Duinesian Elegies

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THE FOURTH ELEGY

The fourth elegy was written 22 and 23 November 1915 in Munich. The dominant theme is man’s knowledge that he must die, which forces him to view life and death as mutually exclusive opposites in contrast to the undivided oneness of life as the creature world experiences it. The second, third, and fourth elegies form a structural unit devoted to man’s view of life and the universe as fractured into irreconcilable parts. The second elegy divides the universe into the spheres of man and angel; the third divides love into the inherited biological drive of man and the pure, unselfish love of woman; and the fourth divides the mature view of life and death as a duality, with death as final end from the creature view of life and death as a harmonious unity with death as transformation. The fourth elegy stresses awareness of death as limitation, continuing the theme of man as limited being from the two preceding elegies.

In the opening line life is described as a tree. The tree passes through the cycles of the seasons without prior awareness of change because it is one with nature; and like the real tree, the tree of life has its natural cycles. Man, however, differs from the tree and from the rest of nature because he alone is aware of death. This awareness turns his view backward since death acts like a wall, shutting off his view of what lies beyond and forcing him to see life and death as opposites. Thus we are not in accord, not of one mind, or as the first elegy states, we are not at home in our world. From our position within the whole but separated from it by a subject-object barrier, we are always faced with Kierkegaardian either-or choices without sufficient knowledge to foresee clearly the consequences. Unlike nature, we ourselves are involved in making our seasons. We make bad choices, or as in the picture of the migrating birds, we make our choices at the wrong time so that our passage may be hindered by wintry winds. For the trees and birds, the coming of winter is another natural season in an ever-recurring cycle, for they share the concept of late fall or winter as a period of dormancy followed by rebirth. For man, however, winter implies death, as in the statement, “We are simultaneously aware of flourishing and withering.” The animals such as the lion, in contrast, are unaware of death; they exist in simple harmony since their view is not limited.

The second section begins with a restatement and enlargement of the theme that man, unlike the animals, knows both life and death. The animals
thus view life as a rising curve, where man sees it as a falling curve. Even lovers, who can almost promise themselves eternity in the second elegy, must ultimately face the fact that they are mortal and perish like everyone else. Instead of freedom and openness in love, they find limitations, instead of chase possession, and instead of sanctuary insecurity. But Rilke reminds us that lovers nevertheless reach the outermost limits of life, and in the act of love are nearer to transcending life’s limitations than are other human beings.

The second part of the second section stresses the significance for others of the limitation of death for lovers. Like contrasting background in a painting, the existence of this limitation forces others to view the lovers sharply and clearly as physical beings. They appear before us with the clarity of external reality where death is a fact understandable as outside stimulus. Others do not learn from the experience of lovers because their message is not factual information but must be learned by each individual for himself. Lovers are deflected back by their mortality from the outermost reaches of love into the harsh world of time and space where their message cannot be shared. The contours of their emotion are doomed to remain unfamiliar to all except themselves.

The third portion of the second section turns from the picture of life as a tree to life as a stage where the players are one’s inner being or heart, emphasizing man’s unique awareness of himself. The scenery, the backdrop for life, is farewell—man’s mortality. Against this background the ordinary person and his claim to a full life appear as mere pretensions, for he cannot escape the conflicting ties and relationships of his world. The garden, which in the previous elegy was a symbol for order and meaningfulness, is here only a backdrop, a two-dimensional false and deceptive order imposed by man. In appearing as a dancer, man demonstrates his physical virtuosity which is a prominent theme in the fifth elegy. This dancer does not transmit meaning; he goes through the motions of life without comprehending its nature or significance. Except for his role as dancer, he is like everyone else when he is not performing; his life is a hollow role.

The fourth and final section of the second stanza rejects life as an empty virtuoso performance without inner significance. The dancer is replaced by

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24Kreutz, p. 61.
25Kreutz, p. 63.
the figure of the doll or puppet or marionette—the German word can mean all three. The wire indicates a marionette, but the distinction is probably not vital. It is an object, a thing, without mind or soul. Its nature is completely external, and this figure represents man as physical reality. In an essay written early in 1914, Rilke describes the function of the doll for the child. He says that the child does not see the doll or puppet as a physical thing alone, but something more—an invisible soul—which is above both the puppet and the child. The child then grows through the distance which separates the inanimate object from the soul above and acquires its own soul—inner being—by doing so. This is the positive value of the doll or marionette as it appears in an elegy fragment in 1913–1914:

Oh doll,
most distant figure—, as stars grow through distance
into worlds, you make the child into a star.
If physical space is too small for it: you spread out
between you spaces of feeling, more intense space.

The stage of the heart is occupied by man as an existing physical phenomenon. Rather than the half-filled delusions of the dancer, it is at least filled with reality. The spectator waits patiently before the inner stage for a performance which will reveal more than this reality, reminding the reader of the closing lines of the requiem, “Für Wolf Graf von Kalkreuth,” with their statement that perseverance is at the heart of life. Man must persevere and endure life, continuing to hope for sudden change to meaningfulness. The spectator continues to wait, even when only emptiness comes from the stage, when he cannot see beyond the confines of reality and the world appears limited, cold, and meaningless. He continues to wait even when the woman and the child—those closer to the angel world than anyone else—have left. The description of the child with the immobile brown eye reminds us of Erik Brahe in Malte Laurids Brigge. There, too, he was at home in both the world of the living and the world of the dead, as his eyes indicate. The lively brown eye belongs to the real world of the living, and the unmoving eye stands for the unchanging world of the dead and the angel.

26Rilke, Briefe, I, 345.
27Rilke, Sämtliche Werke, VI, 1070.
29Steiner, p. 83.
COMMENTARY: The Fourth Elegy

The emptiness of the stage from which the gray draft comes stands for death and implies a way of life overshadowed by awareness of death. It recalls the ninth sonnet of the first cycle of the Sonnets to Orpheus where we are reminded that only he who can sing praise even in full knowledge of the limitation of death can truly acknowledge and praise life. In this elegy likewise man experiences life fully and recognizes beyond its limitations its link to the absolute world of the angel when he faces death in the complete aloneness inherent in the human condition.

The third section inquires into the meaning which the finality of human life has for those who love—father, family, friends, or lovers. All of them try to make the child or loved one into their image of him. This limits the freedom and hinders the free development of the object of love, which is a dominant theme in Rilke's version of the parable of the prodigal son. Rilke's own experience is reflected here, for his father planned a military career for him and was greatly puzzled by his son's so very different talents and inclinations. The son of this section does not love as he is loved. His love does not depend on specific individuals as objects of love, but transcends them to become an absolute existing independently of the object of love. It is purely spiritual love which leaves its object free, points the way to self-transcendence, and is free from the limitations of life. Such love is man's link to the angel world of the absolute. In response to it the angel comes and animates the puppet on the stage of the heart. Together puppet and angel become a paradoxical unity of the incomplete reality of mortal man and absolute reality, of immanence and transcendence, as complementary parts of a meaningful whole. Note that the angel performs above the puppet. The worlds of man and angel remain separated but coordinated. In his heart man transcends his existence as subject separated from all other objects and relates to the grand totality of the universe. In this action his function and meaning are revealed to him; he understands that he has a vital role to play, even though it is limited by physical reality and doomed by death. He sees the seasons of his own life as part of a complete universal cycle. Those approaching the end of life and the child at the beginning of life are nearer to such a view than others. The child has not outgrown his

31Guardini, p. 155.
innate unity with nature, and the dying see beyond the subject-object limitation to a regained oneness with totality. The view from the beginning and the end of life thus differs from that of the mature individual. The child's oneness with nature is characterized by a time concept different from that of the mature person for whom time is a continuum of past, present, and future. The child does not distinguish so sharply; he is content to live intensely in the present moment, unaware of the passage of time, satisfied with things of the spirit, and endowing the whole world with permanence since he is unaware of impermanence. He stands as a link between the world of man and the world of the angel in his innate harmony with the universe and in his unawareness of death which he shares with the animals. Although the child must grow up, must outgrow this pleasant harmony, the memory remains to point the way to the possibility that such a condition may exist again.

The final section summarizes the message of the fourth elegy in the figure of the child. The wonder and mysterious significance of childhood are suggested in the opening question, who can possibly understand childhood, and again in the closing statement that childhood is inexpressible. The role of childhood as one of the great positive possibilities of life is demonstrated by its position as a star in the firmament of life, for the stars belong to the absolute world of the angel. The measuring rod of distance in the hand of the child could measure two distances—the distance of the child from the limited, divided world of the mature individual, and the distance through which the child grows to reach the angel world which he senses above him and the doll. Yet even the child with his unawareness of death as final limit bears within himself death, though not like the ordinary person. In the child, death is a fruit, a theme which occurred in The Book of Hours and in Malte Laurides Brigge. Death is an inborn and inseparable part of life, an organic part of human development, not something imposed as end from without. For the mature individual who sees life and death as opposing poles rather than as harmonious parts of a whole, this is almost impossible to comprehend. Even the horror of murder is easier to understand, and the mature person usually regards death as murder, as an arbitrary and undesirable end imposed from without. The positive message of this elegy in the figure of the child is that this is an error, that life and death are harmonious parts of a greater whole, and that death is to be accepted unquestioningly as the child accepts it.