Duinesian Elegies

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THE SECOND ELEGY

The second elegy was written at Castle Duino in January and February 1912. It focuses on the nature of the angel, the nature of man and the relationship between them.\(^\text{13}\) The angels, which open this elegy, are described as "near fatal birds of the soul," calling to mind the traditional pictures of them as winged creatures. The description overlaps the traditional view of the angels as heavenly beings and thus creatures of the soul and Rilke’s own complex symbol of the bird as belonging to both the world of man as a living thing and to the realm of the angel as a creature of air and space and in its oneness with its surroundings.\(^\text{14}\) The deadliness or menace which the angel represents for our human world recalls the description of the angel in the first elegy. The angel with his celestial perfection is unaware of our world of material reality and would destroy it if he tried to enter it. This means that Rilke’s angel differs from the angel of the Judeo-Christian tradition as demonstrated in the story of Tobias in the apocryphal Book of Tobit. According to this story the archangel Raphael came down to earth and assumed the form of a young man to act as a guide for Tobias when he was sent to Media to bring back funds left there by his father.\(^\text{15}\) But, says Rilke, the days when an angel could enter our world disguised as one of us have gone forever. Now we would perish if the angel were to approach our world by just one step. The human and the angel worlds are separated by an abyss which cannot be bridged directly, so that the angel no longer can function as a messenger between man and transcendence.

The second section of the second elegy is one of the most lyrical passages in the entire cycle. Although the angels are not part of our world, Rilke tries to capture their essence in these lines where their beauty is reflected in the lyrical beauty of their description. In their perfection they are the acme of creation. As first creations in both time and degree of significance they stand for eternity, for time without beginning, change, and end, but like the rest of the universe they are creations, not God the creator.\(^\text{16}\) Their existence is perfect harmony, as is nature in the mountain ranges and dawn-

\(^{\text{13}}\) This theme is treated extensively in E. P. Isler, “La structure des Elégies de Duino de Rainer Maria Rilke,” Les langues modernes, 35 (1937), 226–30.

\(^{\text{14}}\) Buddeberg, p. 23.

\(^{\text{15}}\) Steiner, pp. 38–39.

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reddened peaks. Moving from the light of dawn, the angels are envisioned as pure light, junctures of light with intersecting rays, avenues of light, and staircases of light rising to thrones of light, which returns to the beginning of the section where the angels are the crowning glory of creation. The circular construction symbolizes the never-ending dynamism of radiation and reconcentration of light in the final lines of this section. Angels traditionally have been described as radiant; these angels are light itself. Light in the angel world corresponds to water in our own human world. Both light and flowing water are dynamic, not static. Both appear to remain unchanged and enduring, yet both are formed of a dynamic and continually changing stream or beam. Both therefore symbolize an unchanging totality sustained by the dynamics of continual change. The additional elements of essence, ecstasy, and emotion are likewise dynamic and non-tangible. The final picture of the angels as mirrors radiating light and beauty and reconcentrating it again repeats and sharpens the image of infinitely, blindingly brilliant beings unchanging in their tempestuously dynamic existence.17 In earlier writings Rilke used the image in the mirror symbolically to represent the inner world, in contrast to external reality before the mirror as in the Christine Brahe episode in *Malte Laurids Brigge*. Since the angels are themselves mirrors, they stand for perfect unity of inner and outer images as opposed to man's divided world.

This interpretation disagrees with Guardini's statement that the angels are no longer messengers of God, but have been transformed into earthly creatures.18 As he points out, Rilke's angel is not the angel of revelation, nor a messenger between man and God. But instead of the distance between man and the angel decreasing as it would if the angel were drawn into the human world, it has increased until it has become insurmountable. For man this means that his world is hopelessly fragmented. At best he can surmise tentatively a unity which he can never know fully except in death.

The third section turns to the contrasting picture of man dominated by his mortality, his transitoriness. Man is compared to glowing embers which gradually vanish as the odor they emit fades away. Ernst Zinn informs us that this passage alludes to the burning of amber or sweetgum wood as incense.19 In the absolute world of the angel nothing is lost in the emanation

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17Steiner, p. 43. The dynamic character of the absolute also appears in my dissertation.
18Guardini, p. 73.
19Ernst Zinn, "Nachwort des Herausgebers," *Rainer Maria Rilkes Sämtliche Werke*, I, 792.
and reconcentration of essence, but man belongs to the material world where all that is emanated is lost forever. Not even in the fiery emotion of love can human beings find shelter or permanence. The others, the loved ones, perish like everyone else. The world we live in is no more permanent than we ourselves are. Although our houses and all the things we make and build seem to outlast us, they exist as we do in time and space and also perish. Nature itself which appears enduring is continually changing, even if according to predictable cycles. Everything which has substance is subject to change; we can find no shelter, permanence, or protection in the world of physical reality. No amount of love can restrain us or others; youth and beauty inevitably forsake us. Not even love can alter the fact that we are living creatures doomed to death. What then is the significance of human life? Do we have any meaning in the universe, any relationship to the angel realm? Once again, the answer is negative. The angel is incapable of perceiving man's world of physical reality; he is at home only in his own world. If he tried to enter our world he would destroy it, and our world can enter the angel world only as essence, not as physical reality. The two spheres must remain eternally separated, and man's comprehension of the universe necessarily remains fragmentary.

The first elegy found love one of man's most positive actions, and once again Rilke turns to lovers in his search for meaning. Like trees and houses, like all the physical world except for man, lovers, if they knew how, could tell us why they and this world seems more permanent, more durable than we ourselves. How can this be? The previous section has just pointed out that everything in our world and our very world itself is just as subject to change and destruction as we ourselves are. We, however, differ from the rest of our world in one important respect—we are aware of our impermanence and separated from our world by a subject-object barrier so that we know it only as object. Where the world of things and animals simply exists in harmonious unity, man with his unique awareness of himself and his world consciously seeks knowledge and security even though his very separation from his world as subject renders this ultimately impossible. The things and animals cannot or do not explain why this is so. Perhaps this is because they do not understand it; understanding is peculiarly human. Perhaps it is because they are ashamed for us that we have withdrawn from their world of innate unity. Yet in withdrawing from their world we have

20Buddeberg, p. 28.
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opened up new modes of life, and perhaps we have opened up new possibilities corresponding to our new way of life for the rest of physical reality as well as for ourselves. Therefore we also represent hope for the world of creatures. The later elegies will define one such new possibility, but that is better left for later.

If anyone can transcend himself and the inborn limitations of human life, it is the lover. Lovers draw strength from each other. Does this tell us something about them and about ourselves? As they touch each other, so we touch ourselves; we fold our hands or rest our tired face within them. But this proves only that we exist physically in time and space. Lovers seek and believe they find more than this in their love; they promise themselves enduring love, pure permanence, and eternity. They almost achieve these goals; they attain so much, yet they are doomed to fall short because they are inalterably imprisoned within their human form. They, their love, and their world undergo change like everything else. Even the unique and incomparable experience of first love is subject to the progression of time. After the first glances, the longing for the loved one, the first innocent pleasures of being together, even lovers change. At the end of their experience they are not the same people they were at the beginning. Love furthermore conceals the danger that instead of transcending themselves, each other, and their world and thereby finding their unchanging essence, they lose themselves in the emotional tumult. Instead of finding freedom in love—symbolized by the window as opening to transcendence—they fall victim to their own emotions and drives and become playthings of events rather than their masters. The significance of love lies in its meaning for the one who loves; one can find only himself in love, not another.

In the next to the last section Rilke turns to the past and inquires if man has always been so alone. Were the Greeks with their greater gift for moderation more fortunate than modern man? The question combines the themes of love and farewell. An answer is sought in the portrayal of parting on Grecian stélē or gravestones where the living lay their hands on the dead who are represented as veiled and with bowed heads. Farewell may imply mere parting, but since it is the farewell depicted on Grecian gravestones, the final parting of death dominates the picture. If the concept of grief which was developed in the "Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth" is considered, the milder expression of love and parting on the Grecian tombs indicates a greater feeling of identity with the totality of Being, with the
concept of life and death as an inseparable unity. But since modern man has lost this feeling of oneness with both worlds, the sharpness of loss in death is intensified for him. It is his task and his responsibility to proceed under these altered conditions. Since even lovers are human, parting is inevitably linked to love, either through change in human relationships or through death. But since it is only the object of love which vanishes, love itself endures if it is absolute and not linked to an object. This is the positive message of the gentler farewells on the Grecian memorial shafts.

The final section draws together and summarizes the second elegy. The human limitations expressed so poignantly beginning with the third section are implied in the conditional form of the beginning of this last section: if only we, too, could find . . . a strip of fertile soil. Taking into account the nature of human life, man needs to find his purpose in this world. Too often he is caught up in the whirlwind of emotion and carried along by it as by a stream, or else he seeks to impose order and permanence on his world, to make it as static and unchanging as the rocks.21 Man needs to find something characteristically human, meaningful, and attainable between these two extremes, a fertile soil where he can make his own unique contribution to the universe. But being human, he reaches too high and demands the perfection of the angel world rather than searching for significance within his own. Modern man has lost the Greek ideal of moderation as embodied in their art. It is his heartache that he senses what he cannot know and demands the unattainable. In reaching for what is beyond his grasp and rejecting the limitations of his own world, he is left without home or meaning.

21 Buddeberg, p. 37.