

*THE POETRY AND SPIRITUALITY  
OF RAINER MARIA RILKE*



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## INTRODUCTION



Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) is one of the most influential poets of the 20th century. Born in Prague of German speaking parents, his continuous travels and various residences from Russia to Spain and Paris to Switzerland and Italy, made him a person without a country who somehow belonged to the world.<sup>1</sup> His commitment to the prophetic task of the poet, to speak the meaning of world and human existence, also meant that he belonged to the world. He pursued this task with religious devotion and subordinated his personal life to this mission.

### The Vocation of the Poet

He believed that the poet is one who has been called, set apart for a holy vocation. The poet "from his early days, has been destined to set in motion supreme forces within his own heart, forces which others hold at bay in theirs and reduce to silence."<sup>2</sup> All of existence, interiorized from the experience of world and being human, transformed and made invisible within, eventually emerges in those who will speak it, as in the excerpt from *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* included as "For the sake of a single poem." As he says in the Ninth of the *Duino Elegies*:

Earth, isn't this what you want: to arise within us,  
*invisible?* Isn't it your dream  
to be wholly invisible someday?--O Earth: invisible!  
What, if not transformation, is your urgent command?  
Earth, my dearest, I will. Oh believe me, you no longer  
need your springtimes to win me over--one of them,  
ah, even one, is already too much for my blood.  
Unspeakably I have belonged to you, from the first.  
You were always right, and your holiest inspiration  
is our intimate companion, Death.

Look, I am living. On what? Neither childhood nor future  
grows any smaller. . . . Superabundant being  
wells up in my heart.<sup>3</sup>

For the function of the poet he uses the analogy of a man in a sailing vessel whose presence and song linked the oarsmen with the horizon and expressed the forces which play upon the vessel:

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<sup>1</sup>. For biographies one has Wolfgang Leppmann, *Rilke: A Life*, translated by Russell M. Stockman, verse translations by Richard Exner, (New York: Fromm International Publishing Corp., 1984); and Ralph Freedman, *Life of a Poet: Rainer Maria Rilke*, lyrical verse transl. by Helen Sword, (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996). In addition there are collections of his letters, some of which are mentioned in the notes. His novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, is highly autobiographical and important for understanding him [Egon Schwarz, ed., *Rainer Maria Rilke, Prose and Poetry* (New York: Continuum, 1984), pp. 1ff]. An excellent collection and translation of his poetry is Stephen Mitchell, ed. and translator, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1989).

<sup>2</sup>. "The Young Poet," *Where Silence Reigns: Selected Prose by Rainer Maria Rilke*, translated by G. Craig Houston, Forward by Denise Levertov (New York: A New Directions Book, 1978), p. 63.

<sup>3</sup>. Stephen Mitchell, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, pp.201-2.

What did seem to influence him was the pure movement of his feeling when it met the open distance, in which he was absorbed in a manner half melancholy, half resolute. In him the forward thrust of our vessel and the force opposed to us were continually held in counterpoise - from time to time a surplus accumulated: then he sang. The boat overcame the opposition; but what could not be overcome (was not susceptible of being overcome) he, the magician, transmuted into a series of long floating sounds, detached in space, which each appropriated to himself. Whilst those about him were always occupied with the most immediate actuality and the overcoming of it, his voice maintained contact with the farthest distance, linking us with it until we felt its power of attraction.<sup>4</sup>

In a sense, there is "one poet" who expresses the nature of being and world and all who respond share in this nature. When in the last year of his life he sent a copy of the *Duino Elegies* to Marina Tsvetayeva, the Russian poetess, he wrote on the flyleaf:

We touch each other. How? With wings that beat,  
With very distance touch each other's ken,  
One poet only lives, and now and then  
Who bore him, and who bears him now, will meet.<sup>5</sup>

## A Creation Spirituality

When one sees Rilke's poetic mission as a religious mission and his total commitment to God as he came to understand God, then it makes sense to speak of his spirituality. In many ways he was a mystic who rejected traditional Christianity because of his experience of it and his ambivalent feelings towards his mother, a devout Roman Catholic.<sup>6</sup> However, he was drawn to the mystery of life and the divine. At times this seems a type of pantheism which rejected Christian dualism and affirmed the world. Yet there was also his deep attraction to the God who was beyond world and images and could not be named, influenced by his travel in Russia. He was critical of Western Christianity for trying to describe God and so losing the God behind the names.

I began with Things, which were the true confidants of my lonely childhood, and it was already a great achievement that, without any outside help, I managed to get as far as animals. But then Russia opened itself to me and granted me the brotherliness and the darkness of God, in whom alone there is community. That was what I *named* him then, the God who had broken in upon me, and for a long time I lived in the antechamber of his name, on my knees. Now, you would hardly ever hear me name him; there is an indescribable discretion between us, and where nearness and penetration once were, new distances stretch forth, as in the atom, which the new science conceives of as a universe in miniature. The comprehensible slips away, is

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4. "Concerning the Poet," *Where Silence Reigns: Selected Prose by Rainer Maria Rilke*, p. 66.

5. Yevgeny Pasternak, Yelena Pasternak and Konstantin M. Azadovsky, *Boris Pasternak, Marina Tsvetayeva, Rainer Maria Rilke: Letters Summer 1926*, transl. by Margaret Wettlin and Walter Arndt (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book, 1985), p. 27.

6. His mother was a talented woman with a disintegrating marriage who had lost a female child prior to Rainer's birth. She thus gave him Maria as one of his names and dressed him as a girl until he went to school. In his autobiographical novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* he seems to describe this as a game he enjoyed (Egon Schwarz, ed., *Rainer Maria Rilke: Prose and Poetry*, p. 59). At ten years of age his parents separate and he is put into military school. He was in no way prepared for the world he met. His anger at his mother seems to be that neither in religion nor life had she prepared him for what he was to encounter, a sense of betrayal. He was also caught up in her needs. As presented in his interpretation of the Parable of the Prodigal, in the concluding pages of *Malte Laurids Brigge*, the Prodigal had to escape the smothering love of his home where "one betrayed oneself when they pressed one." When one returned home, "in the main one was the person for whom they took one here; the person for whom, out of his little past and their own wishes, they had long fashioned a life; the creature belonging to them all, who stood day and night under the suggestion of their love, between their hope and their suspicion, before their blame or praise." (Egon Schwarz, ed., *Rainer Maria Rilke: Prose and Poetry*, p. 149)

transformed; instead of possession one learns relationship, and there arises a namelessness that must begin once more in our relations with God if we are to be complete and without evasion. The experience of feeling him recedes behind an infinite delight in everything that can be felt; all attributes are taken away from God, who is no longer sayable, and fall back into creation, into love and death. It is perhaps only this that again and again took place in certain passages in the Book of Hours, this ascent of God out of the breathing heart - so that the sky was covered with him -, and his falling to earth as rain. But saying even that is already too much.<sup>7</sup>

If historical circumstances had been different, I believe he might have been one of the great Christian mystics. However, we must not conform him to what he might have been if his personal history and context had been different. We must let him bring his own gift which was forged within the struggles of his experience and know that it contains insights he passionately lived. We must also listen carefully to his criticism of Western Christianity and his rejection of dualism on behalf of a "worldly" spirituality which embraces all of existence, past, present and future, in modern terms a "creation spirituality".<sup>8</sup> As he says in a letter concerning the *Duino Elegies*:

We, the men of the present and today, we are not for one moment content in the world of time, nor are we fixed in it; we overflow continually towards the man of the Past, towards our origin and towards those who apparently come after us. In that most vast, *open* world all beings are - one cannot say "contemporaneous", for it is precisely the passage of Time which determines that they all *are*. This transitoriness rushes everywhere into a profound Being. And thus all the manifestations of the Actual are not to be used as mere time-bound things, rather are they to be embodied, as far as lies within our power, in that nobler significance which we, too, share. Not, however, in the Christian sense (from which I always passionately dissociate myself); but, with a consciousness that is purely, deeply, serenely *earthly*, it behooves us to bring the things we here behold and touch within the greater, the very greatest circumference. Not into a Beyond whose shadow obscures the Earth, but into a Whole, into *the* Whole. Nature and the objects of our environment and usage, are but frail, ephemeral things; yet, as long as we are here, they are *our* possession and our friendship, knowing our wretchedness and our joy, just as they were the familiars of our ancestors. Thus it is meet for us not only not to pollute and degrade the Actual, but, precisely because of the transitoriness which it shares with us, we should seize these things and appearances with the most fervent comprehension and transform them. Transform them? Yes, for such is our task: to impress this fragile and transient earth so sufferingly, so passionately upon our hearts that its essence shall rise up again, invisible, in us. *We are the bees of the Invisible.*<sup>9</sup>

### His Religious Poetry

There are a number of his works that one might characterize as explicitly religious. There is his *Visions of Christ* written in 1896-98, representing religious sentiments which he did not wish to make public, or perhaps feared making public. They represent a stage in which he was dialoging with the person of Christ and reacting to what he believed the church did to Christ in the development of Christology, somewhat based upon Christ's own aspirations and his mother's expectations. He laments that Christ was turned into a god and explores what it would mean if Christ returned to see the failure of his hopes and visions, called now by life to take his humanity seriously. Some of the poems are rather shocking for their time, perhaps even for ours. In one Jesus asks his child by Mary Magdalene, who never knew her father, to say "papa" to him. In "Night" a prostitute seduces him, and in "The Nun" a young novitiate who seems to have a Lesbian relationship with another nun leaves the convent for a young man she once knew: perhaps more

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<sup>7</sup>. Stephen Mitchell, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, p. 298.

<sup>8</sup>. Rilke in many ways anticipated modern "creation spirituality" such as that advocated by Matthew Fox, e.g. *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear and Company, 1983).

<sup>9</sup>. R.F.C. Hull, translator, *Selected Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke 1902-1926* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1947), pp. 393-4.

of a critique of the church and its denial of sexuality.. In another he finds himself unable to comfort with traditional Christian hope a child who just lost her mother. In "The Church of Nago" Christ returns to his ruined church which has been turned into a manger, a poem more hopeful than most of the "Visions":<sup>10</sup>

Then there is his *Book Of Hours*.<sup>11</sup> Published in 1905, it consists of three sections: Of Monastic Life, Of Pilgrimage, and Of Poverty and Death. Its title was taken from breviaries compiled since the late Middle Ages for lay worship. These divisions do not seem to be strictly followed in the concerns of the poems. Each division was composed at a particular time in a burst of creativity: Of Monastic Life in one month's time in Italy, 1899, Of Pilgrimage in ten days in Germany, 1901, and Of Poverty and Death in one week in Italy, 1903. The time intervals between the various parts meant that, after the first, he did not closely follow his topics, but included the poems which came to him at that time. Some of the poems in the section on Poverty and Death reflect his critique of large cities and their separation of persons from life. In these poems it becomes clear that there is a relationship between the creation of poetry, the expression of the nature of world and human existence, and the vocation of the contemplative and mystic. It is no accident that the last years of his life were spent, almost as a monk, in seclusion.

It is important to recognize that the deep religious sentiments of the *Book of Hours* were not transcended later, but continued to affect him. In a letter in 1915 he discusses withdrawing from his previous suggestion of a public reading of this work which had been motivated by his own rereading of it:

What I had invoked with this reading was the crowd *in myself*, and it is before this crowd and no other that I shall have to act and take my stand for a long time to come. I only became aware of this gradually during the last few days, when I realised that I could scarcely read even the third part of the *Stunden-buch* before a public gathering without letting myself in for a number of prefatory explanations concerning the inner reasons for this lecture. Cogitating just *how* this foreword would have to be framed, I set in motion such a mass of untouched and hitherto unexamined ideas and feelings that I saw at once that the planning of these words would necessitate a terrific rearrangement and re-clearing of ground in myself, a process so arduous and multiform that I could only venture to undertake it independently of all aims and objectives.<sup>12</sup>

In 1899, the same year as the first section of the *Book of Hours*, Rilke wrote his *Stories of the Dear God*,<sup>13</sup> a series of stories narrated to various persons who are then to tell them to children. It is really about the nature of God's presence in the world and begins with a strange tale about how God gave responsibility for creation to his two hands and how things went wrong. God then sends his right hand back to earth to become human and discover what life is like. Each story then revolves around the question as to whether God is in the world again or whether God will come, the final story focusing on the meaning of waiting for God.

In 1913 he published fifteen poems on the *Life of Mary*, originally intended as a cooperative effort with the artist Heinrich Vogler who had done a series of drawings on the life of Mary. At that time Rilke had done three of the poems. However, his artistic preferences, with his work on Rhodin and Cezanne, changed and he no longer wished to include the Vogler drawings. He then added additional poems and published the *Life of Mary* in 1913, without the drawings but with a dedication to Vogler. Paul Hindemuth has created a musical cycle from these poems.

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<sup>10</sup>. Rainer Maria Rilke: *Visions of Christ: A Posthumous Cycle of Poems*, edited, with an introduction, by Siegfried Mandel, poems translated by Aaron Kramer (Boulder: U. of Colorado Press, 1967).

<sup>11</sup>. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Das Stunden-Buch enthaltend die drei Bücher: Vom moenichischen Leben, Von der Pilgerschaft, Von der Armuth und vom Tode* (Leipzig, Insel-Verlag, 1931). Some of the poems from this series are translated in almost every Rilke collection in English.

<sup>12</sup>. *Selected Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke 1902-1926*, translated by R.F.C. Hull, (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1947), pp. 252-53.

<sup>13</sup>. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Geschichten vom Lieben Gott* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1904).



The poems help us to enter into the experience of Mary and are sensitively and imaginatively done. Protestantism needs a greater appreciation of Mary as a model of faith and the Christian life. There are traces of Rilke's struggle with his mother in the relationship of Jesus and Mary. Though Rilke rejected institutional Christianity, these poems are a great gift and may represent real feelings for his childhood faith.<sup>14</sup>

The *Duino Elegies* are dedicated to Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe at whose castle at Duino on the Adriatic he was frequently a guest and where he wrote the first two Elegies in 1912, plus fragments of the others. These, together with the *Sonnets to Orpheus*,<sup>15</sup> constitute some of his best work and should be seen as religious on his own terms. Their completion occupied a time of ten years. Much of Elegies came to him by a process of inspiration in which he perceived himself more channel than creator. While walking outside the Duino Castle in 1912 he believed he heard a voice:

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels'  
hierarchies? ....<sup>16</sup>

And the remainder of this First Elegy came to him within a day:

Voices. Voices. Listen, my heart, as only  
saints have listened: until the gigantic call lifted them  
off the ground; yet they kept on, impossibly,  
kneeling and didn't notice at all:  
so complete was their listening. Not that you could endure  
God's voice -- far from it. But listen to the voice of the wind  
and the ceaseless message that forms itself out of silence.<sup>17</sup>

### **Servant to Existence: The Human Role**

Life, as it is, should be experienced and revered, including suffering, pain and death. The human role in life, like that of the poet, is to become servant to all of existence: to see it, love it, and praise it. In his poem "Turning Point"<sup>18</sup> he begins with "in-looking," by which he seems to have meant looking into the reality of something or some one until it responded, until it became part of the inner landscape of the soul. His friend Rodin, the sculptor, started him on sensitivity to seeing. However, he discovered, the world asks for more than "in-looking."

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<sup>14</sup>. C.F. MacIntyre, translation and introduction, Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Life of the Virgin Mary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1947).

<sup>15</sup>. The *Sonnets to Orpheus* were written as a monument for the daughter of a friend who died as a young woman. Here, as in the Tenth of the *Duino Elegies* and elsewhere, he comes to terms with death as a natural part of life. Both works were completed in a burst of creativity in February of 1922 and published in 1923.

<sup>16</sup>. Stephen Mitchell, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, p. 151.

<sup>17</sup>. Ibid. p. 153.

<sup>18</sup>. He regarded this poem as representing an important development in his understanding of things. The title in German is "Wendung," or "Turning," which better reflects that this represents not an event, but a process. This is written after four years of depression and failed poetic productivity following the publication of *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. He had considered psychoanalysis, but was afraid that "if my devils were driven out my angels also would receive a slight, a very slight (shall we say) shock, and, you see, I cannot let it come to that pass at any price." *Selected Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke 1902-1926*, p. 204. And so he persisted until this new dawning which is not just a new view on things, but the insight which is necessary for him to survive. He says "I involuntarily called it *Wendung* [Turning], and ... it represents the turning that *must* come if I am to live ..." *Selected Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke 1902-1926*, p. 243. "Turning Point" is quoted from Stephen Mitchell, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, pp. 133-4.

For there is a boundary to looking (in German, "in-looking").  
And the world that is looked at so deeply  
wants to flourish in love.

Work of the eyes is done, now  
go and do heart-work  
on all the images imprisoned within you; for you  
overpowered them: but even now you don't know them.

Love does not overpower things and persons, but lets them be, relates to them, and ultimately speaks their existence and praises them so that they live on. Things are always passing away and transient. In "The Ninth Elegy", the answer to the question as to the destiny of humanity is "because everything here apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some strange way keeps calling to us," to say and praise the things of this world more intensely than the things themselves. External reality is internalized, transformed within, so that it lives on in the stream of human collective existence: that interior world, "primal forest" within, mentioned in "The Third Elegy".

### Critique of Christianity

Rilke's critique of Christianity is best discovered in his "The Young Workman's Letter." The device he uses is to have a laborer write to him about his struggles with Christianity. It is partially a criticism of Christianity's other-worldliness which separates one from the meaning of life in this world and particularly human sexuality..

And here, in the love which, with an intolerable mixture of contempt, desire, and curiosity, they call "sensual", here indeed are to be found the worst results of that vilification of earthly life which Christianity has felt obliged to engage in. Here everything is distorted and disowned, although it is from this deepest of all events that we come forth, and have ourselves the centre of our ecstasies in it. ....Why, if guilt or sin had to be invented because of the inner tension of the spirit, why did they let it fall on that part, waiting till it dissolved in our pure source and poisoned and muddied it? Why have they made our sex homeless, instead of making it the place for the festival of our competency?<sup>19</sup>

His criticism of traditional Christology includes several elements. First, Christ, as portrayed, is not really human and not of our time. He cannot help us.

Who, yes -- I cannot express it any other way at the present, *who* then is this Christ, who interferes in everything -- who knew nothing about us, nothing of our work, nothing of our needs, nothing of our joy, as we do it, suffer it, and experience it -- and who yet, as it seems, constantly demands that he shall have first place in our lives? or has that just been put in his mouth? What does he want of us? He wants to help us, they say. Yes, but he behaves in a strangely helpless fashion when near us. His conditions were so entirely different. .... Our world is not only outwardly different, it offers him no access.<sup>20</sup>

Christ, as portrayed, is always drawing us to the past rather than the future and is not a way to God, but a barrier. In speaking of the cross he says:

I cannot conceive that the *cross* should *remain*, which was, after all, only a cross-roads. It certainly should not be stamped on us on all occasions like a brand-mark. For is the situation

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<sup>19</sup>. *Where Silence Reigns: Selected Prose by Rainer Maria Rilke*, Trans. by G. Craig Houston, Forward by Denise Levertov (New York: A New Directions Book, 1978), pp. 75-6.

<sup>20</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

not this: he intended simply to provide the loftier tree, on which we could ripen better. He, on the cross, is this new tree in God, and we were to be warm, happy fruit, at the top of it.

We should not always talk of what was *formerly*, but the *afterwards* should have begun. This tree, it seems to me, should have become so one with us, or we with it, and *by* it, that we should not need to occupy ourselves continually with it, but simply and quietly with God, for his aim was to lift us up and into God more purely.

When I say: God, that is a great conviction in me, not something learnt. It seems to me, the whole creation speaks this word, without reflection, though often out of a deep thoughtfulness. If this Christ has helped us to say it more fully, more effectually, with a clearer voice, so much the better, but now at last leave him out of the question. Do not always force us back into the labour and sorrow that it cost him to "redeem" us, as you put it. Let us, at last, enter into this state of redemption. .... In their (the church's) zeal, they do not hesitate to make this life, which should be an object of desire and trust for us, bad and worthless -- and so they hand over the earth more and more to those who are ready to gain at least temporary and quickly won profit from it, vain and suspect as it is, and no good for anything better. This increasing exploitation of life, is it not a result of the century-old denial of the worth of this world?<sup>21</sup>

In the last year of his life a correspondence developed with the Russian poetess Marina Tsvetayeva. Her understanding of his advocacy of "the Father" is important:

The Beyond (not the religious one, more nearly the geographic one) you know better than the Here, this side, you know it topographically, with all its mountains and islands and castles.

A topography of the soul - that's what you are. And with your *Book* (oh, it was not a book after all, it was becoming a book!) of *Poverty, Pilgrimage, and Death* you have done more for God than all the philosophers and priests taken together.

Priests are nothing but intruders between me and God (gods). You, you are the friend who *deepens* and enhances the joy (is it joy?) of a great hour between Two (the eternal pain!), without whom one ceases to feel the other, and whom, as one is finally forced to do, *one loves exclusively*.

God. You alone have said something new to God. You are the explicit John-Jesus relationship (unspoken by either). Yet - difference - you are the Father's favorite, not the Son's, you are God the Father's (who didn't have one!) John. You chose (electing - choice!) the Father because He was *lonelier* and - impossible to love!

No David, no. David had all the shyness of his strength, you have all your strength's daring and risk.

The world was much too young. *Everything* had to come to pass - for you to come.

You dared so to love (to proclaim!) the unhuman (thoroughly divine) God the Father as John never dared to love the thoroughly human son! John loved the son with his arms (constantly hiding from his love at Jesus's breast), with his eyes, with his deeds. Word - heroics of love, who always wants to be mute (in pure activity).<sup>22</sup>

What is missing in Rilke's spirituality is the Son who in true Incarnation can relate humankind to flesh and world, the suffering Savior who continues to bear upon himself the marks of his wounds, humanity, and

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<sup>21</sup>. Ibid., p. 68-69.

<sup>22</sup>. Ibid., pp. 88-89.

world; the God who has become one with us and so may help us deal with life; and the Transcendent which infuses life and world, but also survives life and world: the soul and the whole spiritual realm.<sup>23</sup> Thus in the terms of the mystics, Rilke's God is the God who dwells in mystery and darkness without the revelation in Christ, but who is present everywhere in life and creation. How wondrous is the mystery of the God he both knows and seeks. Unfortunately, he could find no place to locate Christ within his experience. He speaks of Mohamed who burst through to the one God "without the aid of the telephone "Christ", where all the time you bawl "Hello, who's there?" - and no one answers."<sup>24</sup>

### A Dying Insight

It is interesting that though he courageously maintained his affirmation of life and world to the end, dying his own death from Leukemia without pain killers that would have robbed him of awareness,<sup>25</sup> his perception of his oneness with body and world was beginning to change. He had struggled with this before in his long period of depression following completion of *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, where he wondered if he would ever write again.<sup>26</sup> He had struggled with this in the difficult days of the First World War. Now, in his dying, he was no longer so much at one with his body. He did not have the time to work through the implications of this, but he was beginning to experience himself apart from body and world.

Disturbances of a more subjective than really factually or organically discernible kind (so far, at any rate); inroads upon that absence of bodily self-awareness from which harmony with our material stake (in ourselves) so involuntarily results; slight disorders of my body which render me all the more at a loss since I had been used to living with it in so perfect a concord, without a physician, that I was close to thinking of it as a child of my soul. This began at a certain turning point in my life (about 1899 and 1900, which coincided with my residence in Russia). Light and handy as it was and easy to take along into the most abstruse spheres, how often voided, endowed with weight only by courtesy and still visible merely so as not to alarm the invisible! So intimately *mine*; friend, truly my bearer, the holder of my heart; capable of all my joys, disparaging none, making each my own in a more particular way; bestowing them upon me at the precise intersection of my senses. As *my* creature, ready for me and risen in service to my use; as pre-creature, outweighing me with all the security and magnificence of descent. A thing of genius, reared by centuries, glorious in the serene innocence of its not-I, touching in its eagerness to be faithful to the "I" in all its transitions and oscillations. Simple of mind and wise. How much I have to thank it, which, by dint of its nature, reinforced my delight in a fruit, in the wind, in walking on grass. .... To sum up: distressing, this dissension with it, and too fresh a distress to be ready for compromise yet. And the doctor *cannot* understand what it is that distresses me so profoundly, so centrally, about these handicaps, which after all are

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<sup>23</sup>. In John 20 the resurrected Jesus continues to bear, in symbolic fashion, the marks of his wounds. This is the completion of the Incarnation (described in John 1:1-18) which is then taken up into the Resurrection and Ascension. The Incarnation, as does the N.T. theme of Christ as Creator, disallows the separation of Christ from creation. However, dualism does express a partial truth: that humans have souls and that life has a spiritual dimension which intersects, but transcends, world and body. All life cannot be understood in terms of world and body. Dualism also preserves in part the truth that all of life cannot be understood in terms of God alone. Life is complex.

<sup>24</sup>. *Selected Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke 1902-1926, translated by R.F.C. Hull*, (London, Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1947), p. 222.

<sup>25</sup>. *Ibid.*, pp. 405ff.

<sup>26</sup>. Rilke had deeply invested himself in the *Notebooks*, and found himself unable to write and deeply depressed for several years. In a letter of 1912 he says, "There are days when I look at the whole of creation with the fear that some agony may break out in it and cause it to scream, so great is my terror of the abuse which the body, in so many things, wreaks on the soul..." *Selected Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke 1902-1926*, p. 210.

tolerable, although they have set up their branch offices all over the body while they were about it. ...<sup>27</sup>

Finally, determined to live his own death, he climbed the burning pyre of his illness:

Now come, ultimate essence I avow,  
desperate pain that tears my body's mesh:  
As mind and spirit burned, so do I blaze  
in you. The pyre of my flesh  
had long resisted to accept your flame,  
but now I nourish it and am its fire.  
In your ferocity my earthly gentleness  
will turn to hellish fury. Pure and entire,  
I mounted suffering's chaotic pyre  
free of all future and sure that for this heart,  
with all its treasures muted, future cannot be bought.  
Is it still I who burns unrecognized and caught?  
I can no longer reach for memories.  
Oh life, oh life: to be without such blaze.  
But I am burning. No one knows my face.<sup>28</sup>

### Wonder Becomes Wonderful

Rilke's approach to life is well characterized in a poem, written two years before his death, which has become my favorite:

As once winged delight  
lifted you o'er many a former abyss,  
build now bridges not yet conceived,  
a bold and calculated venture.

Wonder's not only in the unexplained  
overcoming of danger;  
only in a clearly intended  
achievement does wonder become wonderful.

To affect life's course cannot be presumed  
when the process can't be described  
and the pattern becomes continually more intricate,  
only -- to be swept along is not enough.

Stretch your practiced powers  
until they reach between two  
contradictions ... For in humanity  
God wills to be disclosed.<sup>29</sup>

Shortly before his death Rilke gave instructions that, besides his name and family crest, there should appear on his gravestone:

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<sup>27</sup>. Yevgeny Pasternak, Yelena Pasternak and Konstantin M. Azadovsky, *Boris Pasternak, Marina Tsvetayeva, Rainer Maria Rilke: Letters Summer 1926*, transl. by Margaret Wettlin and Walter Arndt (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book, 1985), pp. 98-99.

<sup>28</sup>. Wolfgang Leppmann, *Rilke: A Life*, p. 385. This is the last poem he penned into his notebook.

<sup>29</sup>. Stephen Mitchell, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, p. 260, my translation.

Rilke p.10

Rose, oh reiner Widerspruch,  
Lust, Niemandes Schlaf  
zu sein unter soviel Lidern<sup>30</sup>

Rose, O pure contradiction,  
Passion, sleep of no one  
to exist under so many lids

The meaning of this Epitaph is a riddle which has puzzled many of the Rilke scholars. Some twenty interpretations have been suggested. My approach to its interpretation is to understand it in the light of his spirituality and view of life, as previously discussed, and to consider that the word "reiner" in the first line is a play on his name "Rainer."

When reflecting on these words intended as his final statement, the following interpretive paraphrase came to me in German:

O Rainer, wie eine Rose  
Reine Widerspruch  
die Lust des Seins  
Vom Leben und Todt die Anspruch /Verheissung  
Zusammen,  
Zu leben im Todt dahin  
In inner Welt  
Unter soviel Lidern.

O Rainer, as a rose,  
Pure contradiction  
Passion of being,  
Of Life and death the claim/promise  
Together,  
To live in death  
In the inner world  
Under so many lids.

Perhaps my paraphrase also remains something of a riddle, but I think that that is where I would leave it. He stretched his practiced powers until they reached between two contradictions, as expressed in the poem above. "For in humanity God wills to be disclosed." Rainer, as the rose, expressive of the passion of existence, will not sleep, but will live under so many lids, in the inner world of those who have taken within his poetry and spirit.

The poetry of Rilke included in this compilation is selected because of its contribution to understanding him and his spirituality. It is arranged in the order in which it was written and published:

*The Visions of Christ* 1896-98, unpublished in his life-time  
*The Book of Hours* 1899-1903, published 1905  
*The Life of Mary* 1900-1913, published in 1913  
*The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, completed in 1909, published in 1910  
Uncollected Poems of 1913-1918  
*The Duino Elegies* 1912-22, published in 1923  
Uncollected Poems 1923-26

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<sup>30</sup>Wolfgang Leppmann, *Rilke: A Life*, p. 381.

Rilke p.11

In those poems which I have translated, I tried to stay as close to Rilke's wording and meaning as possible rather than creating poems equivalent to Rilke's meaning in English. I wanted to let him speak. Thus I have made little attempt to rhyme lines because of the limitations this would place upon the translation.

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