Duinesian Elegies

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THE THIRD ELEGY

The third elegy was begun at Duino in 1912 and expanded and completed in Paris in the late autumn of 1913. It is devoted to the theme of love and uses psycho-analytical terminology as a tool for examining it. In the German it is clear that the loved one in the opening line refers to a girl or woman (grammatically it is feminine), so that the perspective of the opening section is masculine. Here the term “loved one” is not a negative contrast to the action of loving, but represents in the pure love of woman the positive aspect of love. The brief opening reference to woman’s love is immediately drowned out by the appearance of masculine love with its instinctive urges in the mythical figure of Neptune. As the riverine god he is related to the stream which bounds one side of the fertile soil sought by man in the closing lines of the second elegy and thereby related also to man’s loss of freedom in complete surrender to his physical and emotional drives. As god of streams, Neptune is also god of the blood stream and thus stands for man’s physical inheritance. His love opens the way to the chaos of tumult, the uproar of uncontrolled passion. The wind of his conch is the dark call of chaos and confusion. It is unrelated to the winds of space which devour our faces in the night in the first elegy, for those winds come from the ordered angel realm. The closing lines of the first section return to the opening theme of praise for woman’s love. They inquire whether, in spite of the dark side of love, it is not related to the pure, vast, unchanging world of the stars, whether through the possibility of his love for woman, man may be led to her purer love.

The second section portrays the function of woman as mother and as beloved in bringing order and meaningfulness into the masculine world. To accomplish this, however, the woman must contend with the unconscious level of instinct inherited along with physical form, which compels the man to act in ways he does not understand. For him the call of the instinctive urge and the yearning for ideal, nurturing love are inextricably bound together. When a girl awakens love in a youth, she awakens simultaneously its dark erotic tumult which agitates and convulses him. Although the youth himself may desire to escape this sinister aspect of love, he cannot succeed completely; he is forever bound to his reality as an existing being.

The mother’s task appears easier than that of the beloved; she is able to do much for the child. She not only creates the child physically, she makes his
world for him; and the world she creates appears friendly, ordered, and harmless. Her figure, slender like the figure of a girl, shuts out the other realm of darkness, destiny, and chaos. She can explain everything to the child—temporarily, at least—and when she gets up at night, the unknown retreats before her presence like darkness before a nightlight. But she cannot eliminate his inborn world; it merely retreats as far as the wardrobe or the curtains, waiting for her to leave to reassert its presence. In spite of her great powers, her accomplishments are limited. There are areas which lie beyond her reach. There she can be of no use to the youth, for not even the mother can alter the given nature of human life.

The third section contrasts the apparent order of the external world which the mother creates for the child with the chaos of his inherited inner world. Although outwardly the child appears protected, his inner world is defenseless, for external sheltering cannot extend into the inner area of inheritance. The inner world of the third elegy differs from the inner world of the remaining elegies where it is linked to the realm of the angels. Here it stands for the inborn erotic aspect of love and its compulsive emotional turmoil symbolized by the primeval forest with its choking underbrush and grasping tendrils where the pale green of the new growth of the young man’s heart springs from the fallen trees of the dead of earlier generations. In this world eternity is achieved through procreation, through Dionysian perpetuation of the race, and the individual is significant only as a link in the chain, not for himself alone. The birth of the individual—his own little birth—is a subordinate part of the line of succession, whose maintenance justifies the horror and suffering inflicted by the pitiless demands of love as biological urge. Yet this aspect of love is so much a part of man’s heritage that it seems friendly and not at all terrible, deceiving him into complacency and acceptance. He is, after all, a product of the procreative chain, and his inherited nature was part of him even before he was born.

The flowers of the fourth section stand for the simple harmony of reproduction in nature and signify a return to the contrasting purity and unselfishness of woman’s love which is free to love for the sake of love alone, free from the compulsion of the chain of procreation. When the man loves, his love is bound to the past and to the future and includes those who have preceded and those who will follow. He alone cannot love the maiden, for

22Steiner, pp. 61–62.
his predecessors and his successors are inexorably present in his love, and he does not love her alone, for he loves all those others, too. This is human destiny—all those factors which are an inherent part of man and his existence as an entity in time and space. These factors are present even before they are awakened by the girl’s love, and she cannot avoid arousing them. The last section continues the contrast between masculine and feminine love from the preceding one. What is the woman to do since her love awakens relentless biological drives in man? The answer to this question is the positive hope which is the message of this elegy. By her own free, undemanding love, she is able to bring order, freedom, and peace into the man’s tumultuous world. Her love is able to transform the wilderness of his uncontrolled passion into the ordered, productive beauty of a garden. It counterbalances his heritage and makes love a meaningful and fulfilling element in life by showing him how to love so that the heart, in opening to accept the loved one, remains open for the whole world. The final “hold him” gathers together all the meanings of love. The German “verhalten” means to hold back or restrain, and refers to the counterbalance which the woman provides to man’s heritage. If the first letter of the word is removed, the word, “erhalten,” remains, which means to sustain, to hold up, to keep, to nourish, and this, too, is part of woman’s dependable labor of love. The word furthermore contains the stem, “halten,” which can mean to hold or embrace, and this is likewise part of the service of love for both the mother and the loved one.  

Woman’s love, like the strip of fertile soil in the second elegy, points a way to a positive area in human life where man may find and fulfill his purpose in his own real world. In reaching the outermost limits of that world in love, he very nearly transcends himself in an action which in its purest form escapes the limits of time and space to become an unbounded absolute related to the stars and the angel.

23Professor Allan W. Anderson, a colleague in the Department of Religious Studies, has informed me that this thought configuration is also present in hexagram 26, “The Taming Power of the Great,” where the three aspects of “holding firm” are (1) holding together, (2) holding back and (3) nourishing. I Ching or Book of Changes, trans. C. F. Baynes and R. Wilhelm (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 104.