POVNG POET

RAINER MARIA RILKE

DIARIES
OF A
YOUNG
POET

||| TRANSLATED AND ANNOTATED BY | EDWARD SNOW AND MICHAEL WINKLER Copyright © 1942 by Insel Verlag Copyright © 1997 by Edward Snow and Michael Winkler Originally published in German as *Tagebücher aus der Frühzeit*

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DIARIES OF A YOUNG POET

RAINER MARIA RILKE

In translations by M. D. HERTER NORTON
Letters to a Young Poet
Sonnets to Orpheus
Wartime Letters to Rainer Maria Rilke
Translations from the Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke
The Lay of the Love and Death of Cornet Christopher Rilke
The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge
Stories of God

Translated by Stephen Spender and J. B. Leishman Duino Elegies

Translated by Jane Bannard Greene and M. D. Herter Norton Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke
Volumne One, 1892–1910 Volume Two, 1910–1926

Translated by DAVID YOUNG Duino Elegies

In Various Translations
Rilke on Love and Other Difficulties
Translations and Considerations of Rainer Maria Rilke
Compiled by JOHN J. L. MOOD

INTRODUCTION |

BETWEEN 15 APRIL 1898 AND 22 DECEMBER 1900 Rainer Maria Rilke wrote three diaries that span a crucial period in his artistic growth. At the beginning of this phase the young poet had perfected, if not yet exhausted, the rhetorical techniques and mannerisms of his early, impressionistic style. His verse was still prone to the gossamer and was given more to a flirtation than a sustained artistic engagement with the exquisite and the delicate. Thus it often enough veiled its extraordinary sensitivity to nuances of mood and perception in an ethereality that could easily slide into preciosity and tended to sacrifice simplicity and clarity of purpose to this very perfection of a method. But Rilke had come to realize only too well that he needed to constrain his busy games of make-believe and learn how to control his ingenious lyricism. This made it necessary, most of all, to free himself from the rapturous self-indulgence that could spin mellifluous lines and intricate rhymes with prolific ease. He had to submit himself to the kind of self-discipline that comes with the ascetic solitude of regular, arduous work.

Rilke's three early diaries reflect this search for a language that might capture the specificity of things natural and crafted and at the same time convey their intrinsic spirituality. They chronicle, in other words, the emergence of the "sachliche Sagen," the objective and visually precise language that will come to characterize his "poetry of things." At the same time they are very different books. Each has a distinct rhetorical style and a persuasive purpose of its own. Yet they complement each other, even as they confound our expectation that they might reveal intimate details from the poet's daily affairs. Rilke's diaries do maintain a certain chronological flow, albeit one with breaks and longer interruptions, but they are not directly the immediate account of a specific time; it is not their intent to record the minutiae of day-to-day life. For this reason, they have not become identified by their chronology. Rather, they are usually titled after three places where Rilke lived and, at least for a time, felt at home: Florence (and the Tuscan countryside), the village of Schmargendorf just outside of Berlin, and Worpswede, an artists' colony in the moors near Bremen.

Yet each of these places also marks a significant turning point, one that may be identified by a personal crisis to which Rilke responded, as he was wont to do throughout his life, with a sudden flight. These precipitous departures (in two instances immediately preceded by rapturous expressions of at-homeness) are impossible to reduce to a single cause. This is especially true of his sudden decision to leave Florence for Viareggio. The justification he gives for this unsettling retreat—his disgust with riotous youths throwing stones into the Loggia dei Lanzi-surely hides more than it explains and leaves unarticulated (in a diary of all places) what must have been a painful blow to his sense of self-worth as a poet. His abrupt departure for Worpswede (halfway through the Schmargendorf Diary) was no doubt motivated in part by tensions in his relationship with Lou Andreas-Salomé that had intensified toward the end of their trip to Russia, and his equally headlong return to Schmargendorf (halfway through the Worpswede Diary) must have had something to do with the news of Paula Becker's secret engagement to her teacher and their mutual friend, Otto Modersohn. These spontaneous moves signal reversals and ruptures in Rilke's private affairs that have shaped the particular character of these three diaries. But the precise manner in which the concatenation of impulses and reasons worked as a motivating force remains elusive and perhaps was not clear even to the diarist himself.

That we should have "diaries" from Rilke in any form is on first

consideration surprising. Rilke was as averse to publishing anything autobiographical as he was to exposing the fragility of his mental constitution in a confessional *poésie du coeur*. He was more likely to seek a sense of calm maturity, which he considered the disposition necessary for beginning a diary, by honing his talent for precise observation and visually vivid depiction. He also had become aware of how strongly his writing needed to reach a responsive companion. This dialogic urge makes its presence felt more as an animating, compulsive energy than as an argumentative voice with fixed convictions. It is a significant and underappreciated aspect of his art. Perhaps even more openly than in his letters, its prevalence is evident in the rhetorical structure of these other-oriented diaries.

The person to stimulate this kind of discursive sociability in Rilke was a woman nearly fifteen years his senior, Lou Andreas-Salomé. When Rilke met her she was already an accomplished writer with a considerable reputation that derived from perceptive books on Ibsen and Nietzsche, from a variety of essays on contemporary issues, and from her fictional work, much of it an "autobiographical" exploration of female psychology.² Rilke approached her with subtle determination, first by sending her poems anonymously, then with an epistolary masterpiece of seductive insinuation (dated 13 March 1897) that speaks of their shared interest in the workings of religious creativity. When they met, on 12 May 1897, she was thirty-six, he, twenty-two. They were attracted to each other at first sight, discreetly became lovers, and remained close companions for nearly three years. Their attachment survived Rilke's marriage to Clara Westhoff and endured as an ever deepening friendship for the rest of their lives. It was a liaison that also yielded what is perhaps Rilke's single most important correspondence.

It was under Lou's tutelage that René became the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. She made him shed the eccentricities of the young genius, and curtail his propensity for turning everything about and around his own person into quickly improvised verse. Her own mental regimen included keeping a diary, as an incentive to formulate impressions and remembrances accurately and as a way of communicating with a soul mate during and after a temporary separation. She had recorded, for example, her conversations with Nietzsche in

1882 in a journal written specifically for her friend Paul Rée, and unlike Rilke, she wrote a diary of their travels through Russia during July 1900.

When she sent Rilke off to Florence in April 1898—ostensibly so that he might experience on his own, directly and differently, what his assiduous studies of Italian art had prepared him to see—it was with the understanding that he would bring her back a diary. It is impossible to say, however, exactly what kind of a diary she encouraged, or perhaps even commissioned, Rilke to write. Was it to be a specific, coherently inclusive description of how the city's historical ambience and its prominent as well as ubiquitous works of art affected him? A refined travelogue that would show Rilke's control over a bewildering variety of impressions? Did she also expect a penetrating account of his social experiences, especially those with connoisseurs of art, that might challenge and sharpen his own perceptions? Was it to be a self-analytical record, a probing of his responses to conflicting stimuli and unique encounters for the purpose of clarifying the complex interaction of his senses and psyche with an objective reality that is constantly in flux? We are left with little more than speculations. But it is very likely that Rilke had to overcome, at least initially, strong misgivings about the (conventional) diary as a literary genre, that he had doubts, at least, about the apparent randomness of its material and about the unpolished spontaneity of its style.3

It is certain, however, that Rilke arrived in Florence both with a burden of learned ballast and with the need to find his own ambitions for contemporary poetry, and indeed for culture, confirmed in the art of the early Renaissance. He felt so closely akin to its "festiveness" and to its "springtime" splendor, to the promise of its exuberant beauty, that he soon dropped the protective guise of the shy initiate and gave in to his desire to absorb as much aesthetic pleasure as he could. In his diaristic ruminations and musings on art he radiates enthusiastic convictions or speculations, some with the self-evident falsity of aphoristic generalizations, a few with the oracular overbearingness and convolution of prophetic or vatic pronouncements, and not a small number of them taken from current discussions and sharpened with his own nuances.

But it is less instructive to trace the provenance of these notions

than to observe how skillful Rilke can already be in his shaping of an authentic voice, one that does not become so private and egotistically esoteric (or sublime) as to lose its ability to persuade. It is equally revealing to notice how much spontaneous delight Rilke took in visual impressions, in paintings and sculpture and unusual places, how intensely he pays attention to gesture and intonation, how flashes of characterization build up a general atmosphere, how precisely he captures an instance and seizes its emotional tenor. His imagination was not sparked by what he might learn from retracing the processes of history. Great personages fascinated him, but he found little of interest in the evolution and passing of time, which he saw only as decline and loss.

But it comes as a surprise nonetheless that (modern) Florence soon overwhelmed Rilke and even turned into a labyrinthine threat from which he had to escape before he could fully enjoy and take in anew what he had come to savor with such avid intensity. Whatever may have been his reasons, Rilke departed much earlier than he had planned. And if he did not flee in a panic, then certainly it was at least with the need to regain his composure. Viareggio, an elegant resort up the coast a short distance from Florence but virtually deserted in May, offered him the respite of solitude and of communion with a tranquil nature.

Rilke must have anticipated a joyful reunion with Lou Andreas-Salomé. Yet their meeting, in the Baltic sea resort of Zoppot, turned into a disappointment. At least so the ambivalent apologia suggests that Rilke added to his Tuscan reflections on 6 July 1898. It is a jarringly saddened—and powerfully written—coda to so confident a profession of his accomplishment and maturity, which he had hoped would find appreciative acceptance. There is no clear indication why and how Lou failed to satisfy his expectations for her as the single intimate reader of his book. But her reaction, whatever the justification or misunderstanding behind it, must have been so profoundly disturbing that Rilke could only respond with a lamentful self-vindication that leaves much unsaid and the cause for his unhappiness obscure.

We also have no external information that would explain Rilke's motivation to start a second diary once he was back in Schmargendorf. Did Lou encourage him to continue, with new emphases and in a different style? Even though she is addressed at the second diary's outset, she is no longer the center of its attention and the personal confidant of its concerns; and thus she fades more and more as its addressee. It may well be that Rilke also wrote his second diary specifically for Lou. But this new book, which contains material written in Schmargendorf and in Worpswede, has a different purpose than the Tuscan apothegms and impressions. The Schmargendorf Diary reflects Rilke's attempt to transform his experiences and feelings, both new themes or sensations and recurring obsessions, into stories, to change the inward news of emotions and imaginings into sustained narratives. After a transitional introduction, we have, then, first a sequence of novellas and tales, some fully developed and poignant, one brilliantly shocking, others little more than fleeting episodes. With the shift to Worpswede, this series of independent single works gives way to the personal stories he writes down as the communal remembrances that his new friends have told him about each other. These stories, in turn, blend in with Rilke's own encounters, conversations, infatuations, and intensely visual "Worpswedean" impressions. Recollections of things done, descriptions of new experiences, and the evocation of a remarkably variegated nature alternate and work together to create an interplay of voices and a sociable atmosphere that imbues the words said and the things told with an abiding intensity of presence. This immediacy of experience had to have been felt as life, perhaps daily life, before its core could be chiseled further into the order of poems.

The Worpswede Diary captures this refinement of communal narration into lyrical verse, its predominant mode of expression. It has a slower, more private, and self-absorbed momentum, a stronger involvement with the writer's inner life. There is also a relaxation both of narrative and of reflective intensity, at times almost a casual attitude with its disregard of firm structure. The first impression is one of fragmentary, even disjointed arbitrariness. But there is also an underlying assurance—or need to believe—that everyday occurrences and things may yield a meaningful purpose, that they can embody a significance within and beyond their outward presence. A waterwand that fails in its practical purpose (p. 201) becomes a thing with

its "potential" still inside it, and thus can be saved up for some future Rilkean expedition. At present, though, these "hours when I am full of images" (p. 241) are his most satisfying time. It is only to be expected, therefore, that many of the Worpswede poems are "occasional" pieces actuated by something personal and grounded in particular incidents.

Rilke acknowledged that he had learned how to observe the phenomena of nature, the "things" all around him, much more perspicaciously when he followed the guidance of two young artists especially, who had become his favorite companions and the twin objects of his infatuation in Worpswede: the sculptor Clara Westhoff and the painter Paula Becker. They taught him to recognize, even in apparently so simple, stark, and almost primitive a landscape as that of the moors, the ubiquity of specific images, of Bilder as the stuff from which paintings and sculpture are made. They also made him aware that he should no longer treat nature as little more than an extension of or setting for his own feelings. It is true that Rilke was not untouched by the neoromantic passion for nature as an élan vital, even though he never wrote what may conventionally be called "nature poems." Yet in Worpswede he came to appreciate a "selfless" participation in nature, one that heightened the daily alertness and attentiveness of his senses turned outward. He was amazed at his own increasing ability both to look unsparingly into his own self and to "look away from himself" and not to fear that he was constantly being watched by his own or someone else's observing eyes.

It is a quality of self-understanding and of objective perception, keen in its attention to details and alert to their symbolical relevance for wider contexts, that had earlier attracted Rilke to the works of Jens Peter Jacobsen. What impressed him especially was the elegant precision with which this Danish writer evoked a finely nuanced complexity in human behavior and in a social environment. When he himself was beginning to trust in his ability to perceive "things" the way a painter and a sculptor does, he was able to see in Rodin's work an altogether new way of structuring space and arranging the images of human interaction. Rilke's reflections in the last two diaries on Rodin's sculpture legitimate his claim—far more convincingly than his concluding admiration for Gerhart Hauptmann's rather mediocre

play about the painter Michael Kramer—that his stay in Worpswede had developed from a diverting episode into an important apprenticeship time—a time that prepared him for Paris and made possible the *New Poems* as well as *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*.

Rilke wrote these diaries of his early years in dialogue with a beloved mentor. They were not intended for publication, but they are clearly a part of his poetic oeuvre. He must have valued especially the Florence diary, since he had it bound—we do not know exactly when—in white patent leather embossed with the city's heraldic lily. His daughter Ruth and her husband Carl Sieber first edited and published the three diaries in 1942 as Tagebücher aus der Frühzeit (Diaries from the early years). This 1942 edition, reprinted without textual emendations in 1973, makes no claims to being a work of philological scholarship. But it is at present the only accessible text. 4 We have followed it even where, on occasion, there is reason to doubt its accuracy. Misprints and obvious errors have been corrected without comment, along with Rilke's faulty spelling of non-German names. For greater ease and clarity we have placed all dates at the beginning of the respective entry. And "Diaries of a Young Poet," it should be emphasized, is an editorial invention, our own title for this English translation of Rilke's three untitled books.

Our translation of the diaries seeks to stay as close to the stylistic individuality of the original as the different structure and rhetorical traditions of English will accomodate. We have tried to present a "congenial" version. Thus we interfere as little as possible with Rilke's language, i.e., with a personal literary idiom that can seem obtuse, portentously vague, or fussy and pretentious, and then a moment later achieve a delicateness, clarity, and imaginative vigor, a focused precision, a subtle variability of expressive strategies, and a richness of suggestive nuances that often enough defy attempts to find a complementary equivalent in English. During his early years, the poet Rilke never felt the attractions of experimental or radically innovative writing of the kind the Expressionist generation practiced. In that sense he was conservative. But he expanded the compass of poetic German to its very limits by turning the cadences and se-

mantic possibilities of a highly refined conversational mode of writing into art.

The Diaries provides more than early glimpses of this style. To find equivalents for his unobtrusive neologisms, for his tight as well as dense abstractions, for his shifts in rhythm, timing, and emphasis, for the wide range of his sound effects, for the synaesthetic coloring of his vocabulary—all this presents a constant challenge to the translator, and can easily turn into a provocation to reinvent English in Rilkean terms.

This is especially true of Rilke's verse. The prosodic ease and agility of his poems slip away from any attempt to force them into matching forms in English. His formal dexterity, the fluid weave of his images, and his unmistakable tone-languid and yet fully alert to its own tensions—at times display their ingenuity too freely, to the detriment of his poetry as art rather than skillful show. But they do entice the translator to enter into their carefully choreographed dance with the confidence of fascinated innocence, until he falters with clumsy turns and distracting flourishes, once and again, and soon finds himself out of step altogether. We have found it advisable, therefore, to let the exact cast of Rilke's meanings, variable as they are with each new context, guide the translation, inevitably at the expense of his rich sound and rhymes. Rilke was, after all, the only one of his readers resourceful enough to reproduce Rilke's style successfully.

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NOTES

1. The diary does not mention a chance meeting in the Boboli Gardens with the severely self-disciplined poet Stefan George (1868–1933), the mentor of a carefully chosen circle of artists and, since 1892, the editor of a privately printed journal, *Blätter für die Kunst*, to which Rilke had offered contributions. But in a letter to Friedrich Oppeln-Bronikowski, dated 29 May 1907, Rilke recalls, still with obvious discomfort, how George reproached him for having published too much poetry prematurely, without discriminating between his good and his bad verse, and how he (Rilke) could only meekly assent to the older poet's criticism. The occasion must have been a traumatic one for the insecure young poet.

- 2. For a more elaborate account of Lou Andreas-Salomé's life and accomplishments, see the biographical sketch (pp. 277–79) that prefaces the notes to the Florence Diary. Following this introduction there is also a detailed chronology of Lou's relationship with Rilke during the period the diaries span.
- 3. As late as 1913, in a conversation with Stefan Zweig, Rilke mentions how difficult he still finds it, even in a letter, to write with a visual objectivity ("gegenständlich") equal to his perception of things. He goes on to say that he therefore avoids diaries, and instead records key moments and encounters in small notebooks he carries with him wherever he goes. (See Stefan Zweig, *Tagebücher*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1984, p. 54.)
- 4. Rilke's diaries were not included in his *Sämtliche Werke* (1955–66), edited by Ernst Zinn, nor in the annotated edition in four volumes of 1996. The original manuscripts are kept at the Biblioteka Jagiellonska in Cracow (Poland) and are not available even for scholarly work.

A CHRONOLOGY

1897

APRIL: Rilke (age twenty-two), in Munich since September 1896 as a "student of philosophy," returns from a trip to Arco (near Lake Garda in the southern Tyrol), Venice, Meran, and Konstanz; later in the month Lou Andreas-Salomé (age thirty-six) arrives in Munich from her home in Schmargendorf.

12 MAY: RMR is introduced to LAS and her close friend Frieda von Bülow (1873–1934), a novelist and companion of Carl Peters, the highly controversial propagandist for German colonization in East Africa, where Frieda managed a plantation. Their meeting takes place at the home of the novelist Jakob Wassermann (1873–1934). RMR is immediately infatuated, and the next day he writes his first letter to LAS, in which he tells her of the profound effect her essay "Jesus der Jude" (Jesus the Jew) in the April 1896 issue of *Neue Deutsche Rundschau* had made on him.

17 MAY: RMR and LAS arrange to meet again, at which time he reads to her three poems from his "like-minded" work in progress, *Visions of Christ.* He inscribes a poem ("Das log das Mittelalter") into a copy of his collection *Traumgekrönt* (1896) and presents it to

her with the dedication "To Frau Lou Andreas-Salomé with gratitude that I was allowed to meet her!"

26 MAY: RMR writes the first of some one hundred love poems to LAS. He would collect them in a manuscript *Dir zur Feier* (In celebration of you) but then refrain from publishing them at her request.

31 MAY: RMR and LAS make a two-day excursion to the village of Wolfratshausen south of Munich near Lake Starnberg in search of a retreat near the mountains for a longer sojourn. During this trip they almost certainly become lovers.

14 JUNE: LAS and F. von Bülow move to Wolfratshausen; RMR first lives in nearby Dorfen before he joins them at the "Lutzhäuser" and, toward the end of July, moves with them to a different house they call "Loufried." The Munich architect August Endell is a frequent visitor. During this "bohemian" period of rustic simplicity RMR, at LAS's urging, changes his first name from "René" to "Rainer." When Friedrich Carl Andreas, LAS's husband since 1887 and a lecturer at the Institute for Oriental Languages in Berlin, joins them (23 July–29 August), RMR leaves for Munich but returns after a week's absence on 1 August. He begins to study Italian Renaissance art.

1 OCTOBER: LAS returns to Berlin, accompanied by RMR who takes up residence there (Berlin-Wilmersdorf, Im Rheingau 8). He enrolls in art history courses at the university, studies Italian, and makes the acquaintance of various poets and writers, among them Stefan George, Carl Hauptmann, and Richard Dehmel. He continues to write poems, novellas, and short plays.

1898

FEBRUARY—MARCH: RMR and LAS decide he should visit Florence to study Renaissance art firsthand. LAS is to join him there later after she sees to family affairs. (Some biographers speculate that LAS arranged this separation in order to secretly terminate a pregnancy.) They plan the trip elaborately together, and LAS instructs RMR to keep a diary, which she will read on their reunion.