dem Durchtobtsein,
doch der Maschinenteil
will jetzt gelobt sein.

Sieh, die Maschine:
wie sie sich wälzt und rächt
und uns entstellt und schwächt.

Hat sie aus uns auch Kraft,
sie, ohne Leidenschaft,
treibe und diene.

XVIII

MASTER, there's something new
droning and drumming.
It has its heralds too,
praising its coming.

Ill though our ears withstand
such perturbation,
now the machines demand
their celebration.

Source of our weakness
now, and in vengeful rage
ruining our heritage,

us shall these things at length,
us, who supply their strength,
serve in all meekness.

XIX

Wandelt sich rasch auch die Welt
wie Wolkengestalten,
alles Vollendete fällt
heim zum Uralten.

Über dem Wandel und Gang,
weiter und freier,
währt noch dein Vor-Gesang,
Gott mit der Leier.

Nicht sind die Leiden erkannt,
nicht ist die Liebe gelernt,
und was im Tod uns entfernt,

ist nicht entschleiert.
Einzig das Lied überm Land
heiligt und feiert.

XIX

CHANGE though the world may as fast
as cloud-collections,
home to the changeless at last
fall all perfections.

Over the thrust and the throng,
freer and higher,
echoes your preluding song,
god with the lyre.

Sorrow we misunderstand,
love we have still to begin,
death and what's hidden therein

await unveiling.
Song alone circles the land,
hallowing and hailing.

XX

Dir aber, Herr, o was weih ich dir, sag,
der das Ohr den Geschöpfen gelehrt?—
Mein Erinnern an einen Frühlingstag,
seinen Abend, in Rußland—, ein Pferd. . .

Herüber vom Dorf kam der Schimmel allein,
an der vorderen Fessel den Pflock,
um die Nacht auf den Wiesen allein zu sein;
wie schlug seiner Mähne Gelock

an den Hals im Takte des Übermuts,
bei dem grob gehemmten Galopp.
Wie sprangen die Quellen des Rossebluts!

Der fühlte die Weiten, und ob!
der sang und der hörte—, dein Sagenkreis
war in ihm geschlossen.
Sein Bild: ich weih's.

XX

But what shall I offer you, Master, say,
you who taught all creatures to hear?—
The remembered evening of one spring day,
in Russia: a horse drawing near. . .

White, coming up from the village alone,
on one fetlock a tethering-block,
to spend the night alone, on his own:
how gaily he tossed the shock

of his mane in time to his mounting mood
on that rudely encumbered race!
How they leapt, the springs of the equine blood!

He had followed the call of space.
He sang and he listened—your cycle swept
unbrokenly through him.
His image: accept.

XXI

FRÜHLING ist wiedergekommen. Die Erde
ist wie ein Kind, das Gedichte weiß;
viele, o viele. . . Für die Beschwerde
langen Lernens bekommt sie den Preis.

Streng war ihr Lehrer. Wir mochten das Weiße
an dem Barte des alten Manns.
Nun, wie das Grüne, das Blaue heiße,
dürfen wir fragen: sie kanns, sie kanns!

Erde, die frei hat, du glückliche, spiele
nun mit den Kindern. Wir wollen dich fangen,
fröhliche Erde. Dem Frohsten gelingts.

O, was der Lehrer sie lehrte, das Viele,
und was gedruckt steht in Wurzeln und langen
schwierigen Stämmen: sie singts, sie singts!

XXI

SPRING has come again. Earth's a-bubble
with all those poems she knows by heart,—
oh, so many. . . With prize for the trouble
of such long learning, her holidays start.

Stern was her teacher, he'd over-task her
from time to time; but we liked the snows
in the old man's beard; and now we can ask her
what green, what blue are: she knows, she knows.

Eager to catch you, Earth, happy creature,
play with the children now outpouring!
Conqueringly foremost the happiest springs.

All she has ever been taught by her teacher,
all that's imprinted in roots and soaring
difficult stems,—she sings, she sings!

XXII

Wir sind die Treibenden.
Aber den Schritt der Zeit,
nehmt ihn als Kleinigkeit
im immer Bleibenden.

Alles das Eilende
wird schon vorüber sein;
denn das Verweilende
erst weiht uns ein.

Knaben, o werft den Mut
nicht in die Schnelligkeit,
nicht in den Flugversuch.

Alles ist ausgeruht:
Dunkel und Helligkeit,
Blume und Buch.

XXII

We wax for waning.
Count, though, Time's journeying
as but a little thing
in the Remaining.

End of unmeasured
hasting will soon begin;
only what's leisured
leads us within.

Boys, don't be drawn too far
into attempts at flight,
into mere swiftness.—Look

how rested all things are:
shadow and fall of light,
blossom and book.

XXIII

Oerst dann, wenn der Flug
nicht mehr um seinetwillen
wird in die Himmelsstillen
steigen, sich selber genug,

um in lichten Profilen,
als das Gerät, das gelang,
Liebling der Winde zu spielen,
sicher schwenkend und schlank,—

erst wenn ein reines Wohin
wachsender Apparate
Knabenstolz überwiegt,

wird, überstürzt von Gewinn,
jener den Fernen Genahte
sein, was er einsam erfliegt.

XXIII

ONLY when flight shall soar
not for its own sake only
up into heaven's lonely
silence, and be no more

merely the lightly profiling,
proudly successful tool,
playmate of winds, beguiling
time there, careless and cool:

only when some pure Whither
outweighs boyish insistence
on the achieved machine

will who has journeyed thither
be, in that fading distance,
all that his flight has been.

XXIV

Sollen wir unsere uralte Freundschaft, die großen
niemals werbenden Götter, weil sie der harte
Stahl, den wir streng erzogen, nicht kennt, verstoßen
oder sie plötzlich suchen auf einer Karte?

Diese gewaltigen Freunde, die uns die Toten
nehmen, rühren nirgends an unsere Räder.
Unsere Gastmähler haben wir weit—, unsere Bäder,
fortgerückt, und ihre uns lang schon zu langsamen Boten

überholen wir immer. Einsamer nun aufeinander
ganz angewiesen, ohne einander zu kennen,
führen wir nicht mehr die Pfade als schöne Mäander,

sondern als Grade. Nur noch in Dampfkesseln brennen
die einstigen Feuer und heben die Hämmer, die immer
größern. Wir aber nehmen an Kraft ab, wie Schwimmer.

XXIV

SHALL those primeval friends of ours, the unfated,
ever-unsuing gods, because they are nought for
the hard-faced steel we have sternly nursed, be repudiated,
or else within some map be suddenly sought for?

Those overmastering friends, who are always reaving
the dead from us, brush nowhere against our wheels.
Now we have left the welcoming bath and the old guest-meals
far behind, we find their messengers tardy beyond believing,

we that can overtake them. Lonely misunderstanders
one of another we wholly depend on at every turning,
nowadays the ways we led in lovely meanders

run right ahead. In boilers only are burning
the former fires and heaving the heavier-growing
hammers. But we are like swimmers whose strength is going.

XXV

Dich aber will ich nun, dich, die ich kannte
wie eine Blume, von der ich den Namen nicht weiß,
noch ein Mal erinnern und ihnen zeigen, Entwandte,
schöne Gespielin des unüberwindlichen Schreis.

Tänzerin erst, die plötzlich, den Körper voll Zögern,
anhielt, als göß man ihr Jungsein ins Erz;
trauernd und lauschend—. Da, von den hohen Vermögern
fiel ihr Musik in das veränderte Herz.

Nah war die Krankheit. Schon von den Schatten bemächtigt,
drängte verdunkelt das Blut, doch, wie flüchtig verdächtigt,
trieb es in seinen natürlichen Frühling hervor.

Wieder und wieder, von Dunkel und Sturz unterbrochen,
glänzte es irdisch. Bis es nach schrecklichem Pochen
trat in das trostlos offene Tor.

XXV

Now it is you, though, you whom I never
knew but as some unnamable flower, I will try
once more to recall and show them, vanished for ever,
beautiful playmate of, ah, the invincible cry.

Dancer, who all of a sudden, her body rebelling,
stopped, as her youth had been bronzed into art,
mournfully hearkening.—Then, from the Ever-Impelling,
music entered into her altered heart.

Sickness was near. In grip of the shadows already,
darklier thrusted the blood, though defiantly ready
to surge to its natural spring-tide just as before.

Time and again out of darkness emerged with a mocking
earthly effulgence. Then, after terrible knocking,
entered the hopelessly open door.

XXVI

Du aber, Göttlicher, du, bis zuletzt noch Ertöner,
da ihn der Schwarm der verschmähten Mänaden befiel,
hast ihr Geschrei übertönt mit Ordnung, du Schöner,
aus den Zerstörenden stieg dein erbauendes Spiel.

Keine war da, daß sie Haupt dir und Leier zerstör',
wie sie auch rangen und rasten; und alle die scharfen
Steine, die sie nach deinem Herzen warfen,
wurden zu Sanftem an dir und begabt mit Gehör.

Schließlich zerschlugen sie dich, von der Rache gehetzt,
während dein Klang noch in Löwen und Felsen verweilte
und in den Bäumen und Vögeln. Dort singst du noch jetzt.

O du verlorener Gott! Du unendliche Spur!
Nur weil dich reißend zuletzt die Feindschaft verteilte,
sind wir die Hörenden jetzt und ein Mund der Natur.

XXVI

You that could sound till the end, though, immortal accorder,
seized by the scorn-maddened Maenads' intemperate throng,
wholly outsounded their cries when in musical order
soared from the swarm of deformers your formative song.

Wrestle and rage as they might on that fated career,
none was able to shatter your head or your lyre:
hard stones hurled at your heart could only acquire
gentleness, soon as they struck you, and power to hear.

Though they destroyed you at last and revenge had its will,
sound of you lingered in lions and rocks you were first to
enthral, in the trees and the birds. You are singing there still.

O you god that has vanished! You infinite track!
Only because dismembering hatred dispersed you
are we hearers to-day and a mouth which else Nature would lack.

SONNETS TO ORPHEUS

SECOND PART

ATMEN, du unsichtbares Gedicht!
Immerfort um das eigne
Sein rein ausgetauschter Weltraum. Gegengewicht,
in dem ich mich rhythmisch ereigne.

Einzige Welle, deren
allmähliches Meer ich bin;
sparsamstes du von allen möglichen Meeren,—
Raumgewinn.

Wie viele von diesen Stellen der Räume waren schon
innen in mir. Manche Winde
sind wie mein Sohn.

Erkennst du mich, Luft, du, voll noch einst meiniger Orte?
Du, einmal glatte Rinde,
Rundung und Blatt meiner Worte.

BREATHING, invisible poem! That great
world-space, at each inhalation
exchanged for this human existence. Counter-weight
of my rhythmical realization.

Single wavelet, whose slowly
gathering sea am I;
you, of all possible seas most frugal and lowly,—
space laid-by.

Of all these places in space, how many a one
has been within me already. Many a wind
seems like a son.

Do you know me, air, still full of my dwelling-places?
You, the one-time smooth-skinned
rondure and leaf of my phrases.

II

So wie dem Meister manchmal das eilig
nähere Blatt den wirklichen Strich
abnimmt: so nehmen oft Spiegel das heilig
einzige Lächeln der Mädchen in sich,

wenn sie den Morgen erproben, allein,—
oder im Glanze der dienenden Lichter.
Und in das Atmen der echten Gesichter,
später, fällt nur ein Widerschein.

Was haben Augen einst ins umrußte
lange Verglühn der Kamine geschaut:
Blicke des Lebens, für immer verlorne.

Ach, der Erde, wer kennt die Verluste?
Nur, wer mit dennoch preisendem Laut
sänge das Herz, das ins Ganze geborne.

II

JUST as the handiest paper snatches
sometimes for ever the master-stroke,
often only the mirror catches
smiles that nothing will re-evoke

from maidens approving the morning alone,
or the image obsequious lamp-light graces;
and later the real, the breathing faces
merely reflect what was once their own.

What have eyes not gazed into quivering flosses
glowing among logs that have ceased to blaze?—
Glimpses of living, beyond recall.

Earth, O Earth, who could tell your losses?
Only who sang with unfaltering praise
of the heart, born into the midst of it all.

III

SPIEGEL: noch nie hat man wissend beschrieben,
was ihr in euerem Wesen seid.
Ihr, wie mit lauter Löchern von Sieben
erfüllten Zwischenräume der Zeit.

Ihr, noch des leeren Saales Verschwender—,
wenn es dämmert, wie Wälder weit. . .
Und der Lüster geht wie ein Sechzehn-Ender
durch eure Unbetretbarkeit.

Manchmal seid ihr voll Malerei.
Einige scheinen in euch gegangen—,
andere schicktet ihr scheu vorbei.

Aber die Schönste wird bleiben, bis
drüben in ihre enthaltenen Wangen
eindrang der klare, gelöste Narziß.

III

MIRRORS: no one has yet distilled with
patient knowledge your fugitive
essence. You spaces in time, that are filled with
holes like those of a sieve.

Squandering the empty ball-room's pomp,
deep as forests when twilight broods. . .
And, like sixteen-pointers, the lustres romp
through your virginal solitudes.

Pictures crowd you at times. A few
seem to be taken right within you,
shyly to others you wave adieu.

There, though, the fairest will always be,
till through to her lips withheld continue
Narcissus, released into lucency.

IV

O DIESES ist das Tier, das es nicht gibt.
Sie wußtens nicht und habens jeden Falls
—sein Wandeln, seine Haltung, seinen Hals,
bis in des stillen Blickes Licht—geliebt.

Zwar war es nicht. Doch weil sie's liebten, ward
ein reines Tier. Sie ließen immer Raum.
Und in dem Raume, klar und ausgespart,
erhob es leicht sein Haupt und brauchte kaum

zu sein. Sie nährten es mit keinem Korn,
nur immer mit der Möglichkeit, es sei.
Und die gab solche Stärke an das Tier,

daß es aus sich ein Stirnhorn trieb. Ein Horn.
Zu einer Jungfrau kam es weiß herbei—
und war im Silber-Spiegel und in ihr.

IV

THIS is the creature there has never been.
They never knew it, and yet, none the less,
they loved the way it moved, its suppleness,
its neck, its very gaze, mild and serene.

Not there, because they loved it, it behaved
as though it were. They always left some space.
And in that clear unpeopled space they saved
it lightly reared its head, with scarce a trace

of not being there. They fed it, not with corn,
but only with the possibility
of being. And that was able to confer

such strength, its brow put forth a horn. One horn.
Whitely it stole up to a maid,—to *be*
within the silver mirror and in her.

BLUMENMUSKEL, der der Anemone
Wiesenmorgen nach und nach erschließt,
bis in ihren Schooß das polyphone
Licht der lauten Himmel sich ergießt,

in den stillen Blütenstern gespannter
Muskel des unendlichen Empfangs,
manchmal so von Fülle übermannter,
daß der Ruhewink des Untergangs

kaum vermag die weitzurückgeschnellten
Blätterränder dir zurückzugeben:
du, Entschluß und Kraft von wieviel Welten!

Wir Gewaltsamen, wir währen länger.
Aber wann, in welchem aller Leben,
sind wir endlich offen und Empfänger?

V

FLOWER-MUSCLE, gradually releasing
the anemone's pale meadow-day,
till at length into her lap unceasing
sky-light pours its polyphonic ray;

muscle stretching out that starry-flowered
quietness for endless welcoming;
so at times by fulness overpowered
that the restward call of evening

almost fails to bring your far-extended
petal-edges back to you once more:
world of will and power uncomprehended!

We, the violent, are not so fleeting.
Through what lives though must we pass before
we reach that state of open-hearted greeting?

VI

Rose, du thronende, denen im Altertume
warst du ein Kelch mit einfachem Rand.
Uns aber bist du die volle zahllose Blume,
der unerschöpfliche Gegenstand.

In deinem Reichtum scheinst du wie Kleidung um Kleidung
um einen Leib aus nichts als Glanz;
aber dein einzelnes Blatt ist zugleich die Vermeidung
und die Verleugnung jedes Gewands.

Seit Jahrhunderten ruft uns dein Duft
seine süßesten Namen herüber;
plötzlich liegt er wie Ruhm in der Luft.

Dennoch, wir wissen ihn nicht zu nennen, wir raten. . .
Und Erinnerung geht zu ihm über,
die wir von rufbaren Stunden erbaten.

VI

You for Antiquity, rose throned in power,
were a calyx with only a single rim,
but for us of to-day you're the full, the numberless flower,
the theme whose depths we can only skim.

Grown so rich, you appear like draping on draping
about a body of air and fire;
though each of your leaves in itself is at once an escaping
and a disowning of all attire.

For centuries, name after sweetest name,
we have heard your fragrance singing:
suddenly it hangs in the air like fame.

And then we find to name it exceeds our powers. . .
And over to it go winging
memories yielded up by recallable hours.

VII

Blumen, ihr schließlich den ordnenden Händen verwandte,
(Händen der Mädchen von einst und jetzt),
die auf dem Gartentisch oft von Kant zu Kante
lagen, ermattet und sanft verletzt,

wartend des Wassers, das sie noch einmal erhole
aus dem begonnenen Tod—, und nun
wieder erhobene zwischen die strömenden Pole
fühlender Finger, die wohlzutun

mehr noch vermögen, als ihr ahntet, ihr leichten,
wenn ihr euch wiederfandet im Krug,
langsam erkühlend und Warmes der Mädchen, wie Beichten,

von euch gebend, wie trübe ermüdende Sünden,
die das Gepflücktsein beging, als Bezug
wieder zu ihnen, die sich euch blühend verbünden.

VII

FLOWERS, whose kinship with ordering hands we are able
to feel at last (girls' hands, of once, of to-day),
who often, strewn all over the garden table,
tired and tenderly injured, lay

waiting for water to come, once more repealing
death already begun,—and now
uplifted again between the poles of those feeling,
magnetical fingers you have to allow

can be far kinder than delicate you had guessed
on coming round in the jug, to find
you were cooling and slowly exhaling the warmth of girls, like
things confessed,

like tiring sins remembered in drowsy gloom,
despoiling of you committed, to bind
you to them once more, who blend with you in their bloom.

VIII

Wenige ihr, der einstigen Kindheit Gespielen
in den zerstreuten Gärten der Stadt:
wie wir uns fanden und uns zögernd gefielen
und, wie das Lamm mit dem redenden Blatt,

sprachen als schweigende. Wenn wir uns einmal freuten,
keinem gehörte es. Wessen wars?
Und wie zergings unter allen den gehenden Leuten
und im Bangen des langen Jahrs.

Wagen umrollten uns fremd, vorübergezogen,
Häuser umstanden uns stark, aber unwahr,—und keines
kannte uns je. Was war wirklich im All?

Nichts. Nur die Bälle. Ihre herrlichen Bogen.
Auch nicht die Kinder . . . Aber manchmal trat eines,
ach ein vergehendes, unter den fallenden Ball.

In memoriam Egon von Rilke

VIII

You few, the one-time sharers of childhood's treasure
in the city's scattered garden walks,
how we met and awoke in each other a hesitant pleasure,
and, like the lamb with the scroll that talks,

spoke without speaking. If sometimes happiness found us,
no one possessed it. Whose could it be?
And how it would melt among all those moving around us,
and the long year's anxiety.

Unconcerning carriages rolling and swerving,
houses surrounding us strongly—untruthfully, though, and never
a thing that knew us. Was anything real at all?

Nothing. Only the balls. Their glorious curving.
No, not even the children. . . Though one would ever
pass, ah, fleetingly! under the falling ball.

In memoriam Egon von Rilke

IX

Rühmt euch, ihr Richtenden, nicht der entbehrlichen Folter
und daß das Eisen nicht länger an Hälsen sperrt.
Keins ist gesteigert, kein Herz—, weil ein gewollter
Krampf der Milde euch zarter verzerrt.

Was es durch Zeiten bekam, das schenkt das Schafott
wieder zurück, wie Kinder ihr Spielzeug vom vorig
alten Geburtstag. Ins reine, ins hohe, ins torig
offene Herz träte er anders, der Gott

wirklicher Milde. Er käme gewaltig und griffe
strahlender um sich, wie Göttliche sind.
Mehr als ein Wind für die großen gesicherten Schiffe.

Weniger nicht, als die heimliche leise Gewahrung
die uns im Innern schweigend gewinnt
wie ein still spielendes Kind aus unendlicher Paarung.

IX

Boast not, judges, of racks no longer required,
of throats no longer locked in the iron's embrace.
Not one heart has it heightened, that newly-acquired
spasm of mercy's milder grimace.

Things it has slowly collected, the scaffold one day
offers us back, like children their long-ago gifted
birthday toys. He'd enter the pure, the uplifted,
gate-wide open heart in a different way,

the god of genuine mercy. Mightily, spreading
flamelier out from his origin.
More than a wind for the great ships steadily heading.

Potent no less than that gentle unconscious awaring,
silently winning us over within
like the quietly playing child of an infinite pairing.

X

Alles Erworbne bedroht die Maschine, solange
sie sich erdreistet, im Geist, statt im Gehorchen, zu sein.
Daß nicht der herrlichen Hand schöneres Zögern mehr prange,
zu dem entschlossenern Bau schneidet sie steifer den Stein.

Nirgends bleibt sie zurück, daß wir ihr ein Mal entrönnen
und sie in stiller Fabrik ölend sich selber gehört.
Sie ist das Leben,—sie meint es am besten zu können,
die mit dem gleichen Entschluß ordnet und schafft und zerstört.

Aber noch ist uns das Dasein verzaubert; an hundert
Stellen ist es noch Ursprung. Ein Spielen von reinen
Kräften, die keiner berührt, der nicht kniet und bewundert.

Worte gehen noch zart am Unsäglichen aus. . .
Und die Musik, immer neu, aus den bebendsten Steinen,
baut im unbrauchbaren Raum ihr vergöttlichtes Haus.

X

LONG will machinery menace the whole of our treasure,
while it, unmindful of us, dares to a mind of its own.
Checking the glorious hand's flaunting of lovelier leisure,
now for some stubborner work sternlier it fashions the stone.

Not for an hour will it stay, so that for once we may flee it,
oiling itself in a quiet factory, fitly employed.
Now it is life, no less, and feels best able to be it,
having, with equal resolve, ordered, constructed, destroyed.

Even to-day, though, existence is magical, pouring
freshly from hundreds of well-springs,—a playing of purest
forces, which none can surprise without humbly adoring.

Words still melt into something beyond their embrace. . .
Music, too, keeps building anew with the insecurest
stones her celestial house in unusable space.

XI

MANCHE, des Todes, entstand ruhig geordnete Regel,
weiterbezwingender Mensch, seit du im Jagen beharrst;
mehr doch als Falle und Netz, weiß ich dich, Streifen von Segel,
den man hinuntergehängt in den höhligen Karst.

Leise ließ man dich ein, als wärst du ein Zeichen,
Frieden zu feiern. Doch dann: rang dich am Rande der Knecht,
—und, aus den Höhlen, die Nacht warf eine Handvoll von bleichen
taumelnden Tauben ins Licht. . .
Aber auch das ist im Recht.

Fern von dem Schauenden sei jeglicher Hauch des Bedauerns,
nicht nur vom Jäger allein, der, was sich zeitig erweist,
wachsam und handelnd vollzieht.

Töten ist eine Gestalt unseres wandernden Trauerns. . .
Rein ist im heiteren Geist,
was an uns selber geschieht.

XI

MANY a rule of death rose with deliberate rightness,
onwardly-conquering man, during your hunting past:
better than trap or net known to me, fluttering whiteness,
you they were wont to hang down in the cavernous Karst.

Gently letting you in, as were you a token
publishing peace. But then: vassal would twitch at your thong,
Night would cast from the caves pallid handfuls of broken-
flighted doves to the light. . .
Not even that, though, was wrong.

Far from the gazer remain every emotion but gladness,
not from the hunter alone, gathering, watchful and keen,
that which his suns have matured.

Killing merely is one form of our wandering sadness. . .
Pure in the spirit serene
's all we ourselves have endured.

XII

Wolle die Wandlung. O sei für die Flamme begeistert,
drin sich ein Ding dir entzieht, das mit Verwandlungen prunkt;
jener entwerfende Geist, welcher das Irdische meistert,
liebt in dem Schwung der Figur nichts wie den wendenden Punkt.

Was sich ins Bleiben verschließt, schon ists das Erstarrte;
wähnt es sich sicher im Schutz des unscheinbaren Grau's?
Warte, ein Härtestes warnt aus der Ferne das Harte.
Wehe—: abwesender Hammer holt aus!

Wer sich als Quelle ergießt, den erkennt die Erkennung;
und sie führt ihn entzückt durch das heiter Geschaffne,
das mit Anfang oft schließt und mit Ende beginnt.

Jeder glückliche Raum ist Kind oder Enkel von Trennung,
den sie staunend durchgehn. Und die verwandelte Daphne
will, seit sie lorbeern fühlt, daß du dich wandelst in Wind.

XII

CHOOSE to be changed. With the flame, with the flame be enraptured,
where from within you a thing changefully-splendid escapes:
nothing whereby that earth-mastering artist is captured
more than the turning-point touched by his soaring shapes.

That which would stay what it is renounces existence:
does it feel safe in its shelter of lustreless grey?
Wait, a hardest is warning the hard from a distance,
heaved is a hammer from far away.

He who pours forth like a spring shall be known of his Knowing;
ravished, it leads him through cheerful creation, that closes
often as not with beginning and opens with end.

Parting's child or descendant is each glad space they are going
gazingly through. And now, feeling her metamorphosis,
laurelled Daphne wants you, changed to a wind, for her friend.

XIII

Sei allem Abschied voran, als wäre er hinter
dir, wie der Winter, der eben geht.
Denn unter Wintern ist einer so endlos Winter,
daß, überwinternd, dein Herz überhaupt übersteht.

Sei immer tot in Eurydike—, singender steige,
preisender steige zurück in den reinen Bezug.
Hier, unter Schwindenden, sei, im Reiche der Neige,
sei ein klingendes Glas, das sich im Klang schon zerschlug.

Sei—und wisse zugleich des Nicht-Seins Bedingung,
den unendlichen Grund deiner innigen Schwingung,
daß du sie völlig vollziehst dieses einzige Mal.

Zu dem gebrauchten sowohl, wie zum dumpfen und stummen
Vorrat der vollen Natur, den unsäglichen Summen,
zähle dich jubelnd hinzu und vernichte die Zahl.

XIII

ANTICIPATE all farewells, as were they behind you
now, like the winter going past.
For through some winter you feel such wintriness bind you,
your then out-wintering heart will always outlast.

Dead evermore in Eurydice, mount with more singing,
mount to relation more pure with more celebrant, tongue.
Here, in this realm of the dwindlers and dregs, be a ringing
glass, which has, even though shivered to pieces, been rung.

Be—and, perceiving in that which is being's negation
merely the infinite ground of your fervent vibration,
beat, through this never-again, to the fullest amount.

To the stock of used-up, as well as of dumb and decaying
things within copious Nature, those sums beyond saying,
count yourself joyfully in and destroy the account.

XIV

Siehe die Blumen, diese dem Irdischen treuen,
denen wir Schicksal vom Rande des Schicksals leihn,–
aber wer weiß es! Wenn sie ihr Welken bereuen,
ist es an uns, ihre Reue zu sein.

Alles will schweben. Da gehn wir umher wie Beschwerer,
legen auf alles uns selbst, vom Gewichte entzückt;
o was sind wir den Dingen für zehrende Lehrer,
weil ihnen ewige Kindheit glückt.

Nähme sie einer ins innige Schlafen und schliefe
tief mit den Dingen—: o wie käme er leicht,
anders zum anderen Tag, aus der gemeinsamen Tiefe.

Oder er bliebe vielleicht; und sie blühten und priesen
ihn, den Bekehrten, der nun den Ihrigen gleicht,
allen den stillen Geschwistern im Winde der Wiesen.

XIV

FLOWERS, so faithful to earth that has sent them hither,
whom we lend fate from the borders of fate—and yet
who knows, when we think we see them regretfully wither,
if it is not for us to be their regret?

To all that would soar our selves are the grand aggravation,
we lay them on all we encounter, proud of their weight;
what terrifying teachers we are for that part of creation
which loves its eternally childish state.

Could someone but take them right into his slumber and sleep
deeply with things, how differently, lightly he'd wander
back to a different day out of that communal deep.

Or, it may be, he would stay, and they'd blossom and praise
him, the converted, now one of them and all yonder
silent brothers and sisters in woodlands and ways.

XV

O BRUNNEN-MUND, du gebender, du Mund,
der unerschöpflich Eines, Reines, spricht,-
du, vor des Wassers fließendem Gesicht,
marmorne Maske. Und im Hintergrund

der Aquädukte Herkunft. Weither an
Gräbern vorbei, vom Hang des Apennins
tragen sie dir dein Sagen zu, das dann
am schwarzen Altern deines Kinns

vorüberfällt in das Gefäß davor.
Dies ist das schlafend hingelegte Ohr,
das Marmor-Ohr, in das du immer sprichst.

Ein Ohr der Erde. Nur mit sich allein
redet sie also. Schiebt ein Krug sich ein,
so scheint es ihr, daß du sie unterbrichst.

XV

O FOUNTAIN MOUTH, you mouth that can respond
so inexhaustibly to all who ask
with one, pure, single saying. Marble mask
before the water's flowing face. Beyond,

the aqueducts' long derivation. Past
the tombs, from where the Apennines begin,
they bring your saying to you, which at last,
over the grizzled age of your dark chin,

falls to the waiting basin, crystal-clear;
falls to the slumbering recumbent ear,
the marble ear, with which you still confer.

One of earth's ears. With her own lonely mood
she thus converses. Let a jug intrude,
she'll only think you've interrupted her.

XVI

Immer wieder von uns aufgerissen,
ist der Gott die Stelle, welche heilt.
Wir sind Scharfe, denn wir wollen wissen,
aber er ist heiter und verteilt.

Selbst die reine, die geweihte Spende
nimmt er anders nicht in seine Welt,
als indem er sich dem freien Ende
unbewegt entgegenstellt.

Nur der Tote trinkt
aus der hier von uns gehörten Quelle,
wenn der Gott ihm schweigend winkt, dem Toten.

Uns wird nur das Lärmen angeboten.
Und das Lamm erbittet seine Schelle
aus dem stilleren Instinkt.

XVI

STILL the god remains an ever-growing
wholeness we have irritably burst.
We are sharp, for we insist on knowing,
he exists serenely and dispersed.

Even gifts of purest consecration
only find acceptance in so much
as he turns in moveless contemplation
to the end we do not touch.

Only those who dwell
out of sight can taste the spring we hear,
when the god has silently assented.

With its brawling we must be contented.
And the lamb's more silent instinct's clear
when it begs us for its bell.

XVII

Wo, in welchen immer selig bewässerten Gärten, an welchen
Bäumen, aus welchen zärtlich entblätterten Blüten-Kelchen
reifen die fremdartigen Früchte der Tröstung? Diese
köstlichen, deren du eine vielleicht in der zertretenen Wiese

deiner Armut findest. Von einem zum anderen Male
wunderst du dich über die Größe der Frucht,
über ihr Heilsein, über die Sanftheit der Schale,
und daß sie der Leichtsinn des Vogels dir nicht vorwegnahm
und nicht die Eifersucht

unten des Wurms. Gibt es denn Bäume, von Engeln beflogen,
und von verborgenen langsamen Gärtnern so seltsam gezogen,
daß sie uns tragen, ohne uns zu gehören?

Haben wir niemals vermocht, wir Schatten und Schemen,
durch unser voreilig reifes und wieder welkes Benehmen
jener gelassenen Sommer Gleichmut zu stören?

XVII

WHERE, in what ever-blissfully watered gardens, upon what trees,
out of, oh, what gently dispetalled flower-cups do these
so strange-looking fruits of consolation mature?
Delicious, when, now and then, you pick one up in the poor

trampled field of your poverty. Time and again you find
yourself lost in wonder over the size of the fruit,
over its wholesomeness, over its smooth, soft rind,
and that neither the heedless bird above nor jealous worm at the root

has been before you. Are there, then, trees where angels will congregate,
trees invisible leisurely gardeners so curiously cultivate,
that, without being ours, they bear for us fruits like those?

Have we, then, never been able, we shadows and shades,
with our doing that ripens too early and then as suddenly fades,
to disturb that even-tempered summer's repose?

XVIII

Tänzerin: o du Verlegung
alles Vergehens in Gang: wie brachtest du's dar.
Und der Wirbel am Schluß, dieser Baum aus Bewegung,
nahm er nicht ganz in Besitz das erschwungene Jahr?

Blühte nicht, daß ihn dein Schwingen von vorhin umschwärme,
plötzlich sein Wipfel von Stille? Und über ihr,
war sie nicht Sonne, war sie nicht Sommer, die Wärme,
diese unzählige Wärme aus dir?

Aber er trug auch, er trug, dein Baum der Ekstase.
Sind sie nicht seine ruhigen Früchte: der Krug,
reifend gestreift, und die gereiftere Vase?

Und in den Bildern: ist nicht die Zeichnung geblieben,
die deiner Braue dunkler Zug
rasch an die Wandung der eigenen Wendung geschrieben?

XVIII

DANCER: you transmutation
of all going-by into going: what you have wrought!
And your finishing whirl, that tree of mere animation,
how it took over the year you had flyingly caught!

Did not its crown, that your swaying might settle to swarming,
suddenly blossom with stillness? Above that, too,
was there not sunnily, was there not summerly warming
all the warmth that exhaled from you?

Nay, it was able, your tree of rapture, to bear.
Are they not, all its fruits that so peacefully shine,
jug streaked with ripeness, vase further ripened, still there?

And does not your mark in their paintings still meet the discerning—
that of your eyebrows' darker line
swiftly inscribed on the wall of your own swift turning?

XIX

IRGENDWO wohnt das Gold in der verwöhnenden Bank,
und mit Tausenden tut es vertraulich. Doch jener
Blinde, der Bettler, ist selbst dem kupfernen Zehner
wie ein verlorener Ort, wie das staubige Eck unterm Schrank.

In den Geschäften entlang ist das Geld wie zu Hause
und verkleidet sich scheinbar in Seide, Nelken und Pelz.
Er, der Schweigende, steht in der Atempause
alles des wach oder schlafend atmenden Gelds.

O wie mag sie sich schließen bei Nacht, diese immer offene
Hand.
Morgen holt sie das Schicksal wieder, und täglich
hält es sie hin: hell, elend, unendlich zerstörbar.

Daß doch einer, ein Schauender, endlich ihren langen Bestand
staunend begriffe und rühmte. Nur dem Aufsingenden säglich.
Nur dem Göttlichen hörbar.

XIX

GOLD dwells somewhere at ease in the pampering bank,
mixing with thousands on intimate terms. But to any
coin that blind man begging, to even a penny,
seems but a desolate place, a chink in a dusty plank.

Money shines out from the shops in its own dimension,
plausibly masking in silk, carnation, and fur.
He, though, silently stands in the breath-suspension
of all the money breathing, asleep or astir.

Oh, how does it ever close at night, that perpetually open hand?
Fate to-morrow will fetch it back and display it,
bright, poor, endlessly fragile, year after year.

Could but at last some gazer, astoundedly coming to understand,
celebrate its persistence!—Only a singer could say it.
Only a god could hear.

XX

Zwischen den Sternen, wie weit; und doch, um wievieles
noch weiter,
was man am Hiesigen lernt.
Einer, zum Beispiel, ein Kind. . . und ein Nächster, ein
Zweiter—,
o wie unfaßlich entfernt.

Schicksal, es mißt uns vielleicht mit des Seienden Spanne,
daß es uns fremd erscheint;
denk, wieviel Spannen allein vom Mädchen zum Manne,
wenn es ihn meidet und meint.

Alles ist weit—, und nirgends schließt sich der Kreis.
Sieh in der Schüssel, auf heiter bereitetem Tische,
seltsam der Fische Gesicht.

Fische sind stumm . . ., meinte man einmal. Wer weiß?
Aber ist nicht am Ende ein Ort, wo man das, was der Fische
Sprache wäre, o h n e sie spricht?

XX

INTER-STELLAR spaces—ah yes, but how many times greater
spaces terrestrial are!
First, for example, a child. . . then a neighbour, a moment
later,—
oh, how incredibly far!

Fate but through spanning us, maybe, with Being's measure
seems so strange to our eyes:
think of the spans to a man from a maid, whose pleasure
lingers with him she flies!

All is remote—nowhere does the circle close.
Look at that curious face on the welcoming table,
staring out of its dish.

Fishes are dumb, . . . so one imagined. Who knows?
May there not be some place where, *without* them, the dwellers
are able
to speak what would be the language of fish?

XXI

Singe die Gärten, mein Herz, die du nicht kennst; wie in Glas
eingegossene Gärten, klar, unerreichbar.
Wasser und Rosen von Ispahan oder Schiras,
singe sie selig, preise sie, keinem vergleichbar.

Zeige, mein Herz, daß du sie niemals entbehrst.
Daß sie dich meinen, ihre reifenden Feigen.
Daß du mit ihren, zwischen den blühenden Zweigen
wie zum Gesicht gesteigerten Lüften verkehrst.

Meide den Irrtum, daß es Entbehrungen gebe
für den geschehnen Entschluß, diesen: zu sein!
Seidener Faden, kamst du hinein ins Gewebe.

Welchem der Bilder du auch im Innern geeint bist
(sei es selbst ein Moment aus dem Leben der Pein),
fühl, daß der ganze, der rühmliche Teppich gemeint ist.

XXI

SING those gardens, my heart, poured as into a glass,
gardens you have not known, transparent, untrampled.
Waters and roses of Ispahan or Shiras,
blissfully sing them, praise them, the unexampled.

Show that by you, my heart, they are never missed:
pleasure for you their ripening figs are preparing,
you with their breezes, almost visibly bearing
fragrance of blossoming branches, can always tryst.

Know that no want exists for, no hand bereaving
takes from, the acted resolution: to *be.*
Silken thread, you have entered into the weaving.

Feel, with what pattern soever you're inwardly blended
(even a scene from the story of Agony),
feel that the whole, the praisable, carpet's intended.

XXII

O TROTZ Schicksal: die herrlichen Überflüsse
unseres Daseins, in Parken übergeschäumt,—
oder als steinerne Männer neben die Schlüsse
hoher Portale, unter Balkone gebäumt!

O die eherne Glocke, die ihre Keule
täglich wider den stumpfen Alltag hebt.
Oder die eine, in Karnak, die Säule, die Säule,
die fast ewige Tempel überlebt.

Heute stürzen die Überschüsse, dieselben,
nur noch als Eile vorbei, aus dem wagrechten gelben
Tag in die blendend mit Licht übertriebene Nacht.

Aber das Rasen zergeht und läßt keine Spuren.
Kurven des Flugs durch die Luft und die, die sie fuhren,
keine vielleicht ist umsonst. Doch nur wie gedacht.

XXII

Oh, but in spite of fate, life's glorious abundance
foaming over in parks and splendid estates,—
or in stone men, with all their straining redundance,
under balconies built over lofty gates.

Oh, the brazen bell that daily uplifts its solemn
hammer against the dullness of every day.
Or the one, the only, at Karnak, the column, the column,
surviving almost eternal temples' decay.

Now, though, the overflowings of that same font all
plunge but as speed from the yellow, the horizontal
day to the night so dazzlingly overwrought.

Rushing by but to vanish and leave no traces.
Lingering spirals of flight through ethereal spaces,—
not one, perhaps, is in vain. Yet as were they but thought.

XXIII

Rufe mich zu jener deiner Stunden,
die dir unaufhörlich widersteht:
flehend nah wie das Gesicht von Hunden,
aber immer wieder weggedreht,

wenn du meinst, sie endlich zu erfassen.
So Entzognes ist am meisten dein.
Wir sind frei. Wir wurden dort entlassen,
wo wir meinten, erst begrüßt zu sein.

Bang verlangen wir nach einem Halte,
wir zu Jungen manchmal für das Alte
und zu alt für das, was niemals war.

Wir, gerecht nur, wo wir dennoch preisen,
weil wir, ach, der Ast sind und das Eisen
und das Süße reifender Gefahr.

XXIII

CALL me to your lonely meeting-places
with the hour that always says you nay:
suppliantly near you, like dogs' faces,
time and time again, though, turned away,

when at last you think that it is yours.
Things thus snatched from you are most your own.
We are free—dismissed from those same doors
where we thought such welcome had been shown.

Anxiously we hanker for a holdfast,
we, too youthful sometimes for the old past,
and too old for what has never been.

We, whose righteousness depends how far we
praise, for branch and axe and sweetness are we
of a peril ripening unseen.

XXIV

O DIESE Lust, immer neu, aus gelockertem Lehm!
Niemand beinah hat den frühesten Wagern geholfen.
Städte entstanden trotzdem an beseligten Golfen,
Wasser und Öl füllten die Krüge trotzdem.

Götter, wir planen sie erst in erkühnten Entwürfen,
die uns das mürrische Schicksal wieder zerstört.
Aber sie sind die Unsterblichen. Sehet, wir dürfen
jenen erhorchen, der uns am Ende erhört.

Wir, ein Geschlecht durch Jahrtausende: Mütter und Väter,
immer erfüllter von dem künftigen Kind,
daß es uns einst, übersteigend, erschüttere, später.

Wir, wir unendlich Gewagten, was haben wir Zeit!
Und nur der schweigsame Tod, der weiß, was wir sind
und was er immer gewinnt, wenn er uns leiht.

XXIV

OH, delight leaping up ever-new when we loosen the soil!
Hardly a hand lent the earliest darers assistance.
Towns arose none the less on gulfs to a blessed existence,
pitchers were filled none the less with water and oil.

Gods,—we plan them in bold provisional sketches
cross-grained Fate takes from us and flings to the past.
Still, they *are* the Immortals. Our spirit outstretches,
hearkening-out the one that will hear it at last.

We, but one race for millennia, growing ever greater,
age after age, with that child of the future whose birth
shall so entirely surpass and astonish us, later.

We, so immeasurably ventured, what aeons attend us!
And only taciturn Death knows what we are worth,
and how much it always pays him to lend us.

XXV

SCHON, horch, hörst du der ersten Harken
Arbeit; wieder den menschlichen Takt
in der verhaltenen Stille der starken
Vorfrühlingserde. Unabgeschmackt

scheint dir das Kommende. Jenes so oft
dir schon Gekommene scheint dir zu kommen
wieder wie Neues. Immer erhofft,
nahmst du es niemals. Es hat dich genommen.

Selbst die Blätter durchwinterter Eichen
scheinen im Abend ein künftiges Braun.
Manchmal geben sich Lüfte ein Zeichen.

Schwarz sind die Sträucher. Doch Haufen von Dünger
lagern als satteres Schwarz in den Au'n.
Jede Stunde, die hingeht, wird jünger.

XXV

HARK, the earliest harrows striving
already; the rhythm of man once more
breaks the tense stillness around reviving
pre-vernal earth. What has come before

seems to return as unstaled as ever.
No new-comer, it comes like new.
Looked for again and again, you never
could capture it. Always it captured you.

Sunset splashes the wintered oaken
leaves with a brown that is yet to be.
Sometimes breezes exchange a token.

Black are the hedges. But heaps of dung
crouch more satedly black on the lea.
Hours grow more eternally young.

XXVI

Wie ergreift uns der Vogelschrei. . .
Irgendein einmal erschaffenes Schreien.
Aber die Kinder schon, spielend im Freien,
schreien an wirklichen Schreien vorbei.

Schreien den Zufall. In Zwischenräume
dieses, des Weltraums, (in welchen der heile
Vogelschrei eingeht, wie Menschen in Träume—)
treiben sie ihre, des Kreischens, Keile.

Wehe, wo sind wir? Immer noch freier,
wie die losgerissenen Drachen
jagen wir halbhoch, mit Rändern von Lachen,

windig zerfetzten.—Ordne die Schreier,
singender Gott! daß sie rauschend erwachen,
tragend als Strömung das Haupt und die Leier.

XXVI

How it thrills us, the bird's clear cry. . .
Any cry that was always there.
Children, playing in the open air,
children already go crying by

real cries. Cry chance in. Through crevasses
in that same space whereinto, as dreaming
men into dreams, the pure bird-cry passes
they drive their splintering wedge of screaming.

Where are we? Freer and freer, we gyre
only half up, kites breaking
loose, with our frills of laughter flaking

away in the wind.—Make the criers a choir,
singing god! that resurgently waking
may bear on its waters the head and the lyre.

XXVII

Gibt es wirklich die Zeit, die zerstörende?
Wann, auf dem ruhenden Berg, zerbricht sie die Burg?
Dieses Herz, das unendlich den Göttern gehörende,
wann vergewaltigts der Demiurg?

Sind wir wirklich so ängstlich Zerbrechliche,
wie das Schicksal uns wahrmachen will?
Ist die Kindheit, die tiefe, versprechliche,
in den Wurzeln—später—still?

Ach, das Gespenst des Vergänglichen,
durch den arglos Empfänglichen
geht es, als wär es ein Rauch.

Als die, die wir sind, als die Treibenden,
gelten wir doch bei bleibenden
Kräften als göttlicher Brauch.

XXVII

Does it exist, though, Time the destroyer?
When will it scatter the tower on the resting hill?
This heart, the eternal gods' eternal enjoyer,
when shall the Demiurge ravish and spill?

Are we really such tremblingly breakable
things as Destiny tries to pretend?
Does childhood's promise, deep, unmistakable,
down in the roots, then, later, end?

Ah, Mutability's spectre!
out through the simple accepter
you, like a vapour, recede.

We, though we wax but for waning,
fill none the less for remaining
powers a celestial need.

XXVIII

O KOMM und geh. Du, fast noch Kind, ergänze
für einen Augenblick die Tanzfigur
zum reinen Sternbild eines jener Tänze,
darin wir die dumpf ordnende Natur

vergänglich übertreffen. Denn sie regte
sich völlig hörend nur, da Orpheus sang.
Du warst noch die von damals her Bewegte
und leicht befremdet, wenn ein Baum sich lang

besann, mit dir nach dem Gehör zu gehn.
Du wußtest noch die Stelle, wo die Leier
sich tönend hob—; die unerhörte Mitte.

Für sie versuchtest du die schönen Schritte
und hofftest, einmal zu der heilen Feier
des Freundes Gang und Antlitz hinzudrehn.

XXVIII

O<sc>h</sc>, come and go, you almost child, enhancing
for one brief hour the figure of the dance
to purest constellation of that dancing
where, subject as we are to change and chance,

we beat dull nature. For she only started
hearing with all her ears at Orpheus' song.
And you still moved with motion then imparted,
and shrank a little when a tree seemed long

in treading with you the remembered pace.
You knew it still, that passage where the lyre
soundingly rose, the unimagined centre,

and practised all your steps in hope to enter
that theme again, whirling to one entire
communion with your friend both feet and face.

XXIX

Stiller Freund der vielen Fernen, fühle
wie dein Atem noch den Raum vermehrt.
Im Gebälk der finstern Glockenstühle
laß dich läuten. Das, was an dir zehrt,

wird ein Starkes über dieser Nahrung.
Geh in der Verwandlung aus und ein.
Was ist deine leidendste Erfahrung?
Ist dir Trinken bitter, werde Wein.

Sei in dieser Nacht aus Übermaß
Zauberkraft am Kreuzweg deiner Sinne,
ihrer seltsamen Begegnung Sinn.

Und wenn dich das Irdische vergaß,
zu der stillen Erde sag: Ich rinne.
Zu dem raschen Wasser sprich: Ich bin.

XXIX

SILENT friend of those far from us, feeling
how your breath is still enlarging space,
fill the sombre belfry with your pealing.
What consumes you now is growing apace

stronger than the feeding strength it borrows.
Be, as Change will have you, shade or shine.
Which has grieved you most of all your sorrows?
Turn, if drinking's bitter, into wine.

Be, in this immeasurable night,
at your senses' cross-ways magic cunning,
be the sense of their mysterious tryst.

And, should earthliness forget you quite,
murmur to the quiet earth: I'm running.
Tell the running water: I exist.

NOTES

(*G.W.*—Gesammelte Werke in sechs Bänden)

NOTES ON THE FIRST PART

I

The miracle of language, or, rather, of poetry, the highest form of language. Orpheus, the ideal poet, does not merely sing *of* a tree or *about* a tree, he *sings a tree*, and, as he sings, by a 'pure transcension', the visible ascends into invisibility, while a temple (or shrine) to receive it rises in the ear.

l. 9. *bell* (*Geröhr*): the cry of a buck or stag at rutting time.

II

This very subtle and 'difficult' sonnet may be regarded as an attempt to describe the essence of poetry, to say what poetry is in itself: that strange something which passes into us and out of us,

> Awakening all the cells where memory slept

when we read (or hear) a poem. Where *is* the poem, where *is* the music, when our experience of it is over? Here (it seems to be suggested) is some clue to the relationship between life and death, here and beyond.

III

How can man, in whose nature there is such deep division and opposition between duty and inclination, desire and capability, ideal and actual, follow the divine example of Orpheus, and achieve complete unity between himself and the world, between what he might be and what he is?

The song of Orpheus (what Rilke would call *real* poetry) is something far more than 'self-expression', or wish-fulfilment, or the communication of a unique sensibility. *Song is existence:* that is to say, it is not merely *about* some reality, what the poet felt about it, how it affected him, as though he and his moods were the most important things in the world; it *is* some reality: the poet has succeeded in completely renouncing, completely suppressing, his own personality, *wie er geht und steht*, in order to become a mere voice, a mere mouth—but 'a mouth for Nature', for the dumb things that can only speak through us and for the spirit that 'bloweth where it listeth'.

This ideal seemed much less impossible to Rilke than it would to most of us; nevertheless, we may find in his letters a record of the terrible moods of depression and emptiness, isolation and unreality, that followed his great periods of illumination and self-transcendence—moods when his spirit was flung back upon 'the unwilling dross that checked its flight'.

IV

This sonnet is presumably addressed *Aux jeunes filles en fleurs.*

V

The poet, there where the great names, Dante, let us say, or Spitteler, no longer matter,—it's the same thing, it's the poet; for, in the ultimate sense, there is only one, that infinite one who, here and there through the ages, asserts himself in some spirit that has been subjected to him. (Rilke, in a letter to Frau Wunderly-Volkart, 1920, quoted by J. R. von Salis, *Rainer Maria Rilkes Schweizer Jahre*, 138.)

l. 14. *over-stepping*, like *überschreitet*, is used in two senses, 'transgressing', and 'stepping over' or 'beyond'. In transgressing against accepted opinions and beliefs, and in passing beyond the here and now into the 'great unity', Orpheus is obeying a higher law.

VI

l. 1. *Does he belong here?* 'He' is Orpheus, the true poet, at home in both domains, that of our 'little life' and that of the 'sleep' that 'rounds' it.

ll. 5-6. *Going to bed*, etc. This reference to popular superstition may be intended to suggest that the unifying and mediatorial power of the true poet can give us an incomparably truer and deeper communion with the dead than any *mechanical* attempts to communicate with them, such as spiritualistic séances: that the *mediator* is nearer to them than the *medium*. Certainly, the sonnet is illuminated by a long letter on spiritualism, written to Nora Purtscher-Wydenbruck in 1924 (*Briefe aus Muzot*, 279-83), a letter in which Rilke declares that, while such phenomena are not to be dismissed as the results of trickery and

illusion, they ought not to be regarded as essentially more mysterious than a thousand other things in this mysterious existence, and that we should try to co-ordinate them with the rest of our experience. For Orpheus, for the true poet, who is at home in *both* domains, the appearance of the dead, the 'magical', the 'mysterious', the 'uncanny', all manifestations of 'otherness', are not exceptional and isolated phenomena, not supernatural, but clear and natural, and he will help us to regard them likewise by mingling them 'with all that we view'.

l. 10. *earth-smoke and rue.* Since the beautiful name *earth-smoke* sometimes occurs in our older writers, and, at any rate until recent times, was still heard in dialect, I have used it rather than *fumitory* to translate (literally) the German *Erdrauch.* Cf. Britten and Holland, *A Dictionary of English Plant-Names*, Eng. Dial. Soc., 1878: *Earth-smoke (L. fumus terrae). Fumaria officinalis, L.—Hal(liwell) gives Erthesmok, from MS. Sloane, 5, f. 5. In the Grete Herball it is called Smoke of the Earth or Fume of the Earth. Prior, p. 70. In Pratt's Wild Flowers of the Year the name is said to be in use in the northern counties.*

With regard to the magical qualities ascribed to these herbs, apart from the numerous cures they were supposed to effect, Britten and Holland (*op. cit., Fumitory*) remark: *All the old authors suppose the name to be given 'from the belief that it was produced without seed from vapours rising from the earth'* (Prior, p. 86); and Brand, *Popular Antiquities*, 1849, III, 315, says that *Rue was hung about the neck as an amulet against witchcraft in Aristotle's time . . . Rue was called herb of grace by the country people, and probably for the reason assigned by Mr Warburton, that it was used on Sundays by the Romanists in their exorcisms.*

VII

l. 1. Rilke continually insists that the duty of the poet is to accept and praise *everything.*

> Oh, tell us poet, what you do?—I praise.
> But those dark, deadly, devastating ways,
> how can you bear them, suffer them?—I praise.

And then the Nameless, beyond guess or gaze,
how can you call it, conjure it?—I praise.
And whence your right, in every kind of maze,
in every mask, to remain true?—I praise.
And that the mildest and the wildest ways
know you like star and storm?—Because I praise.
(*Späte Gedichte*, 160; *Later Poems*, 184.)

ll. 3-4. Poets come and go, their hearts, broken wine-presses, broken shuttles, beat no longer; but the eternal 'metamorphosis' of Orpheus, who uses them, persists.

l. 6. *sacred example:* the example of Orpheus.

VIII

Even Lamentation (*Klage*) must become a kind of praise; it must never degenerate into mere complaining and accusation (*Anklage*). One is reminded of that letter, written in 1912, after the completion of the first two Elegies, where Rilke, admitting that lamentation seems at the moment to preponderate in his work, declares that he knows, nevertheless, *that one is only entitled to make such full use of the strings of lamentation if one has resolved to play on them, by means of them, later, the whole of that triumphant jubilation that swells up behind everything hard and painful and endured, and without which voices are incomplete.* (*Briefe aus den Jahren 1907-1914*, 254.) Triumph 'knows' this, Lamentation does not yet know it, although her lament over 'old tribulation' really springs from her love of goodness and joy.

There is no trace of defiance (except of conventional ideas) in Rilke; we never catch him in the act of shaking his fist at the universe: indeed, he would have been incapable of such a gesture. He often reminds us of Goethe's *Ganymed*, never of Goethe's *Prometheus*. As I have noticed in my Introduction (and in this he is akin to the Absolute Idealists, the disciples of Hegel), he sometimes seems to suggest that whatever is, is right, a position dangerously close to the doctrine that might is right. I shall return to this; but, meanwhile, I would suggest that the attitude of the fist-shakers seems less and less impressive and

satisfying the more closely one considers it. Hardy, for example, who continually suggests that all the good in the world is due to man and all the evil to 'It', insists, not merely on having it both ways, but on having it all ways: the ultimate responsibility for the horrors of war is ascribed to 'It', but any act of kindness or self-sacrifice performed by a soldier is immediately credited to man.

l. 3. *precipitation:* a metaphor from chemistry. The simple image of Lamentation as a nymph presiding over a spring is immediately extended into one of a vast, Miltonic figure, preparing, in some cosmic laboratory, a clear, hard precipitate from the waters of all human weeping. No other poet has given us images like this: I can only compare it with some of the strange 'spiritual landscapes' of the Elegies, where we can no longer say which is inner and which is outer, because the distinction between them has been transcended. Rilke here reveals himself as the great myth-maker of modern times; as the poet who could

> the deepe knowledge of dark truths so teach,
> As sense might judge, what phansie could not reach.

There is a somewhat similar image at the conclusion of one of the poems in *Späte Gedichte* (159; *Later Poems*, 173), where it is said of the Angel:

> Feel him there—for it's he—supple at heart of hardness,
>
> so that in stony pain hard-pressed druses of tears,
> long since free from stain, may turn into amethyst crystals.

X

In the first quatrain Rilke is referring to the stone sarcophagi which in many Italian towns are used as the troughs or basins of fountains and springs; in the second, to those in the famous Roman and medieval cemetery at Aliscamps, near Arles, where Malte imagined that the Prodigal Son might have rested during his wanderings: *Shall I imagine him in the soul-inhabited shade of Allyscamps, his glance pursuing a dragonfly between those*

graves that are as open as the graves of the resurrected? (*G.W.*, V, 296-7). Cf. also the poem *Römische Sarkophage* in *Neue Gedichte* (*G.W.*, III, 50).

l. 13. *the lingering hour:* the hour of waiting, the apparently interminable hour,—the periods when inspiration and expression seem to be withheld from us, as they often were from Rilke himself, especially between 1914 and the completion of the Elegies in 1922, when indeed he became

> a mouth re-endowed with power
> of speech, after knowing what silence is.

XI

Often in reading Rilke I am reminded of some lines in one of Yeats's later poems (*Meditations in Time of Civil War*, vii, from *The Tower*, 1928; *Collected Poems*, 232):

> The abstract joy,
> The half-read wisdom of dæmonic images,
> Suffice the ageing man as once the growing boy.

In this and the next sonnet Rilke is reflecting on those dynamic images and symbols through which, perhaps, we are able to approach nearest to the heart of reality, to make a kind of progress within it, pushing outposts into the darkness and mystery that surround us, and extending the boundaries of possible experience; apprehending truths we cannot yet comprehend or explain, feeling that we are 'greater than we know'.

Human nature might be symbolized by a horse, and 'the god', the unseen power that uses it, directs it, rides it, and to which—we must believe—it should willingly submit, by a rider.

l. 3. *that proud earth:* the horse.

l. 9. *Are they, though?* Can the finite ever be perfectly united with the infinite? Can a mere human poet hope to follow and realize the divine example of Orpheus? Can we hope to overcome the divisions and contradictions in our nature, in our finitude? Will our spirit finally torture its way through 'the unwilling dross that checks its flight'? These doubts, which

often came thronging upon him in the intervals of creative activity, form the tragic element in Rilke's later poems, in his letters, and in his life.

XII

The miracle of our mysteriously preserved existence. We do not really know what we are or where we are, and yet our half-conscious application of uncomprehended laws somehow leads to results that are right. There is a mysterious contact between us and the unseen powers, like that between the aerials (German, *Antennen*) on the lonely, isolated masts of a receiving station and those of a distant transmitter; like that between the farmer and the powers which, almost without his help, transform the seed into the waving summer corn.

XIII

In 1919 Rilke published a remarkable prose-fragment entitled *Ur-Geräusch* (*Primal Sound*), which may be found in the fourth volume of his collected works. Beginning with some apparently fantastic speculations suggested by recollections of a primitive gramophone (Why not make the needle traverse other things than grooves produced by sound vibrations? Would it not thus enable us to *hear* their *shapes*?), he proceeds to insist that the poet should try, so far as possible, to apprehend every object through each of the five senses, and not content himself, as most poets do, with the sense of sight alone; and then, after deciding that such devices as the telescope and the microscope have not really increased the range of our experience, since the extra 'something' they give us cannot be interpenetrated by the senses, and therefore cannot properly be 'experienced', he concludes that *It may, perhaps, be not premature to suppose that the artist, who is developing this five-fingered hand of his senses (if one may so call it) towards more and more nimble and spiritual grasp, is the man who is most decisively working at an extension of the several sense-fields.*

This sonnet and the next but one (XV) are remarkable attempts to use the whole 'five-fingered hand of the senses'.

XV

l. 5. *Dance the orange.* Don't be content with merely tasting, smelling, seeing it—*dance* it: experience it in every possible way, as though it were the most precious thing, the only thing, in the world. Reveal all its possible associations and relations: show us the world *sub specie mali aurantii.*

XVI

One must know—or guess—that Sonnet XVI is addressed to a dog, Rilke wrote to his wife; *I do not like to annotate it, just because I wanted to draw him completely into the whole. Any reference would have isolated and separated him again* (*Briefe aus Muzot,* 198).

In February 1912 he had written, from the solitude of Schloss Duino, to a friend who had asked him if he would mind looking after her dog: *Now it is my turn to thank you, not for Pierrot, for God's sake, no: that would be his ruin, Pierrot's ruin, the saddest story in the world. What are you thinking of, how could I prevail against his boundless homesickness?! And, besides the torment of helplessly looking on at that, I should have to endure a further torment, due to the fact that in my relations with dogs it is particularly hard for me not to sacrifice myself; they go so wholly and entirely to my heart, these creatures completely dependent on us, whom we have helped to a soul for which there is no heaven. Although my heart is quite indispensable to me, the matter would probably end, tragically end, in my breaking off for Pierrot, for Pierrot crying for you, for Pierrot to whom life was no longer comprehensible, first, little pieces from the edge, and then, bigger and bigger pieces towards the middle, of my heart (like dog-biscuits); after some hesitation I should give up my profession and live entirely for his consolation* (*Briefe aus den Jahren 1907-1914,* 191).

In 1924 he told a correspondent, who had asked him for an account of some of the chief 'influences' on him, that perhaps some of the most important had not been in themselves emphatic, and among them he mentions *association with a dog* (*Briefe aus Muzot,* 247).

Dogs, in fact, with their almost heart-breaking dependence on us, their beseeching, supplicating faces, their eager and infinitely pathetic attempts to *understand* that strange human

world which they cannot leave and to which they never really belong,—dogs had become for him a symbol of ourselves, of our finitude, and of the infinite mysteries and forces that surround us, which we, too, only fragmentarily and imperfectly comprehend. One remembers Socrates's description of a cave, whose inhabitants mistake for realities the shadows cast by a fire on its walls:

> *'A strange image,' he said, 'and strange inhabitants.'*
> *'They are like ourselves,' I said.*

The reader who has been able to appropriate that very subtle and difficult poem *Der Hund* (The Dog, *Neue Gedichte*, *G.W.*, III, 252) will, I think, perceive something in the faces of dogs which he has not seen before and which he will always continue to see; just as he will have learnt to see something, which he did not, perhaps, see before, from the comparison, in the poem on the preceding page, between the face of a child, suddenly looking up from its play, and an hour about to strike. I know of no other writer whose images and comparisons are so *creative*—which so help us to extend the range of our own vision and experience.

l. 13. *My master's hand:* Orpheus, the poet's master (*Briefe aus Muzot*, 401, note).

l. 14. *This is Esau here in his own rough fell:* himself, like Esau; not like Jacob, the supplanter—or like us.

XVII

The poet's pedigree or family-tree. His duty and significance is not 'self-expression', but the expression of the accumulated experience of the race, which achieves its highest reality in and through him. He is the topmost branch of the tree, but he draws his life and significance from the unknown and unseen roots.

XIX

It is in those sonnets where Rilke speaks of transience and change that his rhythm and accent become charged with a certain sadness, and that Lamentation traverses what, in the

Sonnets to Orpheus, is essentially the realm of Praise. In the Elegies the fact of our transitoriness and finitude is continually lamented, until at last, in the Ninth, it is triumphantly proclaimed that this fact is the necessary condition for the fulfilment of our specifically human task, that of transformation. Sad too is his accent when he speaks of the mechanization and desecration, the dehumanizing and undeifying, of the world in modern times, a process which, as he told his Polish translator, made the task of transformation still more urgent. Mingled, though (in the Sonnets), with this residuum of Lamentation there is always Praise: in spite of the machine and its conquests (first mentioned in the preceding sonnet), every past perfection is safe in the Invisible, poetry still hallows and celebrates all it touches, existence is still enchanted, and the great tasks still remain. It is this residuum of lamentation, this intermittent disclosure of conquered (perhaps only half-conquered) negation, that makes the general optimism and affirmation of the Sonnets to Orpheus far more acceptable, far less extravagant, than it would otherwise have appeared: it is far removed from the insensitive complacency of, for example, that line of Pope's, doubly, nay, trebly, underlined by Handel:

Whatever is—is—RIGHT.

ll. 9-12. *Sorrow we misunderstand*, etc. Marx, I have been told (for I am no Marxist), declared that on the day of the Proletarian Revolution history would begin—meaning, presumably, that hitherto humanity had merely been fooling around and wasting its resources in a prehistoric age of trade wars and selfish exploitation, and had not yet been able to concentrate upon its proper tasks. Rilke, too, though he had little or no interest in politics or social reform, continually suggests that humanity has so far made only the very feeblest and dimmest beginning with its specifically human tasks. *It's absurd*, reflects Malte Laurids Brigge, *I'm sitting here in my little room, I, Brigge, who have reached the age of twenty-eight and of whom nobody knows. I'm sitting here and am nothing. And yet, this nothing begins to think, and thinks, five storeys high, on a grey Paris afternoon,*

this thought: Is it possible, it thinks, that nothing real and important has yet been seen, perceived, and said? Is it possible, that there have been millennia of time to observe, consider, and set down, and that these millennia have been allowed to go by like an interval at school, during which one eats one's sandwich and an apple?

Yes, it is possible.

Is it possible, that, in spite of inventions and progresses, in spite of culture, religion, and philosophy, man has remained on the surface of life? Is it possible, that man has covered even this surface, which, after all, might still have been something, with an incredibly tedious material, so that it looks like drawing-room furniture during the summer holidays?

Yes, it is possible. . . (*G.W.*, V, 29 ff.).

XX

After giving his friend Lou Andreas-Salomé (with whom he had visited Russia in 1899 and 1900) a breathlessly excited account of his completion of the Elegies, Rilke continued: *And just imagine, one thing more, in another connexion. . . I wrote, made, the horse, the free, happy white horse with the tethering-block on his foot, who once, towards evening, on a Volga meadow, came bounding up to us at full gallop:—*

how

I have made him, as an 'Ex-voto' for Orpheus!—What is time?—When is present? Across so many years he came leaping, with his complete happiness, into my wide-open feeling. (*Briefe aus Muzot*, 102-3.)

ll. 13-14 *your cycle swept*

unbrokenly through him. At first Orpheus was the singer and creation the hearer; then, after Orpheus had been torn to pieces by the Mænads, creation began to sing as well as to hear, and the saga-cycle of Orpheus was completed. This Orphic cycle was, as it were, repeated in the horse, who both 'sang' and listened, 'sang' to himself and listened to himself, breathing that 'aimless breath' which is 'real singing':

> For song, as taught by you, is not desire,
> not wooing of something finally attained;
> song is existence. (I, iii.)

Eberhard Kretschmar, to whom I am much indebted, has some excellent remarks on this sonnet in *Die Weisheit Rainer Maria Rilkes*, 1936, 172-3.

XXI

The little spring-song seems to me, as it were, the 'interpretation' of a singularly dancing music I once heard sung by the convent children at a morning service in the little conventual Church at Ronda (in the South of Spain). The children, always in dance measure, sang a text I did not know to triangle and tambourine.—

Rilke only published two notes with the sonnets: this is one of them.

XXII

We continually hear such phrases as 'our industrial civilization', 'our mechanical civilization', 'the machine age', and so on. In his sonnets on machines and machinery Rilke is insisting on the possibly obvious, but certainly too often neglected, truth that, while a civilization may employ machinery, it cannot possibly be supported or directed by machinery; that, in fact, there is no more essential connexion between civilization and machinery than between chemistry and test-tubes or between physics and theodolites. An aeroplane or a motor car is not, in itself, more important than a stone axe; the question is, what is the man who has it going to *do* with it or *be* with it? A sky-scraper is not, in itself, more important than a mud hut; the question is, what kind of life is going to be lived in it? We have become so surrounded with mere apparatus and devices, with mere means, that we are in danger of confusing means with ends; indeed, of forgetting significant ends altogether, and spending our lives in a cycle of ant-like industry and uncreative recreation. And Rilke, let it be remembered, who so vehemently accuses our age of materialism, was an equally vehement opponent of asceticism and other-worldliness.

Rilke sometimes gives a peculiarly satisfying beauty to his verse by the use of *antithetical rhyme*: here, the contrast between the temporal and the eternal, or, if you like, between actuality

and reality, is emphatically expressed in the rhymes *Treibenden—Bleibenden* in the first quatrain and *Eilende—Verweilende* in the second.

XXV

To Wera.

l. 7. *the Ever-Impelling:* the gods. Literally, 'the lofty impellers, inducers, persuaders'. Rilke has formed a noun, *Vermöger*, from the verb *vermögen* (which usually means 'to be able', but which here = *bewegen, anreizen*, 'induce, impel, persuade', etc.), just as in the twenty-fourth sonnet of the Second Part he has formed (or, rather, re-formed, for this word is not uncommon in early writers) the noun *Wager* from the verb *wagen*, to dare.

l. 8. *music.* After she had given up dancing, Wera applied herself to music: see *Introd.*, p. 12.

XXVI

Orpheus, torn to pieces by the Mænads, is a symbol of the poet, who has completely renounced his own personality, completely given himself to the world, so that dumb things now speak through him in a voice that we can hear.

> He is made one with Nature: there is heard
> His voice in all her music, from the moan
> Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird;
> He is a presence to be felt and known
> In darkness and in light, from herb and stone,
> Spreading itself where'er that Power may move
> Which has withdrawn his being to its own;
> Which wields the world with never-wearied love,
> Sustains it from beneath, and kindles it above.

But while Shelley seems to suggest that *that Power* would have gone on beneficently wielding the world in much the same way with or without Adonais, Rilke seems to insist that without Orpheus there could have been no *nature*; for the 'nature' we talk about is really a 'second nature' which poets have created for us, have taught us to 'hear', and, in some measure, to 'say'.

As a further commentary, I will quote part of a passage from a letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé, from Ronda, in 1913: '*Strictly speaking, he had long been free, and, if something prevented him from dying, it was perhaps only the fact that he had already, sometime, somewhere, overlooked it, so that he had not, like the rest, to go on to it, but only to go back. His existence was already outside, stood in the assured things children play with, and perished in them. Or it was rescued in the upward glance of a woman passing by, or there, at least, surrendered to its peril. Even dogs ran past with it, anxiously looking round to see whether he was not going to take it away from them again. But when he came up to the almond-tree in blossom, he was really alarmed to find it so completely over there, entirely transferred, entirely occupied there, entirely away from him; and he himself not exactly enough opposite and too dim even to reflect this being of his. . .*'

I wrote this in my note-book early this morning; you will perceive whom it is about. (*Briefe aus den Jahren 1907-1914*, 270.)

l. 6. *none was able to shatter your head or your lyre.* According to the version of the legend Rilke follows, the Mænads, when they tore Orpheus to pieces, were unable to injure his head or his lyre, which floated down the stream,

down the swift Hebrus to the Lesbian shore.

Cf. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, xi, 50 ff.:

Membra iacent diversa locis; caput, Hebre, lyramque
Excipis, et (mirum!) medio dum labitur amne,
Flebile nescio quid queritur lyra, flebile lingua
Murmurat exanimis, respondent flebile ripae.

SECOND PART

I

On these first sonnets of the Second Part I will offer the general remark that Rilke's imagination loved to occupy itself with space, air, light, mirrors, reflections, sound-vibrations. At such times one thinks of him as a kind of Ariel, a disembodied in-

telligence, for whom, in the element he inhabits, these are the chief realities. Here, perhaps, one may detect, or fancy that one detects, some affinity with Paul Valéry, a poet whom he greatly admired.

III

l. 7. *sixteen-pointers:* stags with sixteen 'points', 'tines' or branches springing from the 'beam', or main stem, of each antler.

A *lustre*, it is perhaps necessary to observe, is a chandelier with prismatic glass pendants.

l. 14. *Narcissus.* The best commentary, I think, is the letter quoted in the note on the twenty-sixth sonnet of the First Part: *But when he came up to the almond-tree in blossom, he was really alarmed to find it* (his existence) *so completely over there, entirely transferred, entirely occupied there, entirely away from him; and he himself not exactly enough opposite and too dim even to reflect this being of his.*

Will Narcissus (the poet) be *released into lucency* at last, reunited to his escaped existence, *over there*? The myth of Narcissus, like that of Orpheus, had taken a powerful hold of Rilke's imagination. While Orpheus symbolized the poet's service to mankind, Narcissus symbolized the cost at which that service was performed, the poet's sacrifice of his own life and of his own identity. In *Späte Gedichte* (55; *Later Poems*, 119) there is a beautiful and subtle poem entitled *Narcissus*:

> And so it keeps dissolving out of me
> into the air and sympathetic trees,
> withdraws from my possession by degrees,
> and luminously eludes all enmity.
>
> It goes on mounting up into the air:
> I do not want to go, I linger, waiting;
> but all my boundaries keep precipitating
> themselves outside and are already there.

Even in sleep, too. Nothing holds us tight.
O yielding centre in me, O disease
of my incontinent kernel! Fleeing, flight
from all of me that's open to the breeze. . .

II

Narcissus perished as he gazed. His being
evaporated from his mirrored beauty
like perfume from an opened flask. But, seeing
that just to see himself was all his duty,

he loved back all that had begun to flee,
left nothing for the open wind to capture;
short-circuited perception, and, in rapture,
cancelled himself, and could no longer be.

In moments of depression Rilke sometimes felt that he was a mirror rather than a man. Once, as though forcing himself to say something he felt to be quite fundamental, and yet most hard to admit, he told Katharina Kippenberg that the poet must, so far as possible, withdraw himself from experience; and on another occasion he sadly remarked: *My destiny is, to have no destiny* (Katharina Kippenberg: *Rainer Maria Rilke, Ein Beitrag*, First Ed., 1935, 139, 149; Second Ed., 1938, 226, 238). Above all in personal relationships, between him and what is commonly understood by 'experience', the mirror intervened.

IV

ll. 13-14. *Whitely it stole up to a maid,—to be*
within the silver mirror and in her.

Alluding to the famous tapestries of *La Dame à la Licorne* in the Musée de Cluny, Paris; they are elaborately described in *Malte Laurids Brigge*, in a passage which concludes as follows: *But there still remains a banquet, to which no one is invited. Expectation plays no part. Everything is there. Everything for ever. The lion looks round almost threateningly: no one may come. As yet we have never seen her tired; is she tired? Or has she merely sat down because she is holding*

something heavy? A pyx, one might suppose. But she inclines her other arm towards the unicorn, and the creature fawningly rears itself and climbs and supports itself on her lap. It is a mirror she is holding. Look: she is showing the unicorn its image. (*G.W.*, V, 156.)

V

In June 1914 he had written to Lou Andreas-Salomé, from Paris: *I am like the little anemone I once saw in the garden at Rome; throughout the day it had opened so wide that it could no longer shut at the approach of night! It was frightful to see it on the dark meadow, wide open, still absorbing into its almost madly flung open calyx, and above it the far too large night that was not yet done. And near by all its prudent sisters, each closed up around its little measure of abundance. I too am just so fatally turned outwards, and therefore distracted by everything, refusing nothing, my senses going across to every interruption without asking my leave; if there is a noise I give myself up and am the noise; and, since everything, once it has become capable of excitation, wants to be excited, I too, fundamentally, want to be disturbed, and am so without end.* (Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Rainer Maria Rilke*, 66-7.)

In the sonnet Rilke is 'praising', even advocating as a desirably attainable ideal, the experience he had described as a kind of martyrdom ('if it be possible, let this cup pass from me') in the letter. As I have already hinted, Rilke's life seemed to move continually between these two poles: almost superhuman joy in the self-transcendence of creative activity and spiritual illumination; deep depression and emptiness, when he had almost forgotten the reward, and was aware only of the cost at which it had been, and could only be, attained: Orpheus and Narcissus. If we believe that the kind of insight he achieved is the most precious thing in life, we must remember the price he paid for it. For everything has its price.

It has been suggested by many modern writers that poetry must become our substitute for religion, or that we must find our religion in poetry. If this is anything more than mere æsthetic twaddle, it must mean, not that we are to take periodical doses of religious surrogate by reading poetry, but that we are all, in some degree, to become poets ourselves, content with

illumination if we cannot achieve expression, and with the re-creation of the world in ourselves if we cannot project it into a work of art. Only in this way, as the exercise of creative, or re-creative, activity upon a reality we profoundly believe to be holy, as the raising of externality towards the Absolute (to borrow a phrase of Bosanquet's), does it seem possible to conceive of poetry, in its widest sense of 'making', becoming a religion. Rilke was certainly its greatest exponent. He had completely abandoned conventional religion, and yet he was by far the most religious of modern poets. Poetry *was* his religion, and there is a most remarkable likeness between his exultations and agonies and those of the great saints and mystics, the great practitioners of the religious life. If, then, poetry is to be our religion, his example suggests that it will be no easy religion, but one demanding infinite courage and self-sacrifice. We must come to feel as passionately about the world open to our experience as the religious man felt about his personal God, and we must be able to say of it, as he said of God, 'Though it slay me, yet will I trust in it'.

VI

l. 1. *The rose of antiquity was a simple 'eglantine', red and yellow, in the colours that appear in flame. It blooms here, in the Valais, in certain gardens*—Rilke's note, in a presentation copy of the Sonnets (*Briefe aus Muzot*, 402, note).

The development, through the ages, of the rose, and of its meaning in and for us, was the kind of 'progress' that most interested Rilke.

VIII

His cousin Egon, who died in childhood, belonged to Rilke's 'most unforgettable recollections'. He wrote of him: *I often think of him and keep on returning to that figure which has remained for me indescribably affecting. Much 'childhood', the sadness and helplessness of childhood, is embodied for me in his form, in the ruff he wore, in his little neck, in his chin, in his beautiful brown eyes, disfigured by a squint. So I invoked him once more in connexion with that eighth Sonnet,*

that expresses transitoriness, after he had already duly served as the prototype for little Erik Brahe, who died as a child, in the Note-Books of M. L. Brigge. (Carl Sieber, *René Rilke,* 59-60.)

l. 4. *the Lamb with the scroll that talks:* the lamb in old religious paintings, that only speaks by means of the scroll in its mouth, bearing such words as *Ecce Agnus Dei.*

What an unforgettable image this sonnet leaves with us!—the garden, growing dark and indistinct in the twilight, the pale, sad, upturned faces of the children, shadowy and unsubstantial and transitory in comparison with the solid and enduring ball.

Rilke never looked back upon his childhood as a period of romantic happiness—he speaks always of its sadness and terror. This sadness and terror arise from the child's inability to perceive the relationship between things, an inability which, as Rilke himself would admit (Cf. I, xvi, the dog sonnet) persists in later life, although by then, having clearly perceived many relationships, we can find in our ignorance of so many more a source, not of terror, but of delicious expectation and uncertainty. For Rilke, life is above all a matter of innumerable subtle relationships, and it is precisely their inexhaustible possibility of combination that makes life 'magical', 'enchanted' (II, x, l. 11). This, in the main, is his attitude in the Sonnets to Orpheus, although in the Elegies our ignorance of our place and of our relationship to the rest of creation is often, as it is for the child, a source of sadness and terror. There is sadness in the Sonnets and there is gladness in the Elegies, although, on the whole, what is lamented in the Elegies is in the Sonnets transformed into (or regarded as) a source of joy, and is praised. Even in the Sonnets, however, we are continually aware of an undertone of sadness, which sometimes, as in the present sonnet, becomes the dominant tone.

XI

Referring to the manner in which, according to ancient hunting custom, the peculiarly white rock-doves in certain districts of the Karst, by means of cloths carefully suspended into their caves and suddenly shaken

in a particular way, are scared out of their subterranean dwellings to be shot during their terrified escape.—Rilke's note.

The custom referred to, combining as it does both cruelty and treachery, might seem to epitomize all that is most barbarous and brutal in human nature; and yet—such is the remorseless logic of Rilke's philosophy, or religion—even this must be affirmed, accepted, praised. Death, Rilke has continually insisted, is simply the other side of life, and therefore should not be regarded as something alien and terrible. If it is not terrible for us, it is not terrible for the birds; and the hunters, who felt it was a natural and understood thing for birds to die, were already on the track of that true 'rule of death', which declares that death is but the other side of life; they were already becoming familiar with death, *that friendly death*, as Rilke elsewhere calls it; death was entering into their lives, getting closely related to them through their ordinary occupations.

The symbolic facts and generalizations in this sonnet are, I think, more acceptable as an expression of Rilke's general view of the relationship between life and death than as an illustration of his conviction that it is our duty to accept and praise everything. The element of 'impression', that is to say, is more acceptable than the element of 'statement', of generalization. While it is true that we are apt to exaggerate the 'barbarism' and 'savagery' of past ages in comparison with what we regard as our own superior humanity and civilization, and, unhistorically forgetting that it is rather external conditions and restraints than human nature itself which has changed, to regard our own remote ancestors as beings almost of a different species from ourselves, Rilke's exhortation to banish all regret is perhaps too much of a hard saying, and the generalization that

> Killing merely is one form of our wandering sadness

seems to be of doubtful validity, or, at least, to be valid only in a very limited sense. Is one justified in criticizing the ideas which a poet expresses, as distinct from his expression of them?

When they are advanced *as* ideas, not merely as impressions (and the generalization I have quoted is printed in the German equivalent of italics), I think one is. After all, in spite of the advocates of 'pure' poetry, there is such a thing as the poetry of statement, as well as the poetry of impression or imagination, and lines such as

> Men must endure
> Their going hence even as their coming hither:
> Ripeness is all

or

> E la sua voluntate è nostra pace

are great and beautiful, not merely in form, but in matter, as statement, as generalization, as criticism of life. In comparison with them, Rilke's statements and generalizations in this sonnet seem to be valid only in a very special and limited context and subject to innumerable distinctions and qualifications. Would it be unfair to ask whether anyone could or should be able to murmur with conviction over, let us say, the ruins of Lidice or the site of one of the extermination camps:

> Far from the gazer remain every emotion but gladness,
> not from the Nazis alone. . .?

Although ultimately, perhaps, whatever is, *is* right, the conviction would seem more suitable to gods than to men. Certainly, all human attempts to demonstrate it (whether by Optimists or by Absolute Idealists or by poets with a predominantly æsthetic view of life) lead sooner or later to statements repugnant to reason, humanity, and common sense.

XIII

In March 1922, after telling Frau Ouckama Knoop that he had written a second part of the Sonnets to Orpheus, and promising to send her copies, he continued: *To-day I am only sending you one sonnet from them, because, in the whole context, it is the one that means most to me, and is perhaps altogether the most valid therein.* (*Briefe aus Muzot*, 119: a note declares that this is the sonnet referred to.)

l. 11. *beat, through this never-again, to the fullest amount.*

Cf. the Ninth Elegy, ll. 12-16:

> Just once,
> everything, only for once. Once and no more. And we too,
> once. And never again. But this
> having been once, though only once,
> having been once on earth—can it ever be cancelled?

l. 12. *To the stock of used-up. . .* Cf. Bernard Shaw, *Epistle Dedicatory* prefixed to *Man and Superman* (ed. 1903, xxxi-ii): *This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.*

XIV

l. 2. *whom we lend fate from the borders of fate.* Cf. First Elegy, ll. 68-71:

> True, it is strange to inhabit the earth no longer,
> use no longer customs scarcely acquired,
> not to interpret roses, and other things
> that promise so much, in terms of a human future.

XV

The stone mouth of the fountain is a symbol for the poet's mouth, through which, also, earth is only talking to herself.

XVI

l. 8. *the end we do not touch.* We may imagine the offering as being extended towards the god on the end of a long pole, like the collecting-box used in some churches, at home and abroad: the 'free end' (*das freie Ende*) will then be the end nearest to the god, the end we are not holding.

ll. 13-14. *And the lamb's more silent instinct's clear*
when it begs us for its bell.

I do not yet fully understand these lines, which were partially

illuminated for me, quite by chance, during a walk in the Black Forest with a village priest. He would stop to exchange a few words at most of the farms we passed, and regularly enquire after the non-human inhabitants by name; and he told me that every sheep and lamb, cow and calf, had its own particular bell, and would often refuse to go out to pasture until this bell had been duly fastened to its neck.

It is also, perhaps, worth remarking that this is not the only place where Rilke grades in this order, according to their unity of being, their participation in *pure relation*, the god, the dead, animals, man. We are, in a sense, excluded, disconnected, isolated, and have to re-achieve that unity with the spirit of life we sometimes possessed in childhood, and which animals, in their lower degree, never lose. Cf. the Eighth Elegy and commentary thereon in *Duino Elegies*, 1939.

XVII

As a commentary on this poem, cf. the recollection of a morning hour at Saonara, described in a letter to Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis (*Briefe aus den Jahren 1914-1921*, 94-5; quoted in *Duino Elegies*, 1939, Appendix III, 156-7).

XVIII

ll. 9-14. Rilke perceives a connexion between the *turning* (gyration) of the dancer and the *turning* (on a potter's wheel) of the jug and vase.

XXII

Will the mechanical and technical 'marvels' of our civilization be able to pass the test of 'invisibility'? Will they, when they have become 'invisible' within us, have a significance equal to that of the parks and gardens of the Renaissance and the eighteenth century, of the brazen bell (at Moscow?), of the column at Karnak? Only if they are able to become (to borrow a phrase from Rilke's letter to his Polish translator) *vessels in which we may find and store humanity.*

ll. 10-11. *the yellow, the horizontal day.* The day, I presume, that is experienced by a motorist, rushing from one horizon to another in his own yellow dust; its opposite would be the *vertical day*, the day stretching from the green earth below (with the dead beneath it) to the blue sky above.

l. 14. *Yet as were they but thought.* Cf. Seventh Elegy, ll 51-54:

> ever diminishing,
> outwardness dwindles. Where once was a permanent house,
> up starts some invented structure across our vision, as fully
> at home among concepts as though it still stood in a brain.

XXIII

To the Reader (Rilke, *Briefe aus Muzot*, 402, note).

XXV

Counterpart to the little Spring Song of Songs in the first part of the Sonnets (Rilke, *Briefe aus Muzot*, 402, note). He is referring to the twenty-first sonnet of the First Part.

The mystery and miracle of the return of spring, the gradual Northern spring, expected and yet always unexpected, was perhaps of all natural phenomena the one which Rilke most deeply felt. Cf. the two poems in *Späte Gedichte* (122, 162; *Later Poems*, 161, 162), *Early Spring* and *The sap is mounting back*, of which the first may be quoted here:

> Harshness gone. And sudden mitigation
> laid upon the field's uncovered grey.
> Little runnels change their intonation.
> Tentative caresses stray
>
> round the still earth from Immensity.
> Roads run far into the land, foretelling.
> Unexpectedly you find it, welling
> upwards in the empty tree.

XXVI

See last paragraph of note on II, xvi. On this sonnet too the best commentary is the Eighth Elegy, for here, as there, Rilke is

lamenting the fact that man (even as a child) seems isolated and disconnected, an intruder into the harmony of creation, with which, perhaps, only Orpheus, the poet, can reunite him. Cf. also First Elegy, ll. 9-13:

> Alas, who is there
> we can make use of? Not angels, not men;
> and already the knowing brutes are aware
> that we don't feel very securely at home
> within our interpreted world.

l. 14. *the head and the lyre.* See the last note on the twenty-sixth sonnet of the First Part.

XXVII

Of all the sonnets, this is the one that most completely reproduces the conception of human destiny expressed in Rilke's letter to his Polish translator and in that Elegy which is the most closely related to the Sonnets to Orpheus, the Ninth, where all those apparent limitations and contradictions which have been so often lamented are at last (or, if you will, for the time being, and through a mere swing of the pendulum) triumphantly accepted as conditions for the fulfilment of our specifically human task. If I may quote from my commentary on the Ninth Elegy (*Duino Elegies*, 1939, 139): *Only in and through the finite consciousness of a succession of transitory beings like ourselves could the visible world be re-created into an invisible one, could 'externality', in the words of a modern philosopher, be 'raised towards the Absolute'. Transitoriness, therefore, is no longer regretted as a limitation, but joyfully accepted as a condition: negation is overcome by affirmation, and affirmation is strengthened by what it has overcome.*

l. 9. *Ah, Mutability's spectre!* (As an English equivalent of the half-personified *das Vergängliche* I have chosen the word to which Spenser, in his *Two Cantos of Mutabilitie*, has given such depth of meaning): the spectre of the transitory, or of transitoriness: the doubts concerning the 'value and destiny of the individual' that must necessarily assail us, so long as our world is sharply divided into life and death, so long as death is thought

of as the opposite, as the negation and annihilation, of life. Tennyson has expressed it, in *Vastness*:

> What is it all, if we all of us end but in being our own corpse-coffins at last,
> Swallow'd in Vastness, lost in Silence, drown'd in the deeps of a meaningless Past?
> What but a murmur of gnats in the gloom, or a moment's anger of bees in their hive?—

Tennyson could only get rid of the 'spectre' through his belief in personal immortality; Rilke would have us get rid of it by entering what he calls the *pure relation*, where life and death, present and past, are felt to be continuous and one; by becoming simply, guilelessly receptive, renouncing all personal claims, surrendering ourselves completely to the influence of powers we hold to be divine. The justification of the finite is that it is the point at which eternity enters time. If we were not finite and temporal and transitory, the Infinite and Eternal could not use us to achieve its permanent ends—permanent, though achieved only in and through time.

In his continual insistence on transformation and transmutation, and on the fact that man is not important *in himself*, there is a remarkable affinity between Rilke and a writer who, at first sight, perhaps, seems strangely unlike him—André Gide:

Mais ceci demanderait à être développé, et ramené (subordonné) à d'autres considérations; celle-ci, en particulier, que déjà j'entrevoyais dans ma jeunesse: c'est que nous avons tendance à situer beaucoup trop haut la cote 'humanité'; que l'homme n'est pas intéressant, important, digne d'être vénéré pour lui-même; que ce qui invite l'humanité au progrès (et je crois fermement au progrès, dont on ne nous a présenté jusqu'à présent qu'une sorte de caricature), c'est précisément de ne pas se considérer elle-même comme un fin—ni son confort, ni son repos satisfait,—mais bien comme un moyen par lequel, et à travers lequel, peut se jouer et se réaliser quelque chose qui la dépasse. C'est là ce qui me faisait, jadis, prêter à mon Prométhée mal enchaîné ces paroles: 'Je n'aime pas l'homme: J'aime ce qui le dévore,' et mettre

ma sagesse et mon abnégation dans ceci: 'Savoir préférer à l'homme l'aigle qui se nourrit de lui.' (*Divers*, 1931, 208-9.)

ll. 12-13. *Waning—remaining:* the same antithetical rhyme (*Treibenden—Bleibenden*) as in I, xxii, ll. 1 and 4.

XXVIII

To Wera.

XXIX

To a friend of Wera's (Rilke, *Briefe aus Muzot*, 402, note).

l. 1. *of those far from us:* 'der vielen Fernen'='der vielen Entfernten', *i.e.* the dead.

l. 5. *stronger than the feeding strength it borrows.* Although, on the one hand, Rilke continually insists that our task is with the here and now, and fiercely attacks the Church for teaching men to neglect the world for the sake of other-worldliness, he also, on the other hand, frequently suggests that we are being used by eternal forces for supra-temporal and supra-mundane ends. Consider, for example, his words in the letter about Wera and her death: *How she reached out with the antennae of her heart beyond all that is comprehensible and embraceable here* (*Intro.*, p. 13), and the poem *Soul in Space* (*Intro.*, p. 14).

l. 10. *at your senses' cross-ways magic cunning.* Popular superstition has always regarded cross-roads as a seat of magical power. Are these lines intended to recall the first quatrain of the third sonnet in the First Part?—

> A god can do it. But can a man expect
> to penetrate the narrow lyre and follow?
> His sense is discord. Temples for Apollo
> are not found where two heart-ways intersect.

Is Rilke here answering that question with a final triumphant 'Yes'?

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