RAINER MARIA
RILKE

SELECTED POEMS

TRANSLATED BY

Albert Ernest Flemming

RAINER MARIA RILKE is one of the finest poets of our century, and without a doubt the greatest German poet since Goethe. Sixty years after his death in 1926 his influence is ever growing, capturing the hearts and imagination of an ever wider readership, especially in the English-speaking world. The intimate, intense and lyrical voice of Rilke speaks directly to the concerns and yearnings of men and women today.

Albert Flemming's acclaimed translations represent the fruition of a lifetime's reading and reflection on Rilke's poetry from which he has sought both inspiration and a spiritual comfort.

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This volume of wonderfully resonant and faithful translations constitute the ideal introduction to Rilke's verse for those coming to it for the first time. For those already familiar with Rilke's poetry, Flemming will reveal it anew.

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With an Introduction by
Dr. Victor Lange

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IN MEMORY

The translation of
"Almond trees in bloom"
("Mandelbäume in Blüte")
was composed in memory
of Albert Flemming's brother
GEORGE,
who died in his adopted Spain,
Málaga, August 27, 1982.

To
LaDonis James King
in gratitude
for the happy journey

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The idea of translating the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke into English goes back to the thirteen years spent in Southern Germany at private schools, college and the state conservatory of music. His poetry, prose works and revealing letters had a decisive influence on my formative years. It was then that I began my first translations for the enjoyment of my family and friends back home in London.

Years later, when serving in the Royal Canadian Army's Auxiliary Services during World War II, I was asked by fellow officers and men to introduce them to Rilke's poetry: friends who were stationed in far-off places, in submarines, the Atlantic Ferry Command, on mine sweepers in the Caribbean; American friends on lonely Pacific atolls, in isolated military hospitals in the Californian desert, taking care of the endless arrival of war casualties. Rilke's poetry provided a spiritual comfort that they desperately needed during those trying years. Some of these friends lost their lives. . . .

After retiring to Florida, I was asked by a friend to translate Rilke's poem "Roman Fountain at the Villa Borghese". He was so impressed with the translation that he suggested I submit it to the *Christian Science Monitor*'s Home Forum. The poem was accepted and published in 1980 and was subsequently followed by other poems during the following four years.

With this encouragement and the enthusiastic acceptance of the poems by friends, I decided to present the translations in book form.

Some people may question the need for one more translation of Rilke's poetry. My justification is based on the inadequacy of many translations. Rilke's meaning is often obscured, sometimes totally misrepresented. Some translators seem to work solely with a dictionary at their side and do not have sufficient knowledge of the German language where a word may have various meanings just as we find in the English language. Others try desperately to make the lines rhyme, an impossible task, and thereby choose wrong or unsuitable words. The sad truth is that a poem in any language cannot be rendered verbatim in rhythm and rhyme into another language.

The translator faces a demanding task as a recreating artist and writer. He is expected to represent faithfully the original text, but he must succeed in doing this in his own language without being awkward. He must be alert in choosing vocabulary, syntax and cadence. If I may give an illustration using the word "Sunset". In "The Apple Orchard" the first strophe ends on the word 'Sonnenuntergang' which is the German equivalent of 'Sunset'. To achieve the same five syllables with an equal distribution of the evenly divided accent I chose "... watch the sun go down". Then, too, Rilke invents words that cannot be found in any German dictionary and you work hard to search for his intended meaning. And sometimes you discover that a word has its origin in a no longer used medieval expression.

Often his language is so compact that at times it seems like having to unravel patiently a skein of wool to find the beginning thread of understanding.

Rilke was foremost a lyric poet. Translations of his poems must *flow,* even though the lines' rhythm may have to change and the endings do not rhyme. The *'song',* the *'meaning'* must be as close to the original as possible—and that is the difficult task that faces the translator. This is why a sound knowledge of German is essential.

Redington Shores, Florida
Spring 1983.

Be patient toward all that
is unsolved in your heart
and try to love the questions
themselves.

Rainer Maria Rilke
(from his letters)

INTRODUCTION

BY DR VICTOR LANGE

In that extraordinary group of Austro-German writers who emerged at the turn of the century to create within some 30 years a literary canon of the highest imaginative and philosophical rank, Rainer Maria Rilke is one of the most remarkable. Born in Prague in 1875, unhappy in a childhood determined by an eccentric mother, he spent some years (1886–1891) at two Austrian military academies and completed his education in Linz and Prague. It was in the years between 1891 and 1897 that René (as he was called until 1897) wrote, and soon published, his first collection of poetry (*Leben und Lieder / Life and Songs,* 1894; *Larenopfer / Offerings of Diverse Poems,* 1895; *Traumgekrönt / Crowned by Dreams,* 1896), undistinguished sentimental poems, imitative of Heine and minor contemporary poets, vague in perception and unsure in theme and imagery. There was certainly little indication of the intensity of feeling and reflection or the sharpness of observation that were to become the conspicuous quality of his later work. In his single-minded determination to clarify and develop his talent (and to stylize his private life) in pointed opposition to the bourgeois conventions of the time, he followed the admired models of the French symbolist poets, of Wilde, Swinburne and d'Annuncio, of Maeterlink, Stefan George and the young Hofmannsthal. A certain detachment, an aversion to maintaining ties of permanent friendship, a restless compulsion to travel, his preference for works of art rather than direct human

encounters as the source of his imaginative work, all these remained to the end characteristic of Rilke's life.

In 1896 he moved to Munich and there, stimulated by the painters and writers who lived in that lively center of art and literature, he read widely, especially the works of Jens Peter Jacobsen, and met, among others, the novelist Jacob Wassermann who introduced him to Lou Andreas-Salomé. This remarkable woman, fourteen years his senior, born in St. Petersburg, was a friend of Nietzsche, of Gerhart Hauptmann, Wedekind, Schnitzler and later (1911) a close collaborator of Freud's. She was the author of two religious tracts in which she describes the loss of belief in a personal God and her faith, instead, in an all-embracing, all-sustaining Eros.

It was Lou Andreas-Salomé's influence that profoundly affected Rilke's view of himself, of his scope as a poet and of the relationship between his sensibility and the world of concrete reality. What had so far been a mere impressionistic accumulation of miscellaneous and momentary experiences now became in each poetic statement an intensely circumscribed field of introspection or of vision and contemplation, focussed in remembered figures, incidents and objects. The character and the fervor of his love for Lou Salomé is rendered (1897) in the ecstatic poem that opens the present volume: "Extinguish Thou my eyes . . ."

In the company of Lou and her husband, he spent some time in Berlin, and (1898) in Florence, receptive at all times to aesthetic impressions, drawing from them a religious commitment to producing images of a kind of piety that "creates" God instead of only regarding Him as an absolute postulate. In 1899 he published (and in

1909 revised) his first substantial collection of poetry (*Mir Zur Feier / For Me to Celebrate,* later *Die Frühen Gedichte / Early Poems*), less vaguely preoccupied with musical or picturesque effects, more precise in outline and, tentatively, anticipating certain motifs—"God," "Word" or "Angel"—that were to recur and grow more subtle in his later work.

Rilke's intellectual and poetic horizon was immeasurably enlarged by two journeys to Russia with Professor and Mrs. Andreas, during which he joined in the Orthodox Easter celebrations in the Kremlin and met Tolstoy as well as the painters Pasternak and Repin. Deeply affected by the profound religious faith of the Russian people, he wrote a number of shorter works that for long assured his popularity: *The Tale of the Love and Death of Cornet Christopher Rilke; The Book of Monastic Life; Stories of the Good Lord* and the poems that were later collected in *Das Stundenbuch* (*The Book of Prayers*). Especially a second visit to Russia (1900) deepened his affection for the simple life of peasants and monks whose devotion he admired and sought to emulate as a form of daily involvement in the divine creation.

"Russia," Rilke was to say at the end of his life, "was in a certain sense the foundation of my ways of experiencing and of absorbing the world": it was not so much, he meant, an aesthetic as an existential progression. Indeed, the fascination with the romantic mysticism that he witnessed in Russia encouraged in him a tendency towards indistinct and simple-minded religious sentiments and, in turn, a kind of poetry more pure in heart than scrupulous. For two years, having parted from Lou Andreas-Salomé, he settled in the art-

ists colony of Worpswede, entered into a brief and uncongenial marriage, wrote occasional poems and reviews, but terminated this unproductive interlude in 1902 and moved to Paris in order to write a biography of the sculptor Rodin.

Here he lived until 1914, twelve years of extraordinary consequence for his development as a poet. "Paris," he concluded the sentence in which he speaks first of Russia, "Paris—the incomparable—was the basis of my will to deal with shapes and figures." He had for some time been determined to rid his poetry of all merely narrative or private elements, and in the collection of poems written in Worpswede, *The Book of Images* (*Das Buch der Bilder*) he aims (as yet without complete success) at a concentrated perception, at giving significance to an event by gathering in the poem the sum of patient reflection and metaphorical speech. As we withdraw, he seems to argue, from the familiar world that we take for granted, we learn to "see" implications and structures that bring about a rich and distinctive universe, a "world" of significant relationships.

The first years in Paris, with occasional journeys to Rome, Denmark and Sweden, decisively altered the manner and quality of his poetic work. The poems which he now included in the enlarged version of the *Book of Prayers* (1905) are appealing in their measured musical language and their lively pictorial material. Despite the title, the theme that binds these poems together is secular and not monastic. It is the life and procedure of the artist, constantly tested, it is the praise of art, of writing and of painting, and the acts of singing, confessing and enunciating—all means of giving concreteness to the reality of the divine—that form the tenor of this collection.

Rilke's close association with Rodin and his admiration for Cézanne produced that astonishing disavowal of mere incidental inspiration and indistinct poetic effusiveness and brought about, instead, the firm and "objective" manner that soon produced poetry of the most severe perfection. Rodin taught him the craft of drawing the utmost meaning from the precise rendering of a simple object, the evocation of essential features by an exact conveying of the nuances and the translucency of the surface. What he learned from Cézanne was the importance of order and design, a careful procedure of structuring each image, each gesture, each line or stanza. The simple object rather than any random association of impressions now seemed the most expressive and concise vehicle for his poetic intentions. In *New Poems* (*Neue Gedichte*) two chronologically arranged cycles deal with representative moments in the history of European culture, the Bible, classical antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance; but many pieces are specifically devoted to single objects. If "Roman Fountain," "The Merry-Go-Round," the superb "Archaic Torso of Apollo" are in a strict sense "Dinggedichte" ("thing-poems"), others deal with animals, with mythological figures or, like "Self-portrait, 1906" with subjects that seem to aim at achieving in words something like the equivalent of a piece of sculpture. The celebrated prototype of such concentrated statements, severely reduced to an apostrophe of their essence, is "The Panther," the first of the "Dinggedichte," written in 1902. Here and elsewhere time seems no longer in flux, it is not an intimation of human temporality or the blurring thrust of development, but the element in which present abundance is fathomed, undisturbed or momentarily arrested

in the act of memory.

Time and the recognition of its finality in death, death forever present in life, is one of the central themes of Rilke's most complex, yet engrossing piece of prose fiction. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* is the account of a sensitive young Danish nobleman who experiences in Paris the extremes of the human condition, the most intense physical disgust, total loneliness, the beginnings of madness and an elusive but devastating sense of anguish. Darkness and negativity, the vile and the absurd, determine the haunting images and scenes of this document of self-doubt and spiritual agony. The years of its composition—1904 to 1910—were for Rilke a time of continuous travel and unsettled life. Baudelaire and Cézanne now provide the elements of an aesthetic creed which no longer aims at the achievement of beauty in the traditional sense, but at lucidity and a fearless rendering of states of mind that recognizes in the negative and terrifying the evidence of a totality of Being. Neither the world nor the self can here be conveyed as an organic whole or, indeed, as altogether coherent. Rilke's narrative devices are, in consequence, the instruments of disjointedness and discontinuity; the flow of events is circuitous, the central character who, like the hero of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground,* cannot comprehend himself as an intelligible human entity, is the sum of the incidents of horror and shock that he must force himself to confront.

Various forms of death and disease, strange memories, dreams and apparitions elaborate the features of a world whose surface is fractured and whose fragments offer documents of life intelligible only if we succeed in denying temporality, if we exist not within the confines of

chronology but in an awareness of what Rilke calls the "inherent rhythm" of objects or events. The work concludes with a curious reinterpretation of the parable of the Prodigal Son, the legend, as it is here understood, of "one who did not want to be loved," who leaves his self-centered family in order not to have to share their "mendacious" life. Abroad he learns to live without possessions or ambition and devotes himself to the love of God, pure, and unencumbered by a false faith in response or reward. He returns home to "re-live" his youth, indifferent to the family's intrusive offerings of affection, and unwilling to let the love of others constrain and limit him as an object; he is ready only for the love of God, but, so end the *Notebooks, "He* was not yet willing." *Malte Laurids Brigge* is one of the most disquieting and searching works of modern fictional prose; Rilke insisted that it represented "less a descent into negativity than a strange and dark ascent to a neglected and remote part of Heaven. . . ."

For two years after completing the *Notebooks* Rilke again travelled extensively, uncertain of his ultimate effectiveness as a poet. Some of these journeys, such as three months in Egypt, were to supply metaphorical motifs for his later poetry. Through the generosity of the Princess of Thurn und Taxis he was able to stay from October 1911 to May 1912 at Castle Duino near Trieste and there composed *The Life of the Virgin Mary* (*Das Marienleben*), a cycle of fifteen poems in which, drawing on pictures by the Spanish artist Ribadaniera, he celebrates the sensitive and intuitive strength of Mary, Joseph's more commonplace obtuseness and the Savior's exalted career: "You stood apart and overshadowed me . . ." ("Pietà"). Once again it is the "great angel" whose

appearance mediates between human sensibility and the realm of transcendent faith. That image of the Angel recurs throughout Rilke's work, but its invocation in these poems coincides on the very day, 21 January 1912, with the writing in an astonishing burst of inspiration, of the first of the *Duino Elegies,* Rilke's greatest achievement, with its desperate opening question: "Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels' hierarchies?"

The First and Second Elegy, the beginning of the Third and parts of the Sixth, the Ninth and the Tenth were written within a few weeks at Duino; he paused for a year, constantly preoccupied with the slowly emerging cycle, traveled in 1913 in Spain, lived in 1914 in Paris, produced the Fourth Elegy in Munich in November of 1915 and completed the work in February of 1922 at the tiny "castle" Muzot near Sierre in Switzerland where he was to die four years later.

These ten spacious and intricate poems are "elegies" not in the formal sense of a series of stanzas in distichs; they articulate, rather, the thematic movement, largely in free verse, from inadequacy and doubt in the testimonial power of the human performance to the acceptance of a world of infinitely "telling" concreteness and an ultimate rendering of it in acts of praise and rejoicing. The beginning of the Tenth Elegy offers the summary of the cycle as a whole and attempts at the same time an appropriate response to the initial cry of the first: "That some day, emerging at last from the terrifying vision, I may burst into jubilant praise to assenting angels!"

The myth, or symbolism, of the "Angels" elaborates at once the austere projection of an absolute existence beyond human inquietudes and inadequacies, and envis-

ages exemplary models of hope in accomplishing and affirming a sustaining sense of life. The topics of the *Elegies* range from the potter on the Nile to Rilke's own present, from the exploration of consciousness to speculations about the imaginatively "knowing" plants and animals, articulating their special awareness of being. These themes, concentrated in an astounding variety of images, amplify and paraphrase the subject matter of the cycle: the limitations of human existence, imprisoned in temporality and the inescapable circumstances of being, and instances of transcending it in acts of total dedication. While the *Elegies* lack the unity of a single intellectual argument and share with other great poems of our time a deliberate hermetic convolution, irregular syntax and surprising turns of language, inversion and alliteration, they are linked by profuse verbal or metaphorical variations and associations; they are, above all, an account of the poetic process and ultimately amount to a document intended to justify the achievements of art and poetry as means of giving coherence to a world no longer stabilized by traditional systems of belief. "Saying" and "performing" are therefore the two recurring tropes or figures of thought that establish or resolve the juncture of life and death, of lover and beloved, of inner and outer reality, of spectator and artist. These are the very tensions from which the poetic act is born. To love as the ultimate offering by which human actions and feelings can be transcended, the *Elegies* return again and again. It is the specific topic of the first three and the central motif of the first.

Here, in our "interpreted" world, the human being is without certainty and threatened by the restraints of temporality and the impermanence of love; yet, praise of

the highest intensity of feeling, and an acceptance of the passing character of life may enhance our existence. Great examples of love, even though unfulfilled (such as that of the poetess Gaspara Stampa) will increase our understanding: "should not their oldest sufferings finally become more fruitful for us?" (First Elegy). As well as the memory of love, it is the continuing presence of those who died young, those recorded on the tablet in Santa Maria Formosa, who should give us courage: they have "accomplished" their death, for "being dead is hard work and full of retrieving before one can gradually feel a trace of eternity." The mythical dirge at the death of Linos filled the space emptied by his passing with those "vibrations which now enrapture and comfort and help us."

The serene and perfect Existence of the Angel is, in the Second Elegy (thematically related to the First), contrasted with the volatile life of man who, unlike those Beings, must bear the burden of an infinite tension between subject and object, the self and the world: "we, when we feel, evaporate." Lovers, "each satisfied in the other," are again invoked as instances of a potential state of peace and of immunity to the constraints of time. Love which seeks immediate satisfaction—this is the argument of the Third Elegy—is insufficient: it is—in terms and concepts which Rilke borrowed from Freud—the unconscious and subconscious erotic drive, that "hidden guilty river-god of the blood," of which we cannot "speak" to the Angel. Here, as in the Fourth Elegy, it is the conflict so frequently treated in Rilke's later work, between reflection and an immediate awareness of the true "contour of feeling," that drives the poet to a profound sort of self-scrutiny. "Before his own

heart's curtain" he seeks to differentiate the impulses of his awareness. When the imaginary stage empties, when his heart is drained of feeling, when death enters with a grey draft of emptiness, he continues to watch: but to the hollow performance of the actor he now prefers puppets in their specific and not "masked" character, and with utmost concentration calls forth an "Angel," that being of infinite consciousness and, joined in this visionary space, the puppet who is wholly devoid of consciousness. In this speculative union, "What we separate can come together by our very presence." With a Rousseauean flourish Rilke exempts only children and the dying from the fateful schism of mind and emotion: the child who, when it must die, contains death, "the whole of death, even before life has begun." But this, the elegy concludes, is for us, the divided and oscillating creatures, an "indescribable condition."

If the Fourth Elegy, written in November of 1915, is the most bitter, the Fifth is the richest in imagery and the most coherent in its argument. It was (in February of 1922) the last to be written and forms the pivotal piece of the series. For its central motif, Rilke recalled a performance of Père Rollin's troupe of acrobats in Paris in 1907 and, in 1915, Picasso's "Les Saltimbanques" which he saw in Munich in the apartment of its owner, Hertha Koenig, to whom the elegy is dedicated. (This painting is now in the National Gallery in Washington.) Written at great speed, the poem is nevertheless an extraordinarily deliberate and unified composition. Two "voices," the voice of lament and that of praise, are here joined as though in counterpoint, and the Angel is, for once, called upon to consecrate and illuminate a human act. The acrobats as symbols of the human condition re-