INTRODUCTION

The Elegies were begun at the castle of Duino, near Trieste, in 1912. The manuscript was carried through Spain, France, and Germany, and the poems as they now appear were finally completed at the Château Muzot, in Switzerland, in 1922.

They represent the culmination of Rilke's efforts to use his experience not as self-expression but as something more universal. They are neither simple, particularly lucid, nor passionate in a personal sense. The poet had developed beyond his earlier Romantic style in which he wrote of his emotions; he had created the "Thing-poems" of *Neue Gedichte*, which are almost purely objective; and in *Malte* he had rid himself of certain morbid fears, obsessions, and leanings toward the macabre. He had learned that poetry is the result of experiences rather than of feelings. Thus the Elegies present the matured evaluations of a man who had suffered greatly, so much that he finally overcame any desire to bemoan his fate or to accuse destiny; he had won a serenity from which he could regard death as the consummation and continuance of life, as the fullest and most real part of man's existence. Here are no

blessed assurances of rewards, no tabulated proscriptions; the reader is dealing with Rilke's version of the process of becoming, through the evolution of a "wise passiveness," which, after a trial period of lamentation and suffering, can accept the next life. This is represented as no Grecian Elysium, no Hebraic or Catholic heaven, for here also pain is the lot of man. But there is this difference: after the drab state of becoming, man enters into a state ready for actual being in which he can acclaim the part played by sorrow in his evolution. This acceptance of sorrow and man's duty to praise it are major Rilkean themes. Man herewith becomes a Yea-sayer and is ready for the personal death implicit from the beginning.

I have read, made précis of, and rewritten several explanations of these poems, and I had originally intended to prepare a completely documented and scholarly introduction. But I have finally decided that none of them said anything Rilke had not already written more perfectly and clearly himself. A second reading of the series is certainly more valuable than pages of notes and supposed explanations. (With the *Sonnets to Orpheus* the situation is very different, and I have dealt with them accordingly.)

But the initial impact on the reader will undoubtedly be confusing, and a brief outline of the ten elegies may be helpful. The principal symbols —props, one might almost call them—are the angels, the heroes, the great lovers (always women), the mothers, the children who died young, the mime and doll, the acrobats, the animals and finally, the Laments, the personified sorrows of life. The Things:

trees, pitchers, tools, houses, stars, flowers, birds, et cetera, are minor supernumeraries.

Man has always attempted to establish himself on this fickle ball of earth. He can believe in such forces of nature as he has actually conquered. These are tangible. But other values, such as God, faith, and love—these so-called "spiritual values"—are only partially believed in. Eventually man must learn that his agonies and sufferings—certainly tangible and real enough—are his only riches. Yet in his weakness and isolation he naturally turns to things outside himself for help, and a summary of these is the theme of the introductory elegy.

First Elegy: "Whom can man use?" the poet asks himself. The angels are too terrible and aloof; man is no help to his fellow; even the animals recognize that he is a stranger here. Maybe a tree, one's home street, or an old habit or the night can help some. Then Rilke discusses the part of the great lovers (usually deserted women), whom, he insists, it is the poet's duty to praise. Saints and heroes are too intent on their destiny to avail man. The children who died young, "gently weaned from earthly things," no longer need him. Everything seems to stand alone; there is no help. But each of these themes will recur and be evaluated in the other elegies. For the present, the poet leaves man with the one consolation of music, a "blessed advancement" born from grief, according to the Greek story of Linos.

Second Elegy: Angels, perhaps, were helpful in the days of the Old Testament, but Rilke maintained that his angels are rather those of Islam. The approach of such a being nowadays would kill

the beholder. Man constantly breathes himself into and dissolves in cosmic space. The essence of the transitory, he has no proof of existence past death; even the lovers cannot believe that their tremendous feelings have any real eternity. We lack the classic restraint of the Greeks and can no longer behold in the gods symbols by means of which the heart might "temper itself more loftily."

THIRD ELEGY: Man's love is controlled by his dark inherited bloodstream; it is an impulsive, irrational thing incapable of devotion and of satisfying a woman's love. There is a fine eulogy of mother love, birth, and infancy—the treatment is tender without being sentimental. As the youth grows into manhood he becomes aware of his heritage from the past and his place in the continued history of the race. As usual, Rilke calls on the girls to aid, comfort, and restrain man.

FOURTH ELEGY: Ever since Goethe's puppet stage, Heinrich von Kleist's essay on dolls, and Eudo Mason's long chapter in his book, a good deal of nonsense has been written about dolls. Rilke dismisses the masked mime as a mere imitation of something and defends the doll, animated by the angel, as a more real symbol. There is nothing at all in the elegy which is difficult to understand. Man sits before the stage, the puppet show of life. The essence of the play is Parting, loss of those dear to us. Man must learn to accept death calmly. The faint picture of the poet's father is one of the finest passages in the series. The "boy with brown squint-eyes" is his cousin Egon, who is mentioned also in the Sonnets.

FIFTH ELEGY: This is one of the most impressive

and clearest, a halfway point. The acrobats from Picasso's picture are used as symbols of man's pitiful attempts to perform his part in life. It has been suggested that the little girl represents Rilke's pathetic picture of himself in childhood when his mother dressed and treated him as a girl. The ring of spectators around the acrobats, that "rose of gazing" which is ever blooming and losing its petals as people come and are bored and go away, is a fine figure. Man is both actor and spectator, almost the "blow and the wound" of Baudelaire. Then Rilke asks the angel for some supermundane help: a practicing ground where human actions might perhaps be perfected so that they could win the approbation of the "innumerable silent dead," who presumably have come into some higher wisdom in their state of being.

Sixth Elegy: The fig tree flowers modestly in the cavity of the green carapace—so to speak, it "skips over the blooming"; but man, who likes to linger and blossom, to live and enjoy the beautiful play before the serious part of life begins, retards his development as fruit, that is, as in death. The single-minded hero, however, a man of action who knows exactly what he was sent here to do, lives dangerously, and presses ever onward toward self-destruction (sacrifice for his cause), and the beginning of the next, the true part of life. Here is a strange physiological fertility rite in which the hero-sperm has it all his own way. Once born, the hero lets nothing hinder him, even love. He is already beyond all temporal distractions; he is ready to go into the "open" of his destiny.

Seventh Elegy: This begins with a wooing song,

"pure as a bird's." Not only the beloved, but all girls, even the fallen and the dead, are petitioned to come. Life is glorious, but the outer world is constantly dwindling. While the *Zeitgeist* is creating vast storehouses of power, the temples are forgotten. (This is also a theme developed in the Sonnets.) The angel is addressed almost in a defiant tone. The poet will not woo him, but he cites architecture, music, and love as results of man's endeavor to praise something secure amid the flux of existence. The human hand (reminiscent of those carved by Rodin) remains wide open between the poet and the angel, "as safeguard and warning." The angel is unseizable, but the poet also does not intend to be taken tamely.

EIGHTH ELEGY: This is the most pessimistic of the lot. Animals know nothing about death and walk calmly into eternity, without fear. Their gaze is forward. The dead are already in the "open." Children touch upon it sometimes in their reveries and sleep. Lovers almost approach it, but are blocked off by each other. Birth itself, as a departure from the protected existence in the womb, is an agony. Man is always aware of fate and death, and lives ever bidding adieu.

NINTH ELEGY: Why, then, if one might undergo some strange metamorphosis into a laurel, as did Daphne, why does man cling so to life and attempt to evade his destiny, in death? Vastly he loves this world of Things, but what will he be able to take with him into "the other realm"? Human experience would have no voice there. Life is the time of the utterable, therefore let us praise while and what we can, even the simple tools that have beauty of form

and live because of us. Possibly we may take the sufferings and experiences in love with us, but we must give ourselves confidently to earth's "sacred revelation . . . intimate death." Rilke had the odd notion that earth is resurrected "invisibly" in the transformation which man undergoes in death.

TENTH ELEGY: At the end of life, man begins to see the purpose of his nights of affliction. He has been a "spendthrift of sorrow" and has not put it to its use as a stimulus for praise. Henceforth he must "sing out jubilation and praise to the affirmative angels." Now Rilke comes to the magnificent description of the allegorical City of Pain, much more succinctly done than Bunyan's or Thackeray's cities. His most trenchant irony and his rarely used humor are very effective, and a contrast is prepared for the lofty dignity of the Land of Lamentation into which the dead man is now led. Here he continues "to live" on in a beautiful elegiac atmosphere where his companions are personifications of the Sorrows. In a landscape which is reminiscent of Egypt, the individual goes on learning under new constellations. He sees the slender fountainhead of the River of Joy, a navigable river in the world of men. Finally his guide embraces him, weeping. And he disappears alone in two fine lines:

> Lonely, he climbs the mountains of primeval pain.
> And never once does his footstep ring from this
> soundless doom.

If the dead were able to communicate anything of their happiness, it would be to point at the catkins on the leafless hazel, or to the rain of early spring as it falls on the black earth. These are cheerful omens of better things to come. The last four lines

are quite difficult and seem to mean that a falling (dying) thing is to be interpreted in terms of the "rising" happiness it can then enter.

Indubitably the *Duino Elegies* will take their place among the great and unforgettable poetry of the world. Their philosophy is borrowed from various sources, too obvious to tabulate. The unrhymed verses, varying considerably in length and texture, afford continually new interest. Although the style, sentence structure, grammar, and punctuation are arbitrary and often irritating, even controversial, their unraveling is worthwhile.

I want to express my debt of gratitude to many persons, several of whom have asked to remain unnamed (probably because they do not wish to shoulder the blame of my mistakes). Professor B. Q. Morgan of Stanford University made me do these translations three times—bless him!—and helped me with valuable suggestions, and M. Peter Paret has unstintingly given me time and advice. Finally a translator must attempt to fuse the whole into himself and give back something in his own language that he fondly believes may give an experience similar to that produced by a reading of the original. But a translation is always a petard for its maker.

C. F. M.

Weimar, San Francisco, Guadalajara,
Frankfort, Wiesbaden, Paris
1938–1960