RILKE

SELECTED POEMS

with English Translations
and Notes by

C. F. MacINTYRE

RAINER MARIA

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INTRODUCTION

We murder to dissect.

AFTER I had got on with my personal Rilke for some ten years, I was surprised to discover I'd been living with a sort of Proteus who seems to have been all things to all critics and to have trifled with me,—even with the Nordic Diotima, Ellen Key, with the astute but vague Paul Valéry, and with the florid, oily Federico Olivero of the University of Turin. Every man had his own Rilke: to one he seems to have been the great God-seeker; to another, a Russian hermit with strong Gallic cultural antecedents; others saw him as a belated Eckhart or Tauler, a wearer of the diaphanous rags of Plotinus and Iamblichus, a spiritual bridegroom to the pious Mechtilde of Magdeburg; one ingenious person has hatched up for him a birth certificate as the only begotten son of the great lyrist Theodor Storm; yet another has placed him under the carved stony mantle of the French *Parnassiens*—and one quaint soul has found him, like a second Moses, floating among the faded bulrushes of the once lush Louise Labé. After some melancholy months of perturbation, during which time I have regarded his disaffections as personal disloyalty, I have been able to put most of these Rilkes aside in my mind (for future consideration), and to press their discoverers, or inventors, safely

between "the leaves of the dark book" of German criticism which has been written despite the Olympian Lessing.

I want now to isolate my own Rilke, with a documented brief for his existence, as a man who during a certain period of his life rode the twin fillies of the wing'd horse, sculpture and painting, keeping a firm foot on each, and singing, as he went, his beautifully formed and colored sonnets, or polishing and painting small concert and salon pieces, sonatas in miniature. When he gallops out of the tent into the night of the soul in the *Duineser Elegien* and into the foggy obfuscations of *Die Sonette an Orpheus,* my blessing but not my interest goes with him, and I am, as yet, unconcerned with his after-fate. The illusion of his performance has been consummate, and it is the well-nigh perfect artist of three books whom I would present to my reader.

The poet of the period 1900–1908 seems to me, rather arbitrarily perhaps, to be the center of a circle drawn through three points: the painting of the Worpsweders and the French Impressionists, the sculpture of Rodin, and the poetry of Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé, and other Symbolists. The poems of *Das Buch der Bilder* and of the two parts of the *Neue Gedichte* represent an increasingly richer alloy of these various elements, until finally what the poet observes of form and color is expressed in a thin, clear music which is certainly not the German of the philologists. After he finished the last of these books, a great artist began to grow dim; the powerful filament from which light with the minimum of heat

had emanated began to quiver forebodingly toward extinction.

In 1900 he went to Worpswede and lived for a time in the colony of painters. The following year he brought his wife Clara (nee Westhoff), one of Rodin's pupils, a sculptress whose masterpiece, their daughter Ruth, was produced here, while Rilke wrote his monograph on the Worpswede painters. There are many letters covering this period, from which the following excerpt must serve: "*Dank thun* will ich euch allen und eurem Lande und eurer Kunst" (letter to Otto Modersohn, one of the most distinguished painters of the group).

In 1902 he met Rodin, whose secretary he later became, and about whom he wrote a book. Hours of watching the sculptor at his work impressed on the poet a strong sense of the unity of a thing in bronze or stone. A painting can never possess the same vital existence as a plastic form standing alone in space; this viable reality is a quality of Rilke's best lyrics. That his association with Rodin influenced him greatly is shown by his many poems on statues and architecture: two on Apollo, three on the Buddha, the group on the cathedral at Chartres, other pieces on the Roman sarcophagi and fountain, and on the various buildings and squares of several cities. The last book ends with a poem on the stone scarabs and another done under stimulation of a statue of the Buddha,—although it is true that these, as finale, have transcended in the vastness of their conception any attempt to shut them in a half-ounce of carved pebble or even in a ton of bronze or black marble.

The works conceived from paintings or based on the art would make a no less impressive list: the Pietà, Saint Sebastian, the angels, Leda, a doge, a portrait of a lady, those of himself and his father, and in one poem, "Der Berg" (*Sechsunddreissigmal und hundertmal / hat der Maler jenen Berg geschrieben*), he seems to give a fillip at the art itself. In his many poems on flowers and animals there is profound evidence that he observed nature with eyes that took note of form, color, and texture until at last he does not so much describe the object as make the reader see it for himself, projecting it from his own mind, as on a screen. This power to make a headlock on the reader and force his gaze in one direction only, Rilke got from wrestling with the technique of the sculptors and painters.

Let me now indicate the third point through which the circle limiting his art during this period was drawn. In the pages of *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* will be found several references to various modern French poets; he made translations from Maurice de Guérin, André Gide, Paul Valéry, and Stéphane Mallarmé, and often the tone, approach, and feeling of his poems are reminiscent of the best of French poetry of the time.

Let the poet himself speak of his work:

Alas, those verses one writes in youth aren't much. One should wait and gather sweetness and light all his life, a long one if possible, and then maybe at the end he might write ten good lines. For poetry isn't, as people imagine, merely feelings (these come

soon enough); it is experiences. To write one line, a man ought to see many cities, people, and things; he must learn to know animals and the way of birds in the air, and how little flowers open in the morning. One must be able to think back the way to unknown places . . . and to partings long foreseen, to days of childhood . . . and to parents . . . to days on the sea . . . to nights of travel . . . and one must have memories of many nights of love, no two alike . . . and the screams of women in childbed . . . one must have sat by the dying, one must have sat by the dead in a room with open windows. . . . But it is not enough to have memories. One must be able to forget them and have vast patience until they come again . . . and when they become blood within us, and glances and gestures . . . then first it can happen that in a rare hour the first word of a verse may arise and come forth . . .

(*Malte*, pp. 25–27)

This condensation contains much of Rilke's theory of poetics; this is what he was thinking "up five flights of stairs, on a gray afternoon in Paris."

The most important poet in Germany since Goethe, let him be considered at this period of his life as a man who felt himself in exile, a man who spent his days in museums, galleries, studios, libraries, public parks and gardens; a wanderer of the streets by night, often even of the more sinister boulevards, a brooder on the many bridges over the Seine. He knew, as did Ovid of the *Tristia,* Tu Fu, Dante, and the later Heine, the bitterness of going up and down the stairs in the houses of others. He was a man of vast sympathy for the unfortunate and the disinherited: the blind, the cripples, the beggars, the suicides in the morgue, the harlots, the old maids, the animals in captivity—as an interpreter of animals he yields

place to none,—and he understood the mysteries of childhood and the delicate nuances in the feelings of women.

And now he sits in an armchair, covered with rusty green, with gray greasy hollows pressed by dozens of heads, breathing the fumes of a *tête de moineau* which requires a quarter-hour's stoking: this man who dines at creameries, sickened by the smell of urine and the gray nasty reek of potatoes in stale grease: here he sits and dreams of Apollo, cathedrals with beautiful rose windows, charming little gazelles, angels, elderly spinsters brooding futilely in libraries, aristocratic ladies playing the piano, and of the Buddha sitting calmly on the lotus of contemplation.

Much has been and must yet be written of Rilke's technique and form, but he has packed the best analysis of creative power in one sentence:

> Your blood drove you not to form nor to speak, but to reveal.
> (*Malte*, p. 100)

I believe it was Zeuxis who painted grapes so realistically that the finches flew down and pecked at the canvas. Here was the proof of a splendid technique! But there was a Chinese Taoist (his name eludes me) who painted a crane (*Grus chinensis*) on an inn wall which had been plastered with cow dung—the picture was done in payment of his wine bill—and then suddenly mounted on the bird's back and flew off into the blue, leaving the wall as blank and bare as the inkeeper's face! This was the creation of *form* to the *n*th power. And Rilke's method of working is almost the same; he creates

the image of the object, stroke by meticulous stroke, and infuses life into the result by sudden revelation, the exact essence of which is not to be pronged by any critical scalpel.

This faculty he possesses in common with all poets, but to a greater degree than most of them. Perhaps I can best demonstrate his peculiar application of it and at the same time insert an opening wedge for my pet thesis by dissecting four of his animal poems and pointing out his several methods of approach.

In "Die Gazelle" (p. 66), at the first word, "verzauberte," one is immediately rapt into a magic world in such sharp contrast to that suggested by the Latin name which subtitles the poem that the very shock whets the attention. If the rapidly succeeding images seem at first to be entirely unrelated to gazelle, once you have noted and accepted the premise that the poet—after the first direct address to the animal—is really talking over with himself the artistic problem of the impossibility of catching the live beauty of the creature in two rhymed words, the rest of it will go off quite naturally, and each figure of speech will lead the next on to the stage by the hand, as children do at a Sunday School cantata. To proceed: these rhymes come and go, like a signal winking off and on (not bad, that, for the alternate movements of the animal's legs). Not only are the metaphors of the lyre and the branches rising from the gazelle's forehead *just* evocative comparisons, when the musical curves of the horns are considered, but a similar pair may very well have served as the frame for the first lyre. And since the

branches suggest the laurel, another essential of the song god's equipment, Apollo might logically have been the recipient of this little monologue on the theory of poetry. This reference continues through the love songs with words as soft as rose petals. No one can complain about that; for the animal may have been standing conveniently before a rosebush—possibly the astute curators of the Botanical Gardens of Paris had provided an occasional floral nibble for the occupants. But mark how the petals fall on the tired eyelids of the reader: the poet himself with his eternal books, who suddenly conjures up (*verzauberte*) before the mind, which sees into the life of things, this creature of the imagination—not at all like Blake's symbolical tiger—through an odd and untranslatable pun. "Lauf" means both the leg of an animal and a gun barrel; this is merely a matter of language, and the poet didn't have to make it. But the metaphor is easily carried on by "charged but not fired," which makes the gazelle stand alertly on slender legs, "cocked" you might add, and ready for instant flight. Nor is this delicate suspension released by the final trope of the sonnet; for the poem ends with the seemingly completely foreign picture of a girl bathing in a forest pool. But then a girl, especially a German girl, might well have as much natural modesty as any nicely brought-up little gazelle! And there is a splendid suggestion of coyness in the reflection of the water on the half-averted face, with even a blush, maybe. Nevertheless, the reader is not to be diverted by the poet's caprice, and his mind instantly returns to the animal, posed against eternity, as real and beyond change

as the bison on the walls of the caves at Altamira. And all this without any photographic description of the object. There is none of the veterinary's exposition of the stallion of Adonis. It is done calmly. No stars throw down their spears. No God directs its solitary flight. But one has seen a gazelle that never was on sea or land: Rilke's private little antelope, which now becomes the reader's forever. The next time you see one, you will notice that you get the same effect as from a doubly exposed negative, and that the poet's image is imposed on, and probably completely invests, your own picture. If this explanation has grown slightly longer than the fourteen lines of the original, it shows, as by a chart, the poet's power of compression. His figures are not the result of heliographic mirrors flashing bright thoughts from distant hills; they are the hitherto unapprehended facets of the crystal of his thought which are suddenly lighted by a fluoroscope.

In "Der Panther" (p. 64) he is concerned with another type of study. From the first he is dealing with nothing but the animal. There is only one figure of speech in the poem. These sharp notes were written by one who had watched the compact, softly moving beasts many times. There is the unusual observation of the nictitating membrane, common to the cat family, as it moves across the eyeball. Other translators have rendered this "eyelid." I have interviewed three panthers about this, but have got no results. After the dance of strength around the circle of the cage, no other action seems possible. Then it is that Rilke gets inside the panther (as Jupiter in the swan in

the Leda poem) and looks out through the bars. Suddenly a picture—he does not say what, but one imagines the jungle forest and the pantheress—glides into the animal's eyes, flows through the tense body, and ceases in the heart. Mrs. M. D. Herter Norton calls this "one of the most dramatic moments in poetry." This animal is by no means Rilke's panther as the gazelle is his. This is Rilke *in* a panther, not fierce, but resigned with the sorrow of a dumb beast. Although it is not so hard to follow as the other animal poems, it probably represents a more complete embodiment of the poet's self in the object under consideration.

When he purposes a symbolic use of an animal, as in "Der Schwan" (p. 70), it is characteristic of the poet that he does not overdo his symbolism. He does full justice to the awkward movement of the bird on land, its clumsy descent into the water (which I have rendered by a literal compound of three words), and finally to the majestic natatory triumph with which the now very dignified bird moves—almost as if he (like the Queen of Spain) had no legs. Only as one thinks back does the full significance of the poem take effect: one has seen a pageant of life and death. The piece is not so pleasing as "The Gazelle," nor so moving as "The Panther," but it has its roots in a more universal human significance.

Still another treatment of a similar subject, this time more in the style of the painters, is found in "Die Flamingos" (p. 118). The luminous colors of Fragonard, one of the most delicate of the French painters, present the white, black, and fruit-red plumage above the rosy stilt-

legs standing in sedge and flags: the whole thing like a bright flowerbed just outside the window—so immediately does he bring the picture before the reader. Moreover, here are two delicate glimpses of the soft beauty of woman: "she lay there, flushed with sleep," and the evocative name of the loveliest of the Greek hetaerae, Phryne, who was the model for statues by Praxiteles and paintings by Apelles—a whole gallery of fine young women, all appropriately white and rosy, and standing, perhaps, also in water, like the flamingos. By an extension of association the whole festival of the birth of Aphrodite is called forth, as the most glamorous girl in Hellas rises beautifully from the white sea foam . . . and all the old men tremble. But the poet does not let one lose himself in artistic and erotic contemplation. Swiftly he hales the reader into a passionate and sympathetic participation in the futility of the caged birds which waken, stretch themselves, and soar through imaginary skies. The last three lines are master punches on a glass chin: a fine poetic shock. And there is nothing here about "only God can make a flamingo." There is, I believe, in all Rilke no reminiscence of the Landseer or the Rosa Bonheur school of faithful and sentimental animal painting. Only Whistler, or any one of the great Oriental artists a thousand years ago, or Monet could have painted these birds. Here the sensitive artist, lost in the love of living beauty, enriches it with images from the past, then, at the first note of suffering from his models, immediately becomes the seer vividly presenting the inner, deeper pain which is the essence of all beauty.