Duinesian Elegies
Rilke, Rainer Maria , Boney, Elaine E.

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

Rilke, Rainer Maria and Elaine E. Boney.
Duinesian Elegies.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/75857

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2630666
THE FIRST ELEGY

The first elegy was composed in January 1912 in Castle Duino.6 It opens with the figure of the angel, which has received extensive critical treatment. Rilke himself described the nature of the angel in a letter to Witold Hulewicz who translated the Elegies into Polish:

The “angel” of the Elegies has nothing to do with the angel of the Christian heaven (more nearly with the angel figures of Islam) . . . The angel of the Elegies is that creation in which the transformation of the visible world into invisibility which we carry out appears already completed. For the angel of the Elegies all earlier towers and bridges are existing, because they long have been invisible, and the still standing towers and bridges of our existence are already invisible, although (for us) still physically present. The angel of the Elegies is that being which stands for the idea of recognizing a higher order of reality in invisibility.7

The angel belongs to the absolute world of beauty, perfection, and eternity. This realm of pure noncorporeal being is separated from the human world of physical reality by a chasm unbridgeable for man and angel alike. Although man intuitively senses the existence of this other realm and longs for it, the angel cannot hear his cry, for the angel can perceive only that which belongs to his own absolute world. Furthermore, there is no place in our ordinary reality for the angel; if he were to enter our world, he would destroy it, for he is not at home in it. Thus the angel which our longing pictures as beauty becomes awesome or terrible, because he is and must remain incomprehensible. Although beauty per se is an absolute concept, we perceive it in our world as a function of physical reality. Thus we are enabled to sense in the idea the existence of a pure absolute beyond our awareness of beauty in reality, yet the experience remains painful because we can never know beauty perfectly.8 For man the universe remains insurmountably sundered because his very existence as a living creature imprisoned within his existing body which he can escape only in death prevents him from knowing directly the intangible perfection of the other world of the angel.

6Rainer Maria Rilke, Sämtliche Werke (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1955), I, 873. All dates of composition are taken from this source.
7Rilke, Briefe, II, 484. More of this letter is quoted in Appendix A, pp. 133–36.
Recognition of the separation of these two realms means that man must renounce the temptation to call the angel, to lure him into the human world where he does not belong. There are areas of life where each individual must find his own answers—his relationship to the angel, to his own inner self, and to his world. These relationships are acquired by experience; they are not factual knowledge and therefore cannot be transmitted. In these areas neither man nor the angels can help or be of use to us. Each person must make his own life; he cannot escape that responsibility by transferring it to others such as the family or society or to some distant heavenly figure such as the angel.

The animals represent for Rilke a view of the world as unbounded unity in contrast to man’s view of it as discrete. They sense that they are different, that man is insecure within his physical reality which he tries to arrange, master, and own, and on which he attempts to impose his concept of order. The animals who are innately one with the world—hence their view of it as a unity—sense that in trying to possess the world as object, man has lost his secure position within reality without acquiring the ability to escape from his imprisonment within it. What then is left for man? Is anything securely his? There remains only his inner reality, only that which has been transformed into inner permanence—some repeatedly seen view such as a tree or some action which through continually repeated use has become part of us as habit. Nothing except what has become an integral part of our enduring inner being can belong securely to us.

For Rilke, lovers represent man’s most successful attempt to escape himself—to transcend his limitations. This is symbolized by the wind of outer space which tears at our faces in the night. At night we do not see so clearly as in the day; we are more nearly one with our world. Because we cannot see where it ends, it is vaster. We are more open to the other world of the angel, closer to it, and it is closer to us. It feeds on our faces and forces upon us the painfully troublesome task of understanding ourselves and our universe. Night is also the time for lovers, and Rilke inquires if the task of understanding is easier for them. His answer is negative. Even they cannot escape from themselves, and even if they could, the other would still block the view. They are no more securely at home in this world than everyone else. The distance from one human being to another—even the beloved—is insurmountable. Each embrace remains empty since the individual cannot find himself in another. When we truly comprehend this, we are again
COMMENTARY: *The First Elegy*

confronted with the question of what is left for us, what our task and our meaning are, and once more we are referred to inner reality. The past, beauty and art in the symbol of the violin, and the things of our world need us. It is our responsibility to perceive and transform them into enduring form within us. But we are distracted continually from this basic task by constantly changing cares, needs, and desires, by short-range goals and ties to others. Rilke sometimes summarizes all these distractions with one word—destiny.

Although one person cannot shelter or protect another nor find shelter in another even in the most intense love, love remains one of the most positive actions man can perform. This positive aspect is the act of love itself, not that one loves this or that object, but that one *loves*. The significance then is for the one who loves—the giver, not for the one who is loved—a passive receiver. The loss of a loved one through either death or desertion may thus have the positive aspect of freeing love from an object with corresponding transformation into an absolute. For Rilke this is the significance of the Italian poetess, Gaspara Stampa (1523–1554), who captured her love in poetry of genuine passion and expressive power. In a letter to Annette Kolb dated 23 January 1912, he wrote that he considered three women, Gaspara Stampa, Louize Labé, and Marianna Alcoforado, the most nearly perfect examples of unrequited love as a positive force. It is significant that all three examples of such near-perfect love are women, for Rilke believed that woman was capable of loving more freely and less demandingly than man. The acceptance of such lovers back into nature signifies the value of their act. In transforming their love into an absolute, it became a springboard for self-transcendence wherein they overcame their separation from the world and reached a state of harmonious oneness with nature. Thus their lives, like the lives of heroes, mirror in their unity of purpose the harmonious perfection of the universe. The impetus of such love does for life what the bowstring does for the arrow: it frees us from the limitations of the here and now for the absolute world of the angel. In transcending ourselves, we become more than ourselves, as the arrow becomes more than itself in flight.

The beginning of the next section, “voices, voices,” signifies a major change in theme. We are given the task of listening as saints formerly

---

COMMENTARY: The First Elegy

listened to the voice of God, so completely that the world of reality fell away and they were aware of God's voice alone. But their world is no longer ours, and modern man could not endure God's voice. We hear "das Wehende," an indefinable wafting, afflatus, or the breath of God if Christian terminology were possible here, something which exists, yet has no form. It stands for our responsibility to rescue the vanishing object world into our own enduring inner being. This wafting carries a message of silence. Such silence is not the absence of sound; it stands for perfect harmony. In the Sonnets to Orpheus man hears or listens to the song of Orpheus. The accoustical level of noise is comparable to the finite world of man in the Elegies. The absolute world of the angel corresponds to the accoustical form of harmony, and ultimate harmony is silence. Silence therefore signifies a view of the universe as totality where life and death are merely parts of a whole as the child sees it, a view which man senses but can know perfectly only in death. Santa Maria Formosa is a small church in Venice which Rilke visited with Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe. The tablet is thought to be one with a Latin inscription located near the right side altar.10

Such silence speaks of the relationship between life and death. What meaning does the death of a young person or a child hold for us? We are accustomed to say that it is unfortunate, that their life still lay before them. Rilke tells us that this is incorrect, that we do them an injustice. Our view from the life side of totality is distorted; and in trying to hold back those who die by viewing them as still one of us, we hinder them, limit their freedom. From the death side of totality their view is different. The physical reality of earth is no longer significant and the customs they learned there are useless. Since they are now in the angel's world of eternity, time with its emphasis on the future and on duration falls away, as would the human connotation of good fortune and long life for roses.11 In this other realm the child is perfectly free, no longer subject to having his life made for him by others—by family, relatives, and all those who infringe on his life by trying to shape it in their image. Even his name, his mark of earthly uniqueness, falls away. The dead have no wishes, for they have no future and no needs.

10 Romano Guardini, Rainer Maria Rilkes Deutung des Daseins (Munich: Kösel, 1953), pp. 61–62.
11 Jacob Steiner, Rilkes Duineser Elegien (Bern and Munich: Francke, 1962), pp. 31–32.
COMMENTARY: The First Elegy

All the things of this world have no meaning in the other realm where they only flap loosely and uselessly. Only man separates the living from the dead; the angel sees the dead as part of the stream of eternity. In both the English translation and the German original the reference to “those of all ages” means young and old and those who have lived throughout the existence of the human race.

Rilke views the universe as dynamic, not static. The realm of the dead is filled with dynamic change, just as our own world is. Only the total configuration remains sustained by the dynamic change within. As in Goethe’s heaven in Faust, the dead of the Elegies continue to change, adapting gradually to their new condition. The living alone distinguish sharply between the living and the dead; in viewing the world as a harmonious unity, the angel is unaware of the chasm which for us divides the universe.

In the end those who die young do not need us; our world no longer has any meaning for them. It is we who need them.12 We need their message that life and death are integrated parts of a great totality, a message of comfort and help for us.

The theme of life and death as a harmonious unity and the theme of accoustical or musical harmony are linked in the legend of Linos which closes this elegy. There are several legends concerning Linos, and in all of them he is linked with Apollo, the god of song. According to some legends he was either the brother or son of Apollo, according to others he was killed by Apollo who was jealous of his musical talent. In all of the legends he was musically talented and died young, a combination which Rilke found significant. He used it to close this elegy as a symbol demonstrating that man’s ultimate limitation, death, is part of a harmonious totality where it loses the sharp finality which it customarily holds for man.

The first elegy presents all the major themes of the entire cycle. It inquires about the nature of man, the angel, and the world, and about man’s relationship to himself, to the transcendental realm of the angel, and to his own world. Love is presented as man’s springboard for self-transcendence. Lovers and heroes signify in their unity of purpose a view of the cosmos as undivided whole. We alone are separated from our surrounding world; for the animal, the child, and the angel life has never lost its primal unity. These symbols will continue to appear in the elegies, pointing the way to a view of our own world as coordinated with the absolute world of the angel in a meaningful universe.

12Buddeberg, p. 19.