

INTRODUCTION

The *Duino Elegies* constitute a massive, earth-based structure, and remind one of Notre-Dame, with its aspirations and its grotesqueries. The slighter *Sonnets to Orpheus* stand to one side, each a definite artifact, reflecting the same architect and material. In fact, the ideas of the Sonnets are often fragments chipped from the rough-hewn Elegies; sometimes they epitomize an elegy, often they develop a corollary from the larger work. Like the Treasury beside the Cathedral, they hoard many rare bijoux, bright esoteric gems not to be put too readily in public view. A series of sonnets is more easily worked with than the slower-moving Elegies, and a reader familiar with the several themes of the Sonnets will discover that the Elegies finally go off with but slight documentation.

Rilke always maintained that this book was from the most mysterious and enigmatic "dictation ever entrusted" to him—and this is both pompous and pontifical. They were written, he continues, "in a single breathless attention . . . without one word's being in doubt or requiring to be altered." This is pure arrogance. "Would to God," as Jonson said of Shakespeare, "he had blotted a thousand!"

The Sonnets were written during some two weeks in February, 1922, the month that saw the completion of the Elegies. In a way, they seem the secundatum thrown off by the greater effort. Readers of Rilke will be familiar with his evasiveness in dealing with their genesis: (1) a young girl, a dancer whom he had seen but once, the daughter of an acquaintance with whom he had never been on intimate terms, died. (2) He had recently acquired a small print of Orpheus playing on the lyre. (3) He had already made translations from the work of Paul Valéry, among them the essay "L'Âme et la danse" and "Le Cimetière marin." That their author had suffered from a long period of poetic lethargy and inaction and had then produced *La Jeune Parque* certainly gave Rilke a profound impetus for the completion of the Elegies and the reception of the "dictation" of the Sonnets.

As a result of this combination he had not only the immediate occasion and the symbol, but the example of a distinguished colleague. In conjunction with one of those inexplicable emotional releases which we call "inspiration," what could be expected from all these focusing forces but the gushing forth of a book?

In Monique Saint-Hélier's *À Rilke pour Noël* (Chandelier, Berne, 1927, p. 21) we find a passage which indicates precisely the debt to Valéry. "I was alone, I was waiting, all my work was within. One day I read Valéry, and I knew that my waiting was at an end." Aside from a few

borrowings, the influence was rather one of personality than of imitation.

As to the divine afflatus attending the creation of the Sonnets, opinions are dubious. A.A.M. Stols (Maastricht, 1927, p. 128) writes: "He belongs to that group of creators whose signature should be followed by the name of 'artifex' rather than of 'poeta.'" And Franz Rauhut (*Paul Valéry*, München, 1930, p. 66) writes: "His ecstasy is cold; it is of the intellect rather than of the soul. He cultivated intelligence rather than intuition; he is no mystic, but rather a magic-worker."

After the influence of Rodin, so apparent in *Neue Gedichte*, Rilke was developing into a philosophic poet. He had finished his "work of the eye," as he named it; now was to come the "heart-work." Apparently it was the former which moved Valéry to say to Max Rychner (*Neue Züricher Zeitung*) that he loved in Rilke and through Rilke *Dinge*, "Things" (always an especial Rilkean word) which he would not have loved directly for themselves: the occult, the premonitions, intimate appearances of distant things, and the other hitherto secret manifestations of which the German had made him aware. And remember that the speaker was a very hardheaded rationalist.

I must quote the translation of a poem of Valéry's which may also have stimulated the series. Rilke had already translated the poem, which proved a catalytic.

ORPHEUS

. . . Inspired beneath the myrtles, I create the
wonder-
ful Orpheus! From the pure cirque the fire
descends,
turns the bald mount to a trophy from which
ascends
augustly the act of a god, with ringing thunder.

If the god sings, almightily he breaks
the landscape; the sun sees the horror of
moving rocks;
to the dazzling lofty harmonious golden walls
of a sanctuary a unique wailing calls.

Sings Orpheus, sitting beside a sky of fire!
The rock moves, slipping; each enchanted stone
feels a new import, the frenzy for azure light;

evening bathes the half-nude Temple's flight,
and he, mustering himself, in the gold ordains
himself to the vast soul of the hymn on the
lyre!

The two Narcissus poems of Valéry influenced
Sonnets II, 2 and 3, on mirrors. Other influences
have been pointed out in the notes to specific
poems. And the young Symbolists grouped around
Mallarmé taught Rilke some verse tricks, notably
the short-lined un-Germanic sonnet.

From the many loose lines, fragments from the Elegies collecting for ten years, Rilke, with the various influences and the impetus mentioned above, finally burst over, like a volcano, and wrote the series in too short a time. But he certainly gave himself airs about their creation which are very irritating. He wrote several melodramatic letters, for all the world like the complaints of a hysterical woman in an interesting situation, about the spiritual tempest that threatened to rend his whole being, et cetera. ("Look, sir, I bleed!" as the bastard said to Gloucester.) He had moaned and groaned in whole nights of agony. One prefers Dante's litotic assertion that the writing of the *Commedia* had kept him lean.

Rilke seems always to have needed a spiritual prop, as a morning-glory vine drapes itself around a pump handle overnight. Earlier he had worshipped Jacobsen and Tolstoy. Rodin had given him the clear objective way of seeing that produced *Neue Gedichte*. Valéry's self-discipline after a long silence had encouraged him to overcome the apathy of a dozen years. A friend had lent him a small castle at Muzot. A couple of elderly noblewomen kept him in groceries and coddled him. He had wonderful days among his roses and grand long nights of solitude. His style had changed completely in the interim.

In evidence, let me quote "Spanische Tänzerin" (N.G.) for comparison with Sonnets I, 15, and II, 18.

SPANISH DANCER

As in the hand a match glows, swiftly white
before it bursts in flame and to all sides
licks its quivering tongues: within the ring
of spectators her wheeling dance is bright,
nimble, and fervid, twitches and grows wide.

And suddenly is made of pure fire.

Now her glances kindle the dark hair;
she twirls the floating skirts with daring art
into a whirlwind of consuming flame,
from which her naked arms alertly strike,
clattering like fearful rattlesnakes.

Then, as the fire presses her too closely,
imperiously she clutches it and throws it
with haughty gestures to the floor and watches
it rage and leap with flames that will not die—
until, victorious, surely, with a sweet
greeting smile, and holding her head high,
she tramples it to death with small, firm feet.

Here we find a visual, sculptural treatment which freezes one art into another with its cold fire. It is as objective and clear-cut as a Manet painting. There are no further implications to be drawn from it. We are shown none of the poet's personal feelings about the woman. As a matter of fact, she was an entertainer at a wedding party, for the daughter of Zuloaga.

Now, if the reader will look at I, 15, where the little girl is invited to "dance the orange," and then at I, 25, second quatrain: "A dancer first, then her hesitant body stood / suddenly, as if youth were cast in bronze," and then compare II, 18, he can see how the poet's mind and technique had altered in the fifteen years between the two books. Here the girl is no longer merely a dancer; she has become the symbol of metamorphosis, "a transition of all transciency into action." All the summer and sunlight, all the practice of the "hard-won year," have been suddenly drawn together and expressed in an achieved gesture, and now it rests for an instant, static as a "tree of rapture." Then is added a pitcher and vase, and a final figure of the turning on a potter's wheel. Certainly this lacks the unity of the poem about the Spanish dancer, but one feels here that Rilke was searching for something beyond ordinary human ken.

Just as Blake used much of the same subject-matter in his two books of songs, Rilke re-creates many of the earlier objectively treated poems of *N.G.*: gardens, fountains, temples, dogs, children, beggars, trees, figs, pitchers, and rings, but now they are all used figuratively, as symbols. Aside from the pieces on the little white Russian horse, the fabulous unicorn, the dog and the slain doves, the fine animal poems of the earlier books seem to have been forgotten, or, rather, deliberately superseded. The only flowers specifically mentioned now are the anemone and the rose.

But whatever one may think of the matter, the technique of the poet is still masterly. He has not yet got over early French influences, and the same maddeningly perverse yet compelling phrases and arabesques are to be found here. Every critic of Rilke has called him a man of nuances, i.e., a dealer in delicate shadings, tones slightly off-key, and ironically employed expressions. His ability as a musician of verse is commented on in a score of books, but, better than that, it is immediately apparent if the poems are read aloud. His work is deeply indebted to, or else marvelously akin to, the ideal pattern set forth in Verlaine's "Art poétique" which was a bible for the younger Symbolists.

You must have music first of all,
and for that a rhythm uneven is best,
vague as the air and soluble,
with nothing heavy and nothing at rest. . . .

Never the Color, always the Shade,
always the nuance is supreme! . . .

Let there be music, again and forever! . . .
and all the rest is literature.

The last word here, of course, is used pejoratively.

I do not wish to seem unaware of many poetic shortcomings and sins on Rilke's part. The following examples could be multiplied invidiously. But no one should write: ". . . daß sie völlig voll-

ziehst . . .” or “. . . singender steige . . .” or he is not writing good German. When he asks the dancer to “create the relation . . . with the juice that brims this happy thing” (an orange!), or exclaims: “. . . see in the dish / how odd are the faces of fish,” Erato has been nodding on Parnassus.

A word about the form of the sonnets. There are two or three examples in almost Petrarchan form, notably I, 4 and 17, where the octaves are built on two rhymes; the rest employ quatrains unjoined by similar rhymes, and all the sestets have the usual half-dozen variations. He has experimented with different line lengths and meters, not always successfully. Line 8 in II, 17 has twenty badly digested syllables, most of which seem to have been hauled along on a trailer in case something broke down. Many of the sonnets use lines of varying lengths and the effect is choppy. His sonnets in pentameter go off much better than his short-liners, a type borrowed from the French Symbolists. Two of his best, II, 4 and 15, are built on hard masculine monosyllabic rhymes. I have, as usual, reduced the characteristic feminine rhymes natural to the German language to my own idiom, for the trochaic effect bores the English ear. Too many translators feel obligated to reproduce the exact German meter, and their verses abound in silly double-rhymes as bad as an overuse of “voluble-soluble, compressible-dressable, awful-crawful,” and thousands of nasty “-ing” rhymes. These sinners have done

Goethe, Rilke, and Stefan George splendid disservice. "May their tribe increase!"

Granted that Pegasus, indubitably a stallion, may be allowed a reasonable number of caracoles, mincings and prancings, turf-tearings, snortings, foistings, and whiffletree gymnastics, he ought not behave like a mustang at a rodeo. In these sonnets Rilke often does just that. He is sometimes as irritating as Hopkins. And, alas! there are no more Urquharts among us.

The best translators seldom afford their readers steeds other than gelded hacks. Such animals should not draw undue attention to their failings; they should walk decently along and not get burs in their tails; they should not raise their voices, lest they sound dangerously like a chorus of asses braying.

Rilke offers plenty of capricious sentences. He invents unnecessary word-endings, telegraphs his style. He manufactures adverbs from adjectives that resent it, and he uses adjectives, vague enough at best, as nouns which remain almost untranslatable. I have tried to avoid creating English inanities as potential equivalents of his fatuous idiosyncrasies.

A bibliography of major debts was included in *Rainer Maria Rilke*, Berkeley, 1940. At present I must add M. D. Herter Norton's prose versions, and the notes of the translations of J. B. Leishman which have been particularly helpful. For readers of tough German criticism I suggest Eudo C. Mason's *Lebenhaltung und Symbolik bei*

Rainer Maria Rilke, Weimar, 1939, and Hans Egon Holthusen's *Rilkes Sonette an Orpheus, Versuch einer Interpretation*, München, 1937. I have profited by the French translations of J.-F. Angelloz, Aubier, 1943, and of Maurice Betz, Émile-Paul, Paris, 1942. They both made linear translations without attempting to reduce the results to verse, but Rilke goes awkwardly into French prose.

And now let the reader believe Mason's "Alles Gedankliche hat aber in den Sonetten, ohne dadurch entwertet zu werden, eine Art musikalische Verflüssigung erfahren," and let him start his first reading—it will take him several.

C.F.M.

Weimar, San Francisco, Paris
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