



**RAINER MARIA RILKE AS A THINKER:
A STUDY OF DUINO ELEGIES**

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ABSTRACT

Rainer Maria Rilke is generally known as one of the most influential and remarkable poets in the sphere of world poetry. In 1912, Rilke began the poem cycle called the Duino Elegies, which would remain unfinished for a decade because a long-lasting creativity crisis. The outbreak of First World War surprised Rilke during a stay in Germany but he was unable to return to Paris where his property was confiscated and auctioned. The Duino Elegies are intensely religious, mystical poems that weigh beauty and existential suffering. The poems employ as rich symbolism of angels and salvation but not in keeping with typical Christian interpretations. Rilke wrestles with the problems of isolated self-conscious human in search of a new unity with existence.

Key Words: *Duino Elegies, Orpheus, Philosophy, Symbols.*

Introduction

Rainer Maria Rilke is widely recognised as one of the most lyrically intense poets in the realm of world poetry. He was the only child of a German speaking family in Prague where his father was a retired officer in the Austrian army who worked as a railroad official. Among the stunning array of German-speaking writers and intellectuals around 1900, Rilke was perhaps the most cosmopolitan in his worldliness. He was a Bohemian-Austrian poet and novelist "widely recognised as one of the most lyrically intense German language poets" (Holthusen 9). His writing include one novel, several collections of poetry, and several volumes of correspondence in which he invokes haunting images that focus on the difficulty of communion with the ineffable in an age of disbelief, solitude, and profound anxiety. He remained open-minded towards other cultures until the end of his life. His father Josef Rilke became a railway official after an unsuccessful military career. His mother Sophie was a socially ambitious and possessive woman. At the age of eleven, Rilke began his formal schooling at a military boarding academy and writers and intellectuals, with in a year he was transferred to a secondary military school, but he was discharged due to health problems. When he returned to Prague, he was taken aback to see that his parents had divorced in his



absence. In the year 1895, Rilke had enrolled in the philosophy programme at Charles-Ferdinand University. But he soon disenchanted with his studies and left Prague for Munich, ostensibly to study art. In Munich, Rilke mingled in the city's literary circles, had several of his plays produced and published his poetry collections.

When Rilke visited Venice in 1897, Rilke met Andreas-Salome, a married woman fifteen years his senior, who was also a strong influence on Rilke and accompanied Salome and her husband to Berlin in 1897 and to Italy. He fell in love with the widely travelled, intellectual woman of letters. Rilke changed his first name from 'Rene' to 'Rainer' at Lou's urging because she thought that name more masculine, forceful and Germanic. His relationship with this married woman with whom he undertook two extensive trips to Russia lasted until 1900. But even after their separation, Lou continued to be Rilke's most important confidante until the end of his life. Having trained as a psychoanalyst with Sigmund Freud, she shared her knowledge of psychoanalysis with Rilke. In 1898, Rilke undertook a journey lasting several weeks in Italy and a year after, he met the novelist Leo Tolstoy. He accompanied Lou to Moscow where they met the family of Boris Pasternak and Spiridon Drozhzhin, a peasant poet. The writer Anna A Tavis cites the cultures of Bohemia and Russia as the key influences on Rilke's poetry and consciousness. He married Clara Westhoff whom he married and a daughter named Ruth in 1901. In the next year, Rilke left home and travelled to Paris to write a monograph on the sculptor Auguste Rodin. Before long his wife left their daughter with her parents and joined Rilke there. The relationship between Rilke and Clara continued for the rest of his life, a mutually agreed upon effort at divorce was bureaucratically hindered by Rilke's official status as a Catholic, though a non-practising one.

At first, Rilke had a difficult time in Paris, an experience that he called on the first part of his only novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. At the same time, his encounter with modernism was very stimulating as Rilke became deeply involved in the sculpture of Rodin and then with the work of Paul Cezanne. For a time he acted as Rodin's secretary, also lecturing and writing a long essay on Rodin and his work. Rodin taught him the value of objective observation, and further this influence Rilke dramatically transformed his poetic style from the subjective and sometimes incantatory language of his earlier work into something quite new in European literature. The result was the *New Poems*, famous for the 'thing poems' expressing Rilke's rejuvenated artistic vision. During these years, Paris increasingly became the writer's main residence. The most important works of the Paris period were *New Poems* and the novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* starting in 1904 and completed in 1910. During the last part of this decade Rilke spent extended periods in Ronda, the famous bull fighting centre of Spain. There he kept a permanent room at the hotel Reina Victoria where his room remains to this day as he left it, a mini museum of Rilkeana.



In 1912, Rilke began the poem cycle called the *Duino Elegies*, which would remain unfinished for a decade because of a long-lasting creativity crisis. The outbreak of First World War surprised Rilke during a stay in Germany but he was unable to return to Paris where his property was confiscated and auctioned. He spent the greatest part of the war in Munich and during this time he had a turbulent affair with the painter Lou Albert-Lasard. Rilke was called up at the beginning of 1916 and he had to undertake basic training in Vienna, influential friends interceded on his behalf, and he was transferred to the War Records Office and discharged from the military. He spent the subsequent time once again in Munich, interrupted by a stay. The traumatic experience of military service, a reminder of the horrors of the military academy, almost completely silenced him as a poet. After the war, Rilke travelled to Switzerland and the outward motive was an invitation to lecture in Zurich, but the real reason was the wish to escape the post-war chaos and take up his work on the *Duino Elegies* once again. The search for a suitable and affordable place to live proved to be very difficult. Among other places, Rilke lived in Sogilo, Locarno and Berg, and ultimately Rilke completed the *Duino Elegies* in 1922. Before and after, Rilke rapidly wrote both parts of the poem cycle *Sonnets to Orpheus* containing 55 entire sonnets. Both works together have often been taken as constituting the high points of Rilke's work. Rilke also met Alma Moodie, an Australian violinist and Rilke was much impressed with her playing. From 1923, Rilke increasingly had to struggle with health problems that necessitated many long stays at a sanatorium in Territet on Lake Geneva. His long stay in Paris was an attempt to escape his illness through a change in location and living conditions. During this, numerous important individual poems appeared in the years 1923-1926, as well as the abundant lyrical work in French. He wrote three letters in which he praised Benito Mussolini and described fascism as a healing agent.

Rilke published the three complete cycles of poems that constitute *The Book of Hours* in 1905. These poems explore the Christian search for God and the nature of prayer, using symbolism from Saint Francis and Rilke's observation of orthodox Christianity during his travels in Russia in the early years of the twentieth century. Rilke wrote only one novel *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge* while living in Paris and completed in 1910. The novel is semi-autobiographical and he adopts the style and technique that became associated with the Expressionism that centred European fiction and art in the early twentieth century. Rilke addresses existential themes, profoundly probing the quest of individuality, the significance of death, and reflection on the experience of time as death approaches. Rilke draws considerably on the writings of Nietzsche and his work also incorporates impressionistic techniques that were influenced by the painter Cezanne and sculptor Rodin. He combines these techniques and motifs to conjure images of mankind's anxiety and alienation in the face of an increasingly scientific, industrial and reified world. Rilke began writing the elegies in 1912 while a guest of Princess Marie von Thurn and Taxis at Duino Castle near the Adriatic Sea. During this ten-year period, the elegies languished incomplete for long stretches of time



as Rilke suffered frequently from severe depression-some of which was caused by the events of World War and his conscripted military service. Aside from brief episodes of writing in 1913 and 1915, Rilke did not return to work until a few years after the war ended. With a sudden renewed inspiration-writing in a frantic pace he described as 'a savage creative storm' and completed the collection in 1922 while staying at Switzerland in Rhone Valley. After their publication and his death shortly thereafter, the *Duino Elegies* were quickly recognised by critics and scholars as Rilke's most important work. The *Duino Elegies* are intensely religious, mystical poems that weigh beauty and existential suffering. The poems employ as rich symbolism of angels and salvation but not in keeping with typical Christian interpretations. While labelling of these poems as 'elegies' would typically imply melancholy and lamentation and many passages are marked by their positive energy and unrestrained enthusiasm.

With the death of his daughter's friend, Rilke was inspired to create and set to work on *Sonnets to Orpheus* and within a few days, he had completed the first section of 26 sonnets and then again focussed on the *Duino Elegies*. Immediately after, he returned to work on the *Sonnets* and completed the following section of 29 sonnets in less than two weeks. Throughout the *Sonnets*, Wera appears in frequent references to her both direct where he addresses her by name and indirect as allusions to the mythical Eurydice. Though Rilke claimed that the entire cycle was inspired by Wera, she appears as a character in only one of the poems. The content of the sonnets is as is typical of Rilke, highly metaphorical. The character of Orpheus appears several times in the cycle, as do other mythical characters such as Daphne. There are also biblical allusions, and other themes involve animals, peoples of different cultures, and time and death. Rilke often worked with metaphors, metonymy and contradictions. Rilke's poem *Vision of Christ* depicted Mary Magdalene as the mother to Jesus' child. Quoting Susan Hawkins: "It was Rilke's explicit belief that Christ was not divine, was entirely human, and defined only on Calvary, expressed in an unpublished poem of 1893, and referred to in other poems of the same period, which allowed him to portray Christ's love for Mary Magdalene, though remarkable, as entirely human" (Robey 127).

It is true that Rilke was never a philosopher in, his own right, and it would be a mistake to read him on the purely propositional level. But it would equally be mistaken to assume that because Rilke's ambitions were aesthetic, his work has no philosophical dimension, or that his conception of what it means to be a poet does not have philosophical implications. Rilke specifically problematised the relationship between the task of the philosopher and the task of the poet, for in his view these two activities are no more closely linked than ever before. It is difficult to know the exact extent to which Rilke was familiar with, the European philosophical tradition, for he underplayed his knowledge of philosophical texts. Nevertheless, it is possible to sketch an outline of his knowledge of European philosophy, and identify some of the figures he had read. Rilke attended lectures on art, history and literature.



Of his contemporary philosophical contacts, the closest he entertained was with Rudolf Kassner, a cultural philosopher with a distinctly mystical bent, whose work elaborates a characterological approach to culture. Although each had already become aware of the other. Although each had already become aware of the other, the two men first met in Vienna in 1907 and Rilke regarded Kassner as no less than a spiritual child of Kierkegaard and soon after finishing *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, he read in some detail Kassner's *On the Elements of Human Greatness*.

Rilke was impressed by the Christian and the Islamic culture of North Africa and tried to translate part of Augustine's *Confessions*. Rilke maintained a strong interest in spiritism, which came to the fore in turn-of-the-century Europe, arguably in response to the crisis of liberalism, the decline of organised religion and the ascendance of materialism. J.B. Leishman believed, "Rilke reached his characteristic conception of the whole and of death as the other, the unilluminated side of life" (Leishman 156). A figure who is insufficiently recognised as having played an important role in Rilke's intellectual and poetic development is the cosmic poet, Alfred Schuler. Schuler was one of the main sources of Rilke's interest in Orphic-mystery cults reflected in *The Sonnets to Orpheus*. Elsewhere in Rilke's correspondence we find further philosophical reflections which provide insight into the intellectual context within which he produced his works, both lyric and prose. The essence of Rilke's philosophy lies in his project for a restoration of the erotic and an investment of life with aesthetic significance. In other respects, Rilke lacked any kind of political programme, despite an instinctive inclination towards authoritarianism, probably acquired from frequenting aristocratic circles. Perhaps it is no coincidence that, as well as Heidegger and the existentialists, it is thinkers working in phenomenological traditions associated with vitalism who have demonstrated a notable interest in Rilke. Thus Rilke from a philosophical perspective can reveal a different Rilke from the mournful, gloomy figure that he is sometimes presented as being. So Rilke is a cheerful and joyous writer who seeks to increase the readers' sense of vitality, to enhance the keenness of their appreciation of life.

The *Duino Elegies* are a collection of ten elegies written by celebrated Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke who is "widely recognised as one of the most lyrically intense German-language poets" (Prater 28) began writing the elegies in 1912 while a guest of Princess Marie von Thurn and Taxis at Duino Castle near Trieste on the Adriatic Sea. The poems, 859 lines long in total, were dedicated to the Princess upon their publication in 1923. During the ten-year period, the elegies languished incomplete for long stretches of time as Rilke suffered frequently from severe depression-some of which was caused by the events of the World War I and being conscripted into military service. *Duino Elegies* was published by Insel-Verlag in Leipzig, Germany in 1923. prominent critics praised the work and compared its merits to the works of Holderlin and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In 1939, critic Hans-Rudolf Muller was the first to describe the collection as inherently "mystical and promote Rilke as a mystic



spiritual guide" (Stanley 39). German novelist Hermann Hesse describes Rilke as evolving within the confines of exploring his existential problems that "at each stage now and again the miracle music of the universe; like the basin of a fountain he becomes at once instrument and ear" (Hesse 337). However, during the 1920s, many of the younger generation of German-language poets and writers did not like *Duino Elegies* because of the poems' obscure symbols and philosophy.

However Rilke employs the rich symbolism of angels influenced by their depiction in Islam to represent the embodiment of transcendental beauty. Throughout the *Duino Elegies*, Rilke explores themes of "the limitations and insufficiency of the human condition and fractured consciousness...mankind's loneliness, the perfection of the angles, life and death, love and lovers, and the task of the poet" (Paulin 68). Philosopher Martin Heidegger remarked that "the long way leading to the poetry is itself one that inquires poetically and Rilke comes to realise the destitution of the time more clearly. The time remains destitute not only because God is dead, but because mortals are hardly aware and capable even of their own mortality" (Heidegger 96) Rilke explores the nature of mankind's contact with beauty, and its transience, nothing that humanity is forever only getting a brief, momentary glimpse of an inconceivable beauty and that it is terrifying. At the onset of the First elegy, Rilke describes this frightened experience, defining beauty as

"...nothing but the beginning of terror which we are barely able to endure and we are so awed because it serenely disdains to annihilate us" (Rilke, First Elegy 4-5).

Rilke depicted this infinite, transcendental beauty with the symbol of angels. However, he did not use the traditional Christian interpretation of angels. He sought to utilize a symbol of the angel that was secular, divorced from religious doctrine and embodied a tremendous transcendental beauty. In this, however, Rilke commented that he was greatly influenced by the depiction of angels found in Islam. For Rilke, the symbol of the angel represents a perfection that is "beyond human contradictions and limitations in a higher level of reality in the invisible" (Freedman 67).

As mankind comes in contact with this terrifying beauty represented by these angels, Rilke is concerned with the experience of existential angst in trying to come to terms with the coexistence of the spiritual and earthly. He portrays human feelings as alone in a universe where God is abstract and possibly non-existent, "where memory and patterns of intuition raise the sensitive consciousness to a realization of solitude" (Gass 84). Rilke depicts the alternative, a spiritually fulfilling possibility beyond human limitations in the form of angels. Beginning with the first line of the collection, Rilke's despairing speaker calls upon the angels to notice human suffering and to intervene. There is a deeply felt despair and irresolvable tension in that no matter man's striving, the limit of the human and earthly existence renders



humanity unable to reach out to the angels. The narrative voice Rilke employs in the *Duino Elegies* strives "to achieve in human consciousness the angel's presumed plenitude of being" (Sword 68).

Rilke uses the images of love and of lovers as a way of showing mankind's potential and humanity's failures in achieving the transcendent understanding embodied by the angels. In the Second Elegy, Rilke writes:

*"Lovers, if Angels could understand them, might utter
Strange things in the midnight air" (Rilke, Second Elegy 37-38).*

He depicts the inadequacy of ordinary lovers and contrasts a feminine form of sublime love and a masculine blind animal passion. At the time the first elegies were written, Rilke often "expressed a longing from human companionship and affection, and then, often immediately afterwards, asking whether he could really respond to such companionship if it were offered to him" (Leishman 123). In the face of death, life and love is not cheap and meaningless and Rilke asserted that great lovers are able to recognize all three i.e. life, love and death as part of a unity. Rilke asserted that the true meaning of love could be understood through death providing love a meaning of love could be understood through death providing love a meaning in this unity that the nature of every ultimate love is only able to reach the loved one in the infinite.

The Fifth Elegy is largely inspired by Pablo Picasso's 1905 Rose Period painting, known as *The Family of Saltimbanques* in which Picasso depicts six figures pictured in the middle of a desert landscape and it is impossible to say whether they are arriving or departing, beginning or ending their performance, Rilke depicted the six artists about to begin their performance, and that they were used as a symbol of human activity. Further, Rilke in the poem described these figures as standing on a "threadbare carpet to suggest the ultimate loneliness and isolation of man in this incomprehensible world, practicing their profession from childhood to death as playthings of an unknown will...before their pure too-little had passed into empty too-much" (Komar 189). Because of the profound impact that the war had on him, Rilke expressed a hope in a letter that the task of the intellectual in a post-war world would be to render the world right.

Rilke's reputation in the English-speaking world rests largely on the popularity of *Duino Elegies*. The collection has been translated into English over twenty times since it was first published in 1931 by London's Hogarth Press in England in a translation by Edward and Vita Sackville-West. It was first translated for the American market in a translation by J.B. Leishman and Stephen Spender published by New York's W.W. Norton & Company. Other translations have included by poet David Young, Robert Hunter and Stephen Cohn etc.



Conclusively, Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies* have remained remarkably influential into the twentieth-first century. Translations into many languages are still being actively produced, which at least seven new translations into English alone since the turn off the millennium. His *Duino Elegies* form a meta-text that explores the apprenticeship of the poet. But they also connect him to the spiritual realm in which angels become objects of poetic investigation and the search for a reunification of isolated consciousness with something larger and more unified is an urgent poetic quest. This dual role of artist and spiritual seeker broadens Rilke's readership and helps to keep his *Duino Elegies* alive. There is no doubt that at first instance, Rilke's *Elegies* can appear hopelessly idiosyncratic with images ranging from gnats to angels and a cast of characters from acrobats to heroes. And indeed *Duino Elegies* took shape in the midst of a chaotic world in which science yielded not a new system of order as the Enlightenment and the nineteenth century had hoped, but instead radical relativity and uncertainty. Rilke's *Duino Elegies* participate in this exploration as they seek to understand how human consciousness can relate to such a disorienting world. It records his creation of a poetics and exemplify that poetics. In these poems, Rilke wrestles with the problems of isolated self-conscious human in search of a new unity with existence. Rilke ten elegies form a response not so much to this question as to the impulse to ask it. They record the isolation of human consciousness seeking some escape from the trauma which was so strongly felt by writers and artists between the two world wars.

Rilke's cycle of poems is elegiac, in tone, often lamenting lost unities. But the poems also emulate the traditional form of the elegy, the elegiac distich that consists of a line of dactylic hexameter followed by a line of essentially dactylic pentameter. These echoes of earlier poetic forms link Rilke to an older poetic tradition even as he laments the loss of the past. Thematically, Rilke examines possible interactions between the angelic and human realms. He will begin by looking to the divine realm and man's separation from it. His poems then trace a path that examines man's status in relation to the transcendent realm. Rilke is not, however, a linear thinker. He meanders through a series of reflections and reconsiderations as the cycle progresses, however, he arrives back in the realm of the humanly possible. Rilke's *Duino Elegies* dramatise the construction of a poetics as well as an ontology. He is concerned with the task of the poet, but also with an understanding of the human world in broader terms.

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