



Rainer Maria Rilke
Selected Poems

WITH PARALLEL GERMAN TEXT

New translations by Susan Ranson and Marielle Sutherland

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SELECTED POEMS

RAINER MARIA RILKE was perhaps the greatest poet writing in German in the twentieth century. Born in Prague on 4 December 1875, he passed much of his unhappy youth in military academies before he matriculated at university, first in Prague and later in Munich and Berlin. His first volume of poetry, *Lives and Songs*, was published in 1894 and by 1900 he had completed another seven. Two visits to Russia with Lou Andreas-Salomé (inspiring *The Book of Hours*, 1905) are the first of many journeys he was to make, to Italy, Scandinavia, Spain, North Africa, and Egypt, before he settled in Switzerland in 1919. He married the artist Clara Westhoff in 1901, and they had a daughter, Ruth, before separating a year later.

Rilke's lyrical prose tale about the *Love and Death of the Cornet Christoph Rilke* (1906) achieved cult status, but his poetic breakthrough came with the publication in 1907 and 1908 of two volumes of *New Poems*, written after he moved to Paris in 1902, where he worked for, and wrote on, the sculptor Auguste Rodin. His only novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, appeared in 1910. At the outbreak of war in 1914 Rilke was in Munich, and he fulfilled military service in an archive in Vienna. By then he had begun the *Duino Elegies*, although these were not completed until February 1922, in the Château de Muzot in the Valais. The same month saw the composition of the whole of *The Sonnets to Orpheus*. Rilke died of leukaemia on 29 December 1926, aged 51.

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RAINER MARIA RILKE

Selected Poems



Translated by

SUSAN RANSON *and* MARIELLE SUTHERLAND

Edited with an Introduction and Notes by

ROBERT VILAIN

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

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Published in the United States
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

Translations © Susan Ranson and Marielle Sutherland 2011

Editorial material © Robert Vilain 2011

First published as an Oxford World's Classics paperback 2011

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First published 2011

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed in Great Britain
on acid-free paper by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

ISBN 978-0-19-956941-0

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

AT Oxford University Press, Judith Luna's kind and knowledgeable guidance has been invaluable to the editor and translators at all stages of this project. In addition, Marielle Sutherland would like to thank Professor Karen Leeder and Frank Preut for their valuable advice, and Susan Ranson her daughter-in-law Regina Uebelmann for help generously given. Both translators have, naturally, consulted each other frequently during the two to three years of translation and are mutually indebted for many clarifications and suggestions.

Robert Vilain is highly indebted to Revd Richard Haggis (Oxford) for advice on biblical and religious questions, and to Karen Leeder for her expert knowledge and sensitive readings of Rilke from which he has learned so much during collaboration on two other Rilke projects completed in 2010 and during a series of seminars devoted to Rilke's late work held in Oxford in 2006. Above all he is grateful to Patience Robinson for her tolerance of the intrusion of Rilke into domestic life over nearly half a decade (so far).

Susan Ranson would like to thank the Editorial Director of Camden House, an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Inc., Rochester, New York, for permitting us to reproduce sixteen of her translations from *Rainer Maria Rilke's 'The Book of Hours': A New Translation*, 2008.

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>B I, B II</i>	<i>Briefe in zwei Bänden</i> , ed. Horst Nalewski (Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig, 1991)
<i>DE</i>	<i>Duino Elegies</i>
<i>KA</i>	<i>Kommentierte Ausgabe</i> , 4 vols. plus a supplementary volume, ed. Manfred Engel et al. (Frankfurt am Main, 1996 and 2003)
<i>SW</i>	<i>Sämtliche Werke</i> , 7 vols., ed. Ernst Zinn (Wiesbaden, 1955–66 and 1997)

INTRODUCTION

RAINER MARIA RILKE (1875–1926) was one of the leading poets of European Modernism, as important and as influential as T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Paul Valéry, and certainly one of the greatest twentieth-century poets writing in German. His poetry is arrestingly beautiful, but it is also amongst the most challenging and thought-provoking ever written, in any language, at any time. It is not possible to read one of his poems without being halted, interrogated, and made to re-read and revise or refine an initial impression. These are poems that require and repay frequent re-reading, and if the capacity of a work of literature to sustain endless returns and fresh approaches is a mark of its quality, then Rilke's poetry must stand out as being exceptional. The satisfaction that many readers gain from it derives paradoxically from not being satisfied, not achieving full understanding, knowing instead both that there is more to be grasped and that one has none the less achieved an insight into one of the most extraordinary, complex, and subtle intellectual and aesthetic worlds that modern culture has to offer.

Some of the challenges of reading Rilke derive from the fact that his approach to poetry was never static or fixed. There is no single Rilke, no straightforward style or set of aesthetic precepts to which he adhered. He constantly subjected his own writing to the severest scrutiny, changing even some of his most basic assumptions and beliefs when he felt they were no longer valid. The different Rilkés in the complex series that constitute this man and his poetic personality often look back and incorporate their predecessors: very often his poetry is about itself, its origins and its development—it is thus 'poetological' poetry. Like all writers of any significance, Rilke changed as he developed, and although his creative growth was not simple or naively linear, it is none the less possible to think of it in a number of identifiable stages or periods whose transitions (whilst by no means abruptly separating styles) were usually marked by crises, turning-points, moments of inspiration, breakthrough, or release.

Watersheds were sometimes also marked by journeys or changes of place and dwelling—from Germany to Paris in late August 1902, for example, a long visit to Egypt in 1911, and his discovery of the

Château de Muzot in Switzerland late in 1921. After his childhood in Prague, which was disrupted by his parents' divorce and extended, unhappy periods boarding in military academies, this modest house near Raron in the Canton of the Valais was the nearest thing that Rilke ever had to a permanent home. In his constant physical and geographical displacement, and in his need to rely on the material support of wealthy or aristocratic patrons who often housed him for months on end, Rilke manifested a particularly acute form of the cultural malaise of rootlessness, restlessness, and unease that dominated the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe. Friedrich Nietzsche's announcement of the 'death of God'¹ expressed in lapidary form the loss of faith in a divinely sponsored universe experienced by a whole generation, and reflected a broad crisis of moral and cultural values. The First World War was the most obvious and the most catastrophic form of a deep-rooted upheaval and turbulence, delivering a hammer-blow to already crumbling social structures and exacerbating the individual's disjunction from any traditional sense of community and collective. Whilst the war also saw the deployment of some of the most violent products of mechanization and industrialization, science had long before initiated a more rationalistic, teleological view of the world, and many felt that its rapid development was demystifying the processes of nature, sidelining the numinous, and subordinating intrinsic value to purpose and function. Years of crisis they may have been, but the first two decades of the twentieth century gave rise to a remarkable concentration of cultural masterpieces none the less. The single year 1922 in which Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus* were finished saw the completion or publication of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, Franz Kafka's *The Castle*, Paul Valéry's *Charmes*, T. E. Lawrence's *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, the bilingual edition of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and Friedrich Murnau's *Nosferatu*.

It is in this historical and cultural climate that Rilke's poetry developed, and this brief introduction will trace that development using a broadly accepted modern taxonomy that divides his work into four phases. The poetry (and some short prose works and dramas)

¹ First in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (*The Gay Science*, 1882) and later in *Also sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, written 1883–5).

written between *Lives and Songs* (1894)² and the first version of *The Book of Images* (1902) is seen as his 'early work'. The *New Poems* (1907 and 1908) and the novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910) are the work of a 'middle period'. The *Life of the Virgin Mary* (1913) and the *Duino Elegies* (1923) form the major achievements of a 'late period' in which relatively little was brought to completion. Finally, *The Sonnets to Orpheus* (1923) and four collections of poetry in French are designated 'last works'. Each period also naturally includes some important individual poems not published by Rilke in collections or cycles.

This is a useful paradigm not least because it makes apparent continuities that might otherwise remain hidden. The 'middle' period, for example, includes a number of important texts—like *The Book of Hours* (1905), *The Book of Images* (1906), and the drama *The White Princess* (1904)—that are revisions of works conceived and sometimes already published in the early years. The 'late' *Elegies* were completed in a short burst of activity in February 1922 in the middle of the month in which the *Sonnets* ('last' works) were being composed—so whilst they are chronologically virtually simultaneous, poetically they point in quite different directions: the editors of the *Kommentierte Ausgabe* (annotated edition) of Rilke's works are rightly at pains both in the structural divisions of the volumes and in their explanatory notes to indicate how much more in common the *Sonnets* have with the poetry written at the very end of Rilke's life than with the aesthetic represented by the *Elegies*, which bring to a close a project rooted in the early years of the second decade of the century.

The present edition provides as full and as representative a selection of Rilke's verse from all these periods as space permits. Rilke was tremendously prolific—in the modern standard edition in German the poetry fills almost a thousand (monolingual) pages, and even this does not include all the early work—so for the purposes of this introduction and survey the selectiveness has necessarily had to be somewhat fierce. Nevertheless, the *Duino Elegies* and *The Sonnets to Orpheus* are complete here, and a significant number of the most important 'uncollected poems' are included, some translated for the first time. Whilst the selection is inevitably based to an extent

² The dates given in parentheses in this Introduction are the dates of publication, not those of the genesis or completion of a work.

on personal preference (especially in the choice of the *New Poems*), it is also reflective of an assessment of what is essential or indispensable to convey both Rilke's poetic achievements and his development as a writer from precocious youth to an astonishing maturity.

To this end also, the Introduction and the Notes make frequent quotation from Rilke's letters. Over almost thirty-five years he corresponded with nearly five hundred people—fellow writers, family, and lovers, as well as friends, mentors, and acquaintances from the highest echelons of the European aristocracy to teenage children and domestic staff. The total number of his letters has been estimated at more than 17,000—which almost matches the near-legendary output of Voltaire, who lived twenty years longer than Rilke. All Rilke's letters are about himself, intimately, even when they are also about someone else, a place, or an object, for they all respond openly to the world as a source of insight into the self. These letters deserve to be treated as coeval with the more conventionally literary works, partly because of their craftedness and beauty, but chiefly because they reflect upon, clarify, and extend many of the themes and images of the poetry and prose. The boundaries between different forms of writing were certainly fluid for Rilke, and some collections—such as the *Letters to a Young Poet* (ten letters to Franz Xaver Kappus giving advice on love, life, and poetry) and the fifteen *Letters on Cézanne*—are virtually regarded as creative works in their own right.

Rilke was a tremendously productive poet in his earliest years, although a relatively small proportion of this work is now read widely. He was himself somewhat ambivalent about its qualities, sometimes nostalgic for its popularity but usually vehemently dismissive of what he called 'rehearsals' ('Proben') for poethood.³ Between 1894 and 1899 he produced more than a book a year. Romantically, even sentimentally, they bear traces of his early reading—indeed in *Lives and Songs* (1894) they are sometimes so obviously derivative of the canonical works of nineteenth-century German poetry that no real Rilkean voice is discernible. However, the best of them develop a more individual style and represent a conscientious apprenticeship in the technicalities of a variety of stanza forms, metrical schemes, and the possibilities of rhyme; there are even early hints at Rilke's

³ Letter to Robert Heinz Heygrodt of 24 December 1921 (B II, 196).

fondness for cyclic composition. Most of the poems in *Offerings to the Lares* (1895) are transfigurations of the monuments and topographical features of Rilke's native city of Prague and the Bohemian countryside surrounding it, or are about local artists and historical figures. The 'lares' are Roman gods of house and hearth, and the collection as a whole is shot through by an affection for 'Heimat' ('home' or 'homeland') that even at this early stage Rilke feels is under threat from the modern world.⁴

Advent (1897) is dedicated to 'my dear father under the Christmas tree' and contains many other personal dedications to poets, friends, and benefactors, including Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Peter Altenberg from Vienna, the Belgian Symbolist dramatist Maurice Maeterlinck, and the Danish poet and novelist Jens Peter Jacobsen. Its affinities with the contemporary artistic movement known as *Jugendstil* in German (art nouveau elsewhere in Europe) are most obvious in the fondness for surface and plane in the way the outside world is depicted (giving it a somewhat two-dimensional character) and in the choice of motifs, particularly in the first part ('Gifts'), where the inspiration from local topography that was discernible in earlier volumes gives way to stylized parks, pools, and castles populated by peacocks and swans in a world reflecting a mysterious and largely absent poetic self.

The shift from a longing for a dream-world towards a focus on that self is evident in the very title of Rilke's next published volume, *In Celebration of Myself* (1899)—two other volumes, the cycle *Christ: Eleven Visions* and *In Celebration of You*, remained unpublished in his lifetime. In the case of the latter, suppression was at the request of its dedicatee, Lou Andreas-Salomé, with whom Rilke had begun a four-year sexual, emotional, and intellectual relationship in 1897 that he later described as his 'second birth'.⁵ This marked a watershed in many respects—he changed his name from René to Rainer, for example, and even altered his handwriting style. Inspired in part by Nietzsche's affirmation of life, despite its dangers and threats, *In Celebration of Myself* does not abandon the motivic and aesthetic repertoire of decadence and *Jugendstil* but depicts the self as on

⁴ The 'Lares' remain important to Rilke throughout his life; cf. the letter to Hulewicz quoted below (pp. xxv–xxvi).

⁵ Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Ernst Pfeiffer (Frankfurt am Main, 1975), 243.

the threshold of a breakthrough to 'life' in its true fullness, and the collection as a whole is marked by a mixture of promise and frustration. It also introduces a powerful series of figures and images that will be developed over many years: the angel, girls, the Virgin Mary, the night, and God.

God, the Virgin Mary, and angels are perhaps surprising themes for a poet who was not a Christian (despite being received popularly as a religious writer for most of his life) and who was usually at least sceptical of, often overtly hostile to, aspects of Christian doctrine, worship, and morality. The very notion of a transcendent deity is alien to Rilke, whose debt to Nietzsche's discrediting of the traditional Christian God is evident in many of his early diary notes, as is his substitution of art for God: 'Religion is the art of those who create nothing', he wrote: 'They become productive in prayer: they give form to their love, their thanks and their longing, and thereby free themselves. . . . The non-artist must have a religion (in the deepest sense of that word), even if it is only one that rests on a common historical consensus. Being an atheist in his eyes is the same as being a barbarian.'⁶ The highest form of productivity for Rilke is that of the artist, although the artist is seen not as an ivory-tower-dwelling aesthete hostile to the forces of life but as the highest potentiation of that life. Christ has been described as the symbol of Rilke's unanswered prayers in childhood, 'the interloper and intruder who denied life and mortal love and stood between himself and his mother',⁷ who had sent him to a Catholic school in Prague before he was 7. The Christ of this collection, too, preaches not the God of the Jews and Christians but a new God of the here-and-now. Christ cannot himself create this God, he can only encourage the children to remember their innocence and openness and create him out of themselves.

In Rilke's next collection, *The Book of Hours*, these figures are supplemented by a Russian monastic icon painter—the speaking voice of the three cycles that this volume contains—and by St Francis of Assisi. A book of hours is a devotional book, a small breviary containing prayers, biblical texts, and psalms for the devout to use at certain times of the day in ways echoing the more rigorous schedule

⁶ Rilke, *Tagebücher aus der Frühzeit*, ed. Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber; re-edited by Ernst Zinn (Frankfurt am Main, 1973). Quoted in *KA* 1, 737.

⁷ Siegfried Mandel, 'Introduction' to Rilke, *Visions of Christ: A Posthumous Cycle of Poems*, trans. Aaron Kramer (Boulder, Colo., 1967), 16.

of the monk—and the first version of Rilke's *Book of Hours* gestured towards this by embedding his poems in a brief contextual commentary. But despite appearances, Rilke's God here is not the God of Christianity; he replaces transcendence with inwardness and immanence, the notion of a supreme *being* with that of a force *becoming*, seeing God as an expression of a Nietzschean elemental power suffusing the whole of life, not intrinsically meriting but often dependent upon the faith of the believer for his own very existence. There are points, too, at which the object of Rilke's/the monk's devotion is not God but Lou Andreas-Salomé. Rilke's God undergoes many changes and developments as his poetics progress: the journey that he took to Egypt in the first three months of 1911 was important not only for the rich fund of imagery it bequeathed to his poetry from the *Elegies* on, but because Egyptian culture demonstrated what seemed to him a much healthier attitude to death, seen not in a rigidly antithetical relationship with life as it is in Christianity but as a continuation of it. The Orpheus of the *Sonnets* is in many ways also a myth specifically replacing the redemptive role of Christ. When Rilke writes 'O you great god who are lost to us! Infinite trace!' (*Sonnets*, 1. XXVI), the dissolution of Orpheus is a pantheistic substitute for the personal incarnation that Christ represents.

Christianity may not have been palatable to Rilke, but its art and architecture was frequently inspirational, as the first collection of Rilke's 'middle' and more mature period testifies. He outlined the focus of the *New Poems* in 1907 thus:

I am not proceeding from 'great things and thoughts' outwards but instead inwards towards the very place where everything, even inconspicuous or ugly things, even the things from which we would otherwise simply turn away, appeal to me like matters of great and eternal significance and make indescribable demands upon me. This is the place where the artist, whose nature is to be an observer in many areas of life, can in this capacity experience the *whole* of life, that is to say, the whole world for and of itself, as if it were running through the middle of him with all its manifold possibilities. For me Paris has been . . . an immeasurable education because it has held up to my gaze and my senses the remotest and most extreme circumstances of spiritual experience, ones that cannot be verified any longer, condensed to the point of being incomparably seeable (seeable even from afar).⁸

⁸ Letter to Karl von der Heydt, 21 February 1907 (*B* 1, 241).

These poems are often seen as belonging to the German tradition of ‘Dinggedichte’ (‘thing-poems’) that flowered in the hands of nineteenth-century poets such as Eduard Mörike and Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, and it is true that Rilke’s poems do treat a wide variety of objects. Often these are works of art or architecture—Far Eastern or classical Greek and Roman statues, friezes, a lute, a coat of arms, a reliquary, medieval cathedrals, paintings, steps, a balcony, squares, towers, and fountains—but they include also more everyday things such as a ball, an orange, lace, a bed, a merry-go-round, or a bowl of roses. Some are about living things, animals and birds—the famous panther, a gazelle, a swan, a dog—and plants such as the blue and the pink hydrangea. Others are about things in an even more extended sense, about places and times—landscapes, parks, and graves, Venice in the autumn, the countryside around Rome, a dance—or events from history, myth, or personal experience or report (from the Last Count of Brederode avoiding capture by the Turks, or the Day of Judgement, to the death of a lover). Many take people as their subject, real observed contemporaries (such as a group of acrobats or a blind man), and historical, biblical, or mythical figures (Adam and Eve, a courtesan, prophets, the Sibyl of Cumae, sometimes mediated via a work of art), and there are figures, too, whose individuality is less important than their situation (a convalescent, a poet, a lonely man, a lover, a child, an alchemist).

Readers will ask what these things are for or what they represent, and the answers are complex because this is what is ‘new’ about the *New Poems*. A minority can be read as symbolic in a relatively narrow sense—‘The Swan’, for example, is ‘about’ or is ‘an image of’ the awkwardness of life contrasted with the naturalness of death. But even here it would be inappropriate to speak in terms of a metaphor’s traditional ‘vehicle’ (swan) and ‘tenor’ (life/death/dying), since the poem is just as much ‘about’ the swan itself, which is illuminated by the explicit existential comparisons being made. Most of these poems resist paraphrase in this way, however, not suggesting a meaning or significance external to the object or person but instead conveying intensely *what* their subjects are, *how* they are these things, and an *experience* in the reader of seeing them. Rarely are the ‘things’ of these poems static; they enact movement, processes, growth, observation. In this way a poem such as ‘The Merry-go-round’ enacts rather than describes both an experience *from* childhood and the experience *of* childhood.

Behind the *New Poems* lies a preoccupation with 'Anschauung' ('looking' or 'gazing') that Rilke articulated in a famous letter to his wife:

Gazing is such a wonderful thing, and one we know so little about. In gazing we are completely turned outwards, but at the very moment when we are most outward-turned things appear to happen within us that have waited longingly until they are unobserved, and whilst these things happen within us, without us, perfectly and strangely anonymously—their significance grows in the object outside, a convincing, strong name, their only possible name, in which we blissfully and reverently recognize what is happening within us without ourselves reaching out for it, comprehending it only very gently, from some distance, under the sign of a thing that just now was alien to us and in the next moment will be alienated again.⁹

Rilke's *New Poems* enact this subtle mutual process. They are about the relationship between 'objects' and their perceiving subjects, a relationship that releases the inner dynamics of both. As the passage above makes clear, they presuppose that in the modern world, when 'things' (canonically exemplified by the panther) are 'alien', there is an urgent need for action to release such vitality; it is the task of the poet to do so and to capture it in poetry that will preserve it in a form of suspended animation, maintaining the dynamic without freezing or neutralizing the inner energies of the things perceived.

Rilke's is not a neo-romantic conception of the poet as magician, since the imperative derives from the things observed—it is the archaic Torso of Apollo that issues the command to change our lives, and it is the absence of its eyes that reminds and challenges us to re-perceive the world. And the poetry of the *New Poems* is not inspired outpouring but careful craft, the product of conscious 'sculpting' of inner reality into outer form as befits an aesthetic partly inspired by Rilke's close cooperation with Auguste Rodin. Rilke learned much about art from Rodin, ethically ('toujours travailler'—'never stop working'), conceptually (the idea that the aesthetic object intensifies and exceeds the objects of the natural world), and pragmatically (how best to look at and read inner realities from outer surfaces). Above all he learned of the tension between the stillness that appears to characterize a finished work of art and the vitality that it expresses

⁹ Letter to Clara Westhoff, 8 March 1907 (*B* 1, 247).

and incarnates: 'Even the stones of ancient cultures were not calm. Enclosed within the hieratically restrained gestures of ancient cultic worship was the turmoil of living surfaces, like water held in the walls of a container. There were currents flowing in the impassive gods that were seated, and in those standing up was a gesture like a fountain rising out of the stone and falling back into it again, filling it with wave upon wave.'¹⁰ The motif of the rise and fall of the fountain persists in Rilke's own work until the end of his life, reflecting both movement and artistic self-sufficiency, a combination of dynamism with cyclic enclosure that in Rilke's hands is always reciprocal, never contradictory.

Whilst crucial to his own development, Rilke's response to Rodin was neither uncritical nor itself static and he gradually came to see Rodin's art as too deliberately symbolic and too dependent on independently existing thoughts and concepts for him. His exposure to the work of Paul Cézanne over a fortnight in October 1907 (Rilke visited the memorial exhibition at the Salon d'Automne in Paris almost every day) confirmed his preference for things depicted without preconceived messages or intentional significance. Visiting the exhibition with Mathilde Vollmoeller, a German-born artist living in Paris, he was astonished to hear her say of Cézanne that 'he sat in front of things like a dog, just looking, without tension or ulterior motive of any kind' (*KA* IV, 614). What he says of Cézanne's painting applies to his own poetry: 'It is natural, of course, to love all the things you make, but if you show this, you make it less well; you *judge* rather than *say* it. You stop being impartial, and what is best about it, the love, remains outside your work, does not enter into it, stays un-transformed alongside. That is how atmospheric painting arose (which is no better than naturalist art): people painted "I love this thing" instead of painting "here the thing is"' (*KA* IV, 616).

Despite a preoccupation with things, the *New Poems* are not neutral or objective as has sometimes been claimed, although they are not subjective (in the sense of sentimental) and they avoid the so-called 'lyrisches Ich' (personal narrative voice). Formally they embody a variety of possibilities, from the 'Rollengedicht' (literally 'role-poem', as if spoken by a dramatic character) and the dramatic monologue to the sonnet, of which there are many. This last is a form usually

¹⁰ *KA* IV, 417 (from Rilke's monograph on Rodin).

associated with the poetry of thought rather than that of objects, but in Rilke's hands it is transformed, rendered supple and fluid, its traditional stanza structures, rhyme schemes, and metrical conventions boldly varied and developed.

The other major work of Rilke's middle period, his 'novel' *Malte Laurids Brigge*, is formally and structurally even more adventurous. It begins by appearing to imitate the form of a diary, but very quickly abandons the expectations of linear chronological progression that that genre creates; the fragmentation of the structure is a deliberate reflection both of the disruption to the structures of perception by urban experience and of the vulnerability that results from childhood trauma that the novel explores. Malte is an insect without a carapace, 'like a beetle that has been trodden on, you are squeezed out of yourself' (*KA* III, 507). There is little that one might call a discursive 'plot', although there is an evocative 'narrative' provided by the presentation of the processes of experience in Paris and in Malte's past in Denmark. Malte, too, learns to 'see', even if his 'sight' is predicated on a negative aesthetic of the foul and the broken rather than that of beauty. He is likened to one 'who hears a glorious language and with feverish intensity undertakes the task of writing in it. But he had yet to face the consternation at learning how difficult this language is; at first he did not want to believe that a long life could be spent forming the first, short, bogus sentences that had no meaning' (*KA* III, 633).

The enormity of the existential and aesthetic task that Malte finds himself faced with at the end of the *Notebooks* pre-empted the extended period of crisis that Rilke entered after the publication of these and the *New Poems*. Difficulties with personal relationships proliferated—he had affairs with Marthe Hennebert, Magda von Hattingberg (known as 'Benvenuta', 'The Welcome One'), Lou Albert-Lasard, and Baladine Klossowska ('Merline'), all of which he began with high expectations that were then disappointed. Love and an intimate connection to another human being were almost a *sine qua non* for Rilke, the conditions under which intensity of experience and self-awareness flourished and for a time gave energy for poetic creation; at the same time, however, they also drained him of that energy and, by involving him in the responsibilities and entanglements of personal life, inhibited his sense of self ('life' turned into 'fate') and interfered with writing. The First World War and the revolutions in Germany that followed, which Rilke saw as the worst of

the intrusions of mechanized, capitalist society into truly meaningful life, contributed to his depression. He was himself called up and after a miserable period of basic training served out his time in a military archive in Vienna. This of course did nothing to appease the demons that an adolescence spent in military academies had stirred up.

It is not surprising that Rilke struggled with his work after *Malte*: he wrote to Lotte Hepner that the novel had been about one big thing, which was 'how is it possible to live if the elements of our lives are so completely beyond our comprehension? If we are continually inadequate in love, insecure in our decisions, and incapacitated in the face of death, how is it possible to exist?'¹¹ The early work on the *Duino Elegies*, begun in a moment of inspiration during a visit to one of the castles owned by Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis and her husband in the winter of 1912, was itself a source of tension: Rilke was aware of having seized upon important ideas and images that he was at that point unable to think through and bring to completion. It was a powerful inhibitor to other work—a project in 1916 to bring together a sequence of works written a few years earlier and to be entitled *Poems to the Night* remained incomplete, for example: despite also being linked closely with the material of the *Elegies*, this did not trigger the completion of the larger project either. Instead Rilke translated—Michelangelo, Louise Labé, Mallarmé—and wrote a large number of free-standing poems. In many of these he developed a more expansive concept of space (in contrast to the focused, centred, even 'centripetal' conception implied by the *New Poems*), moving away from the idea of shaping or outlining an object towards one in which experiences were conceived spatially as unbounded and unenclosed. It is at this time that Rilke develops the concept of 'Weltinnenraum' (literally 'world-within-space') in which human consciousness seems to meld with the world of objects, things, and landscapes that is by definition without subjective consciousness (see the poem 'Almost all things beckon us to feeling', p. 117).

The poem 'Turning' is perhaps the one that most clearly expresses the crucial change of vision that Rilke underwent during the crisis years. It sets the work of seeing against that of the heart, acknowledging the power of the aesthetic that underpinned the *New Poems* and the achievements of that period but stating clearly that 'gazing . . .

¹¹ Letter to Lotte Hepner, 8 November 1915 (B 1, 599).

has a limit', for the world so looked upon thirsts for the activeness of love as well as the receptivity of an open gaze. 'Work of seeing is done, | now do heart-work | on the images in you' is the injunction of the final stanza; that which has been 'won' (a reference perhaps to the ethic of work and craft Rilke inherited from Rodin) has not yet been loved, and that is the next step. 'Turning' shows incidentally how much common ground there was between Rilke and the Expressionist generation of writers, who were at much the same time proposing a shift from an essentially passive impressionistic world-view ('seeing') to a visionary and dynamically *expressive* one ('looking'), as articulated for example in Kasimir Edschmid's 1917 manifesto (*On Expressionism in Literature and on the New Writing*). Lou Andreas-Salomé (to whom Rilke sent the poem as soon as it was completed) subjected it to a psychoanalytical interpretation: she doubted that the turn—real though it certainly seemed to be—was as sudden as it was portrayed there because Rilke's own body, his eyes in particular, had been betraying it for some time: they had become painfully congested because of an increase in the internal pressure of the blood towards them as if the body wished to make them into sexual organs. Psychologically plausible or not, the reading articulates the very real sense of blockage and longing for release that beset Rilke during these years.

The sense of alienation and crisis that Rilke experienced was by no means unique. In the early 1900s, his compatriot Hugo von Hofmannsthal went through a personal 'Chandos crisis', the evaporation of his confidence in the capacity of language to shape and express experience and of the integrity of the self that can be said to be experiencing in the first place. Paul Valéry's so-called 'nuit de Gênes' of October 1892 resulted in his abandoning poetry until 1917. Rilke's alienation was far-reaching, and his sense of responsibility urgent. A well-known letter to his Polish translator Witold Hulewicz confirms how much he felt the world was at risk:

For our grandparents a 'house', a 'well', a familiar tower, even their own clothing, a coat, was still infinitely more, infinitely more intimate; almost every object was a vessel in which they found humanity already present and to which they added a store of humanity ['Menschliches hinzusparten']. Nowadays there are things forcing their way over from America, empty, insensible things, fake things, *substitute lives* . . . A house, in the way it is understood in America, an American apple or a vine from over there has

nothing in common with the house, the fruit, the grape into which the hopes and reflectiveness of our forefathers had made their way. . . . The vitalized, directly experienced things that *share knowledge with us* are in decline and cannot be replaced any more. *We are perhaps the last ones to have known such things.* It is upon us that the responsibility falls not only to retain their memory . . . but their human and 'laric' value ('laric' in the sense of the house-deities).¹²

Another letter, written in 1915 about his experience of the area around Toledo in Spain, shows how deeply Rilke felt then that he needed support in this task:

The Spanish landscape . . . has driven my constitution to its extreme in that there external things themselves—tower, mountain, bridge—possessed simultaneously the undreamed-of, unsurpassable intensity of their inner equivalents through which one might have depicted them. External appearance and inner vision everywhere came together in the object, in each one of them a whole interior world was made apparent, as if an angel encompassing the space were blind and were looking inwardly into itself. This world, no longer seen by men but within the angel, is perhaps the object of my true mission.¹³

This angel, the angel of the *Duino Elegies*, is one of the most powerful poetic figures of the twentieth century, terrifying yet noble, unapproachable yet magnetically attractive, a guarantor of the fact that 'a higher level of reality is recognizable in the realm of the invisible'.¹⁴ In the angel and the other unique figures that populate these ten complex poems—including the allegorical *dramatis personae* of the journey through the Land of Suffering in the tenth—Rilke achieves that rarest of things, the creation of a modern myth. There are grounds for fear, as Rilke explains in a letter about both the *Elegies* and the *Sonnets to Orpheus*:

Formidableness has shocked and horrified mankind: but where is there anything sweet and marvellous that on occasion does not wear this mask, that of the formidable? Life itself . . . is it not formidable? . . . Anyone who has not acknowledged the fearsomeness of life on occasion, even acclaimed it, will never fully take possession of the ineffable authorities of our existence, he will pass by on the verges, and when judgement is made one day

¹² Letter to Witold Hulewicz, 13 November 1925 (*B* II, 376–7).

¹³ Letter to Ellen Delp, 27 October 1915 (Rilke, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1914 bis 1921*, ed. Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber (Leipzig, 1937), 80).

¹⁴ Letter to Hulewicz, 13 November 1925 (*B* II, 378).

will be neither alive nor dead. To demonstrate how formidableness and blessedness are identical . . . : that is the core meaning and conception of my two books.¹⁵

Rilke aims in the *Elegies* to give a full account of the human condition and mythopoeically to identify a means of addressing the problems of existence in the modern world that will give us grounds for a degree of confidence and optimism. The poems are elegies—laments, poems of regret for loss—but they are also hymns. They are a lament for the condition of the modern consciousness, for the state of alienation in which man now finds himself, and for his banishment from a potential wholeness or completeness or unity. But they also celebrate man's capacity, via poetry, to preserve the external by transforming it inwardly.

There is a second sense in which the *Duino Elegies* are elegiac, for they contain echoes of the classical verse-form known as the elegiac distich (pairs of lines consisting of a hexameter followed by a pentameter), in which dactylic feet were prominent. Lines 5 and 6 of the first *Elegy* constitute just such a pair, and there are others in seven of the ten poems. The *Elegies* as a whole are obviously not written consistently in this form (the fourth and the eighth, for example, are written largely in iambic pentameters, blank verse), but most have what Theodore Ziolkowski calls 'dactylic parlando' (where the musical term indicates 'speaking', as if in fluent speech rhythms), and the elegiac distich hovers suggestively behind the varied verse-forms of the *Elegies*.¹⁶ This is more than a mere parlour-game that Rilke plays with the reader: behind his *Elegies* the ghost of the perfect form constantly reminds us of the tendency of the modern world, the modern poetic aesthetic, to fragment, to fail to complete, to hint at perfection, or at an ideal, rather than achieve it. The falling away from the traditional form is quite deliberate and it reflects the subject-matter of the *Elegies* very precisely.

The *Elegies* present two categories of creature that allow Rilke to demonstrate alternatives to the human condition—the angel and animals—but also a number of figures who occupy a transitional state between that of corrupted humanity and the ideally non-human:

¹⁵ Letter to Margot, Countess Sizzo, 12 April 1923 (*B* 11, 296).

¹⁶ Theodore Ziolkowski, 'The Fragmented Text: The Classics and Postwar European Literature', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 6.4 (2000), 549–62 (p. 560).

lovers, children, the young dead, and heroes. Animals exist in a condition of openness, where their access to the world, their ability to *see* in the world of the visible, is not impeded by consciousness. Angels are the opposite, 'super-conscious' beings, creatures of pure consciousness, 'spaces of being' (*DE* II, 14), who exist entirely within the realm of the invisible—itsself a 'space', to be thought of not as the infinite extensiveness of the cosmos but as the intangible but clearly discernible dimension that we can see, for example, 'on the other side' of a mirror—and which is explored in one of *The Sonnets to Orpheus* (p. 213). The tragedy of mankind consists in being condemned to remain on this side of such a mirror. The dignity of mankind, however, lies in our capacity to perceive that this dimension does exist and, as the *Elegies* progress, they counsel a resolution not to try to attain it but to celebrate and transform the world we do inhabit, imbue the visible with significance so that it is no longer felt to be such a poor relation of the invisible.

Mankind is alienated from the world because of his reflexive consciousness, the irremediable division of subject from object—which is a cognitive version of the biblical Fall of Man. The poetic 'I' reappears in the very first line after its banishment from the *New Poems*, marking the obtrusive presence of consciousness. However, there are certain conditions under which this does not apply. Children, for example, enjoy in Rilke's poetics an almost mythic, pre-lapsarian innocence; in play they inhabit imaginary worlds (*DE* IV, 73). Those who die young make the transition from childhood directly into death virtually without passing through the corrupting stage of adult awareness of the imminence of decline and death. Lovers, too, enjoy a form of suspension from the subject/object division provided that their love is not 'transitive' (that is to say provided that they say 'I love' and not 'I love you'): the first *Elegy* celebrates Gaspara Stampa, a sixteenth-century Venetian poet whose love was unrequited, but throughout his life Rilke admired others in similar situations, such as Bettina von Arnim (whose passion for Goethe was not reciprocated) and the Portuguese nun Mariana Alcoforado who was deserted by her seducer. These lovers are, not coincidentally, all women; the third *Elegy* evokes the disruptive power of male sexuality. It is not coincidental either that they are all writers—either of poetry or of letters—and thus capable of perpetuating their heightened 'intransitive' condition for posterity.

These examples of alternative and transitional consciousness are evoked and explored in the first four *Elegies*. The last poem to be written, placed fifth in the cycle, marks a low point in the mental and emotional search that the poet is enacting, and laments the situation of the rest of mankind via the image of a group of street-tumblers based on a real family that Rilke had seen in Paris and on a very different and more troubling representation of such a troupe in Pablo Picasso's painting of that name made in 1905. Their performance is destined to flip over from inadequacy to empty facility without ever lingering on the ineffable point at which true artistry is achieved, skill imbued with effort and meaning. Rilke invokes the angel again to imagine a place 'which we do not know of'—in the sphere of the invisible, then—where lovers might demonstrate an act of 'Können' ('being able to', *DE* v, 97), but it is a hypothesis rather than a memory. The hero who forms the subject of the sixth *Elegy* is real but rare, a unique example of an imitable state of freedom from the confines of consciousness in an adult male; courage and the compulsion to act bypass reflection, and the inevitable early death preserves this condition from the inimical effects of a continued existence where such intensity could not be sustained. He is compared with the fig-tree, which appears to fruit without bothering to indulge in the self-aggrandizement of blossoming.

The structure of the cycle so far has created a situation in which possibilities have been examined for the fulfilment of the hope incarnated in the putative cry of mankind to the angel that opens the *Elegies* but, with its nadir in the fifth and only a glimpse in the sixth, this hope is unrealized. The seventh opens with the realization that the ambition to resemble the angel is wrong-headed: the cry of the first is echoed as that of a bird who sings not in order to ask for something ('wooing', *DE* vii, 1) but as a spontaneous act of self-fulfilment. There is an excitement in this poem accompanying the realization that inhabiting our own world is enough for us, provided that we transform it and make it internal. The angel is still present here, but Rilke is jubilantly confident that we do not need to emulate him; showing him what is ours is enough—at this point he still needs the gaze of the angel to 'save' the things of the world for posterity, but its function is itself metamorphosing as the act of showing to the angel is understood as that of poetic creativity.

With some psychological plausibility Rilke records in the next

poem a dramatically retarding moment of doubt, a resurgence of the conviction that man's self-consciousness precludes his self-fulfilment. But as the near-triumphant 'major key' of the seventh is modulated suddenly into a plangent minor in the eighth, it is followed by another uplifting as the ninth *Elegy* refines the insights of the seventh and focuses on the very transitoriness of human life as the fit object of man's (poetically) restorative activity. Its injunction is to transform the visible into the invisible by *saying*, an idea that is reinforced in a volley of reformulations: 'Here is the time of the say-able', 'speak and bear witness', 'praise *this* world . . . to the angel', 'show him that which is simple', 'Tell him Things'. What is often not noticed about this *Elegy* and the task it celebrates is that, even though the poet refers to the angel only in the third person (whilst addressing the earth in the second person at the end), the salvation of the here-and-now and its reinvigoration with significance has not yet been fully emancipated from the supervision of the angel ('preise *dem Engel* die Welt' is the injunction), The purely intransitive act of praising will not emerge until the *Sonnets*.

The most intractable division that affects our lives is that between life and death, and the final *Elegy* shows us the crossing of that border. The poet takes us on an allegorical journey out of 'Mourning's capital' through the landscape of lament, past the experiences of the living (love, pain, and mourning), past erstwhile cultural achievements, into a place 'out that way' to see 'trees-of-tears' and 'flowering melancholia fields' and into the 'peaks of Original Grief'. Rilke insisted to Hulewicz that this landscape was '*not to be equated with Egypt*', but was 'in a manner of speaking a reflection of the lands of the Nile in the desert—clarity of the consciousness of the dead' (*B* II, 377), which Rilke wishes us to see not as the negation of life but as one component of an indissoluble pair with it.

The angel fades away in the last of the *Elegies*, and in the other cycle that emerged in February 1922, he is replaced entirely by a quite different figure, Orpheus. A representative of transcendence (albeit not transcendence in a traditionally religious sense) is succeeded by one of mediation; a being beyond our time and space has no place in *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, whose presiding deity—and he is a deity for Rilke, not the demi-god or even the mortal that most of the ancients saw him as—is anchored to the earth addressed so intimately at the end of the ninth *Elegy*. Even the grandiose poetic form of the

elegy that Rilke derived partly from previous German poets such as Friedrich Hölderlin or Friedrich Klopstock is replaced by the altogether tighter scheme of the sonnet whose origins lie in French and Italian literature and whose very right to exist in German was hotly debated in the early nineteenth century. And he restores to the sonnet form its traditional function of guidance and teaching (which the many sonnets in the *New Poems* had consciously moved away from), albeit with no less formal flexibility than in the period between 1903 and 1907. And yet the two works, as Rilke wrote to Hulewicz, are intimately related: 'the *Elegies* and the *Sonnets* are permanently supportive of one another—, and I regard it as an infinite boon that I was able to fill both these sails with the same breath: the little rust-coloured sail of the *Sonnets* and the *Elegies*' huge white sail-canvas' (*B II*, 378).

Just before Rilke began writing the *Sonnets* he composed a number of poems that probed the themes and poetics of what would become the new cycle whilst overtly turning away from those of the *Elegies*. They include one written on 1 February 1922 that begins 'When will, when will, when will lament and saying suffice?' (*KA II*, 276). Here the cry to the angel is definitively rejected as a mode either of communication or (which is the same thing) self-realization: 'Because the stars seem silent to us in the screamed-at ether, the most distant, the old and the oldest ancestors spoke to us! And we: we heard at last! The first hearing people.' The first of the *Sonnets* picks up the motif of listening and hearing, which is carried through explicitly in another eight poems in the two parts.

If the *Elegies* moved tentatively towards affirmation before grasping it enthusiastically, the *Sonnets* are wholly devoted to it. Praise and song are its existential modes—'singing is being', 'Breathing, you invisible poem!'—and it would not be an exaggeration to say that the whole sequence is an exploration of the ontology of poetry. And in contrast to the *Elegies*' aspirations to timelessness, an acceptance of the temporal and the fleeting is a precondition for the Orphic existence of the *Sonnets*. Rilke writes of an ideal Orphic world in which there is no difference in kind between inner and outer, visible and invisible, singing and silence, holding and loosing—ultimately between life and death, which are the components of what the cycle calls a 'double-realm'. *Sonnet 2. XIII* issues the injunction 'Be—and know also non-being'. Whilst this is part of the modern myth that

Rilke constructs, it is, of course, an important component of the classical myth that he uses as a starting-point, both in the descent of Orpheus into, and his re-emergence from, the underworld and in Orpheus' own brutal death at the hands of the Maenads which he overcomes as his head continues to sing after being severed from his body.

Rilke saw these sonnets as more direct and plain than his previous work—'I think that there is no poem in *The Sonnets to Orpheus*', he wrote to a friend, 'that means something other than what is completely articulated in it, although often under its most secret names. Everything in the nature of an "allusion" to my mind contradicts the indescribable *there-being* ["Dasein", or "existence"] of the poem.'¹⁷ And yet they cannot be described as an easy read. Many evoke absence, emptiness, and silence, and the burden of meaning is transferred to the linguistic structures and patterns that are described rather than being conveyed by clear semantic 'content'. The image of the mouth, as well as that of the ear, recurs frequently, suggesting that the dominant theme of the cycle is the exploration of the conditions, nature, and qualities of poetic language as it says, speaks, and praises. 'Bezug' ('relation', 'link', 'connection') is a key concept throughout and it stresses the fact of connectedness rather than the substance of the things connected. This makes it very difficult to paraphrase the poems or 'hold' them mentally, reduced to an intellectually graspable substance. And yet this is the essence of the mission of transformation that lies at their heart, the metamorphosis of the visible world into language, despite but also because of the obstacles presented by technology, capitalism, the modern urban world, and a conception of life as 'fated' or determined rather than freely self-expressing.

The letter to Hulewicz referred to above is concerned above all with the *Elegies* and the *Sonnets*, and thus with Rilke's late work. It reflects concerns that he has harboured for most of his life, however, and one of the quotations from it above (p. xxv) echoes a passage added to the Rodin monograph in 1907: the tragedy that Rodin's monumental bronzes articulate derives from being 'born into a time that has no things, no houses, no exteriors. The interiority that characterizes our age is formless, ungraspable: it flows' (*KA* IV, 478)—and Rilke himself remarks on the link with his earlier works

¹⁷ Letter to Margot, Countess Sizzo, 1 June 1923 (*B* II, 307).

in that letter. The *Sonnets* do have much in common with the *New Poems* in that both presuppose respect for the integrity of the material world, but the later works are far more abstract, more concerned with 'relations between' than 'localities in', and the primacy of seeing has been replaced by that of hearing—attending to the 'vibration' of the world, its musical harmonies and dissonances, but also and especially its harmonics.

The reader of this selection will soon notice how full Rilke's poetry is of interdependent images of giving and receiving, rising and falling, presence and absence, corporeality and immateriality; a tendency to simultaneous gain and loss or beginning within completion is true of his poetic development as well as of his images. The inspirational gain of those of the *Elegies* that he 'found' in January 1912 created the tension that prevented their fulfilment; their completion was dependent on a new beginning in the *Sonnets*. But perhaps the most radical of all the shifts in direction that Rilke's poetry underwent was one in the very last years of his life in some of his most difficult and intense poems, and it took place because the accomplishment of the poetic task of the *Sonnets* meant that it could not continue to be valid for future work. A prolonged period of engagement with the work of Paul Valéry began with Rilke's translation in March 1921 of Valéry's own 'breakthrough' poem, *Le Cimetière marin* (*The Cemetery by the Sea*), and continued with more translations, of both poetry and essays, in the winter of 1922–3. For Rilke, Valéry offered a model for poetry very different from that of Orphic transformation.

The affinity that Rilke sensed between himself and his French contemporary made itself clearly felt in his poetry after the *Sonnets*. The poem 'Dedicated to M . . .', written a year after the Valéry translations, speaks of the 'heart's swing', as part of which there is a 'prescribed return' into a new creative period: 'the loaded sling, | heavy with heart's curiosity, tautens | upward into the opposite. | Different again: how new!' (p. 245). In February 1924 'The Magician' also proclaims a shift in poetic stance, positing a radical opposition between the magician-poet and the world hitherto quite uncharacteristic of Rilke. The magician is distinct from the world he is conjuring, which is defined as 'All that *he* is not; the Other'. The conception of the poet as magician is in the Mallarméan pedigree, to which Rilke recognized that Valéry belonged, as a letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé

of 29 December 1921 confirms. It is reflected stylistically, for example, in Rilke's increasing use of emphatic, single-word or short-phrase 'conjunctions' to open his poems. And it manifests itself in a pre-occupation with sound in poems such as 'Gong' (which derives to some extent from the model of dense musicality that French Symbolist poetry offered) and in poems such as 'Mausoleum' in the tradition of Mallarmé's 'tombeaux' poems. Whether the aesthetic that leads to an ever more hermetic style of writing was a fruitful one or not is actually one of the questions asked by 'Mausoleum', as Judith Ryan points out: 'is [hermetic poetry] a precious container for meaning that is hidden deep inside, like the kernel in the fruit, or is it merely a surface which, when turned inside out, will prove to contain nothing?'¹⁸ Rilke has moved almost immeasurably far from the world of his first *Jugendstil*-inspired collections, but characteristically has done so whilst retaining a focus on lasting, complex, and sustaining images—here the tension between surface and depth.

Rilke has always enjoyed a remarkable degree of passionate interest and loyalty—both private, from his many lovers and admirers (who all testify to the personal fascination he exercised, despite his somewhat unprepossessing physical appearance), and public. The early story in prose, *The Lay of the Love and Death of Cornet Christoph Rilke*,¹⁹ whose first version was written in a burst of inspiration over a single night, became a cult work soon after it appeared in 1906, selling 8,000 copies in the first few weeks, more than 200,000 by the time of Rilke's death in 1926, and well over a million today. Differently, but no less intensely, Rilke's poetry still commands astonishing devotion. There are enough reprints and translations of Rilke's works, and enough books and essays about Rilke, to sink a battleship. He is one of the most edited, translated, and analysed poets of any age, and those interested in him include poetry lovers of all sorts, from the amateur to the academic, literary and cultural historians, and a wide range of alternative groups who see Rilke as a form of guru or spiritual(ist) guide. He might not have been displeased with either role, but he would most certainly have regretted any attempt to divert attention from his work.

¹⁸ Judith Ryan, *Rilke, Modernism and Poetic Tradition* (Cambridge, 1999), 217.

¹⁹ A 'cornet' is a commissioned officer in the cavalry, and the bearer of the flag.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

THE German text for almost all the poems in this selection is based on that in the most up-to-date critical edition of Rilke's works: *Kommentierte Ausgabe*, 4 volumes plus a supplementary volume, edited by Manfred Engel et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1996 and 2003). However, this invaluable edition, with its informative editorial material and introductory essays and a wealth of background material from Rilke's correspondence, is not exhaustive. The texts of two poems in this selection, 'This my struggle' and *Gong*, are therefore taken from the earlier standard edition, *Sämtliche Werke*, 7 volumes, edited by Ernst Zinn (Wiesbaden: Insel, 1955–66 and 1997).

The German texts in *Selected Poems* follow Rilke's idiosyncratic punctuation exactly as it stands in the editions cited above. Rilke frequently uses 'double punctuation', with a comma, a full stop, or a semicolon either preceded or followed by a dash. Since this is alien to modern English usage and not usually crucial to the sense, we have not usually adopted these variations in the translations and have replaced them by one only of the original two points, usually the dash. Occasionally, however, such as when Rilke adds a dash to a full stop in the middle of a line (most noticeably in the fast tempo of the *Duino Elegies*, for example), a more marked pause seems to be called for so we retain the original punctuation in translation. This is the case, too, when Rilke is at his most idiosyncratic, punctuating at the beginning of a line, before any of the words themselves.

Another idiosyncrasy of Rilke's is his inconsistent use of suspension points. In the earlier work these often take the form of the three points familiar from modern English usage, but in the later work in particular they tend to vary between two and ten points (such as in the tenth *Duino Elegy*). Bilingual editions of Rilke, including this one, usually prefer to retain Rilke's usage, both in the original German and in translation.

NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

Two translators have been responsible for the English versions of Rilke's poetry in this edition. Susan Ranson translated the poems from five of Rilke's early collections, some of the *New Poems* and *New Poems, Second Part*, the *Duino Elegies*, five of *The Sonnets to Orpheus* (1. VIII, IX, and XVIII, 2. IV and VI) and all but one of the uncollected poems. Marielle Sutherland is the translator of the majority of *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, of the remaining *New Poems* in both parts, and of 'Turning' amongst the uncollected poems. The translators of the *New Poems* are identified by their initials alongside the titles in the Notes at the end of this volume. Both translators would like to express their warmest thanks to Robert Vilain for undertaking the editorial work on this volume.

If the reader's eye falls first on the introductory early poems of this selection an impression could be gained from their transparent language that Rilke may not be as untranslatable as has sometimes been claimed. Indeed, some of these earlier lyrics did much to translate themselves. However, in the *New Poems* an intricate, purposeful density of expression and description already asserts itself; the *Duino Elegies* add further difficulty by their subtle rhythm-changes, speed, and high mood, and by the need to interpret the expressions of Rilke's imagination in our more pragmatic English words; *The Sonnets to Orpheus* lift the mood even higher, almost beyond speech and translation at times, since their subject is the song of the human being's creative connection to earthly life and to the unknowable nature of extinction. The uncollected poems, here mostly from Rilke's last years, present dozens of arresting styles and challenges.

The first task facing us was that of rendering into English intensely lyrical poetry written in an intensely German style. It has the richness of rhyme and luscious musicality that German much more easily allows; the concentration of meaning and extended syntax, clause heaped upon clause, that are clearer in German than in English; the affinity for trochaic and dactylic metres that German has taken from the ancients but that English on the whole has not. Then secondly we had to find ways of re-expressing Rilke's both compressed and

vaulting personal style. We will briefly discuss a few of these challenges in more detail.

In his early work the young Rilke allows himself to be intoxicated by sound as he discovers how easily he can drench the line in assonance, alliteration, internal rhyme, and end-rhymes repeated many more times than once. In English, which has fewer consonant combinations and fewer long vowels, sounds are lighter and less 'velvet' in their appeal. The translator may have to use various tactics to indicate the original musicality: a little alliteration, as much part-rhyme as possible, and repetition where it can work to good effect. (SR has discussed this subject at greater length in her Translator's Note to *Rainer Maria Rilke's The Book of Hours* (2008), pp. xxxvi ff.)

We have not felt bound to reproduce Rilke's regular full rhyme, choosing instead to modify this for the ear attuned to more recent English verse. SR prefers largely to abandon full rhyme in favour of part-rhyme or a slight indication of rhyme only, though still in as many lines as possible. MS, in the tightly compacted *New Poems* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*, often stays closer to rhyme and tries to replicate sounds depending on how insistent these seem to be within the meaning of the poem. For example, in sonnet 1. VI she tries to preserve the richness of the assonances. Orpheus here infuses the vision of the living with appearances of the dead, and Rilke sounds out this Orphic fusion of the upper and lower realms of life and death by blending flickering, lighter German 'i' sounds with longer, darker 'au' sounds. In her version MS blends English 'i' with 'oo' sounds.

Some poems demand more rhyme in translation than others: for the faithful translator the most difficult poems of all are those with the shortest lines (e.g. *End Piece; Sonnets to Orpheus*, 1. XVII–XIX and XXII–XXIII). Only close replication of both metre and rhyme can preserve them in English as the lyrical distillations that Rilke makes of them.

Rilke likes to cast a poem of several stanzas as one sentence, usually syntactically complex with many subordinate clauses and with the main verb perhaps in the last stanza (*Sonnets*, 1. XXIII again) or even omitted altogether (*Roman Fountain; The Ball*). This device creates an almost physical tension between the stanzas, which the translator has no right to sever. In fact, German syntax naturally delays subsidiary verbs and often even the main verb or participle until the end of the clause or sentence; these poems show Rilke making vivid

poetic use of the delay and by doing so making demands on the translator: *Der Ball* ends on the verb 'zufallen', at the very end of the ball's own movement. In *Sonnet* 1. XXIII he uses the single-sentence style for tracing the trajectory of the plane climbing into the sky and in *Roman Fountain* for the downward flow of water in a fountain with several basins. We see the same style in *Early Apollo*, which fills us with such awaiting and anticipation of language and poetry in the god that at the full stop we are craving the next sentence.

Despite his tightly controlled poetic expression, Rilke allows open emotion to surface, indicated perhaps (in *The Garden of Olives*) by an untranslatable repeated 'Ach' or in semi-incoherent phrases or exclamations (especially in the *Sonnets*, but scattered throughout most of the later work). Moreover, German still has the expressive familiar form of 'you', equivalent to English 'thou'. 'Du' and the imperatives, presenting informal, even intimate, registers, occur frequently in Rilke, but they too are difficult to render simply in English ('Du, mein Freund'; and 'Sieh' in *Sonnets*, 1. XVI).

Time and again the translator is brought up short by Rilke's predilection for word-creation, which is already apparent in the early collections. We meet perplexing compounds and abstractions in 'frühlingfrierende Birke' ('What is the furthest I shall reach', p. 8), 'Flammenumflehter' (*Prayer*, p. 4) or 'aus allem draußen Aufgereihten' (*The Ball*, p. 102). His project of drawing into relation the opposing territories of concrete and abstract, subject and object, presence and absence, is linguistically manifest in the contrasts formed between abstruse vocabulary or phraseology and utterly simple, conversational usages (*sonnets* 1. XIV, 'tun sie es gern?', and 1. XV, 'Wartet . . . das schmeckt . . .').

Then there is the need to replicate Rilke's varied metres, while softening a few of the stressed beats to create the relaxed, less insistent rhythms of spoken language. (For instance, MS's line 'In reflections resembling Fragonard' (*The Flamingos*) no longer has five full stresses but only three or even two, and is for that reason a most beautiful pentameter — SR.) This is not an illogical aim: the reader, unaccustomed these days to such regularity as Rilke favours and perhaps even now attuned to Shakespeare's miraculously modern spoken rhythms, asks for no less.

But Rilke also offers many highly irregular metres (*Song of the Sea*; several of the *Sonnets*; *An die Musik*), and the *Duino Elegies* wander

from tetrameters through pentameters to hexameters, from trochee to dactyl, iambus to anapaest, which gives them the extraordinary pull of fast-flowing rivers. We attempt to mirror these rhythms and in particular to respect Rilke's preference for the trochee and dactyl, which are not 'native' to English prosody as they are to the German. However, to travel too far in this direction would sound artificial in English and you will often find the iambus and the anapaest taking over in our versions. We found that even if a trochee is consciously written at the start of an English line, it often, by an unconscious switch of the stress, reads as an iambus, perhaps because in English there are naturally fewer feminine line-endings to precede and mark a trochee. It took us much time and trouble to clarify the trochees at the beginnings of lines and so avoid confusing the reader's sense of the metre; we may not have wholly succeeded, because metre is sensed subjectively. On the whole, whatever the difficulties, we did not think it right to smooth Rilke's metrical variations into English iambs, especially the variations on a larger scale.

Influenced by Hölderlin, Rilke occasionally drops into the classical hexameter; again we follow suit. And in two poems ('Oh leave me, you whom I asked'; *For Erika*) he adopts complex verse-forms, also with regular mid-line caesura; in the latter poem this is a classical ode-form. In the interests of accuracy and rhyme, SR's version cannot perfectly match the metre: this illustrates the kind of trade-off that translation exacts from the all-too imperfect translator.

We have both worked by the demanding principle that verse translation should attempt to render not only the central meaning of a poem but almost all its detail, although we were certain that shadowing the original *poetry* must always be our overriding aim. Conscious of both the temptations and the pitfalls of faithfully replicating a verse-form in another language, we have tried to offer at least hints and traces of regular rhymes and rhythms (at times more), within flexibility. We hope this does justice to the idea that 'translation is not the work, but a path towards the work . . . an apparatus, a technical device that brings us closer to the work without ever trying to repeat or replace it'.¹

SR and MS

¹ José Ortega y Gasset, 'The Misery and Splendour of Translation', trans. Elizabeth Gamble Miller, in Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (eds.), *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida* (Chicago, 1992), 109.

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