Duinesian Elegies

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FOREWORD

My study of the Duineser Elegien began with a seminar under Professor Robert T. Clarke, Jr. at the University of Texas, continued through a year of study under Professor Steffen Steffensen at the University of Copenhagen, and produced my dissertation, “Existentialist Thought in the Works of Rainer Maria Rilke” (University of Texas, 1958), which was completed under the supervision of Professor Helmut Rehder. Although I long have been aware of the need for a better translation of the Elegies, I hesitated to attempt a translation myself, for I knew that I could not do justice to the great beauty of the original. Nevertheless, like Malte in Rilke’s novel, Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge, I found that this was a task which had to be undertaken. When the translation was completed, it was obvious that a good interpretation was needed to accompany it since the only extensive critical treatment of the Elegies available in English is Rilke’s Duino Elegies: An Interpretation (1961), a translation of Rainer Maria Rilkes Deutung des Daseins by Romano Guardini. It also became clear that some of Rilke’s letters relating to the Elegies were needed to complete this volume.

An examination of the translations now in print has confirmed my general impression of need for a new one. Since the completion of my own rendering a version by Stephen Garmey and Jay Wilson has appeared. Of the three translations presently in print this one was lyrically the most promising despite some errors resulting from inadequate knowledge of the German language and others caused by insufficient understanding of Rilke’s thought. These authors have relied on the Spender–Leishman translation in their resolution of the major problems of translation for which I have attempted to find new solutions.

The remaining translations are by English writers and thus are attuned to the British more than to the American idiom and style. The Spender–Leishman translation, which appeared in 1939, is a great achievement. It has made the Elegies available in English for many years while there was no other adequate edition. Although it is still the best known and most widely used English version of the Elegies, major research on the Elegies has appeared since that time which contributes to a more complete understanding of them than was possible in 1939.

Of the existing translations the rhythmic version by C. F. MacIntyre is the most accurate. As a scholar of German literature, MacIntyre was familiar
with the important critical literature, and his understanding of the Elegies is mirrored in his translation. In contrast to MacIntyre, I opted for freedom with regard to rhythmic patterns, and thus I have greater latitude in choice of words while retaining a lyrical quality.

Translation must grow from understanding of a work beyond mere comprehension of language. My own work with Rilke has been existentially oriented with the view of man as an imperfect, limited being necessarily imprisoned in his own world as a central and basic concept. These limitations fragment man’s view of the world, for from his position within the whole he never can view totality as an object, a whole. He is caught between the creature world with an innate harmony which he himself has lost and his intuitive awareness of the angel world of the absolute—an awareness which is painful because he can only sense but never know it. Given these limitations, man must question the meaning of human life, a meaning which Rilke ultimately finds in man’s position in the middle. Through the inner world of his heart man transforms physical reality into an intangible form which the angel can comprehend, while at the same time he rescues transitory reality into the permanence of the angel world. From his position in the middle he relates to each other these two worlds, which otherwise would remain separate; in this manner he acquires his unique responsibility, meaning, and task within the universe as a function of his singular nature. The elegies thus are tightly structured around a pattern of separation imposed upon man by the fact of his corporeity, a separation which is not only a painful limitation but also the source of his hope and significance. Life, together with its ultimate limitation of death, can be affirmed as a necessary and meaningful state within a meaningful whole wherein man does not perish but undergoes transformation.

In making this translation I have considered meaning—even to the point of trying to retain layers of meaning—the highest value. Beyond ascertaining meaning, I have tried to formulate it in clear, poetically cadenced English in an effort to capture a shadow of the original beauty. I have made no effort to retain the original meter, and where the original meter is preserved, it happens by chance. I have sought to translate not merely the words of the elegies, but also their essence—to re-create this work in good, clear English. Basically untranslatable expressions have been stated as equivalent thoughts rather than words, and certain choices had to be made. Although some readers will disagree with my choices, they were made with careful deliberation and represent the best decisions that I could reach.

During the years of my concern with Rilke’s works I have received help
and encouragement from many sources. The late Professor Robert T. Clarke’s seminar on Rilke at the University of Texas in 1948 was responsible for my decision to write my dissertation on Rilke, and subsequent study with Professor Steffen Steffensen and Professor Helmut Rehder developed the critical judgment necessary for scholarly endeavor. I am especially grateful to Professor Robert M. Browning of Hamilton College for his many valuable suggestions concerning stylistic nuances, interpretation, and occasional errors, for they greatly improved the accuracy and poetic quality of the translation. My colleague, Professor Harvey I. Dunkle, has been very helpful in solving some of the most difficult linguistic problems, and Professor Allan W. Anderson has suggested improvements in philosophical terminology in the commentary. Professor Ernest Wolf and Professor Guenther C. Rimbach read portions of the manuscript and provided me with early encouragement. Professor Mary Redding assisted me with writing the foreword, the most difficult portion of this work to formulate. Professor Suzanne Henig gave my work its first public exposure by publishing selections from the translation in the first issue of the Virginia Woolf Quarterly (Fall 1972). Our departmental secretaries, Mrs. Viola M. Beatty and Miss Alice J. Clary, have contributed countless hours of typing. To all who have given me help and encouragement I gratefully acknowledge my indebtedness. Most of all I am grateful to Rainer Maria Rilke for giving the world this incomparably beautiful work which has been my companion for so many years.

W. W. Norton & Co. has graciously granted permission for use of the German text from Rilke’s Sämtliche Werke I (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1955). Without the German text this edition of my translation would have been hopelessly incomplete since no translation can adequately replace the original. Norton’s permission is most gratefully acknowledged. The permission of Insel Verlag to publish the translations of the three letters in the appendices makes their inclusion possible and is acknowledged with pleasure.

Special acknowledgment is due Professor Karl Hittmann of Salzburg, Austria, for permission to use his original block print of the angel in this edition. Professor Hittmann, a graduate of the Vienna Art Academy, is a professional artist whose work I have long admired. In his design rays form an angel of light with circles conveying a sense of the cosmic. The abstractness of the artist’s design provides a visual parallel to the abstractness of the Rilke angel.

Elaine E. Boney 30 May 1974
The second edition of this volume differs from the first only in the correction of typographical errors and the inclusion of some minor improvements in the translation.

Elaine E. Boney

30 September 1976