Duinesian Elegies

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The fifth elegy was written 14 February 1922 after all the others had been completed. It is dedicated to Mrs. Hertha Koenig, who was the owner of the 1905 painting by Picasso, *La famille des saltimbanques*. Rilke had been familiar with the painting even before Mrs. Koenig acquired it, and from mid-June to mid-October 1915 he stayed in her apartment in Munich where the painting hung.32 Also contributing to the background of this elegy is Rilke’s description of a performance by the well-known acrobatic troupe of Père Rollin in Paris in a letter dated 14 July 1907.33

Like the doll of the fourth elegy, the acrobats represent the physical reality of human life. In contrast to the actor whose role may have meaning

32Steiner, p. 101.
or to the dancer whose motions may convey an idea, the acrobats present physical virtuosity without inner reference or meaning. Their significance for the elegies lies in the nature of their lives—their complete rootlessness and insecurity. The fifth elegy is possibly the most complex of all the elegies in its symbolism and meaning, and the element of physical virtuosity has both positive and negative aspects. To the extent that an absence of inner or absolute reality is implied, it is negative; but complete and willing acceptance of the physical reality of life together with all its suffering and limitations is a positive element.

In these acrobats the transitoriness of human life is illuminated even more clearly than in those who partially hide from its impermanence in more permanent elements such as home, family, and work. The rootlessness of the acrobats causes the fleeting quality of their lives and all human life to stand out more sharply. They stand for all the limitations which physical existence imposes on man, for their lives function on this level alone. They are mere objects, subject to the whims and changes of the moment, without continuity, and driven by the outward purpose of perfecting their performance. Their lives are like their acrobatic performances—in life they are twisted, bent, pitched, and thrown by external circumstances just as they are in their act.

This is a wandering acrobatic troupe without tent or protection from the forces of nature. Their stage is the carpet which they spread out, a carpet worn thin by continual usage. Translated to the level of human life, our lives are a performance on some worn carpet, some insignificant spot lost in the vastness of the universe. These acrobats do not perform in the rich suburbs or the center of town, but in the poorer areas at the edge of town where town and country meet and where the nature which survives is scrubby and wounded and scarred by the encroachment of the town. Their performance temporarily covers over the harsh reality of life in such a place and presents in its stead the semblance of perfection like a bandage over a wound.

As soon as the acrobats arrive wherever they are to perform, they are on exhibit, even while setting up and practicing. The lines beginning with “And scarcely there,” are among the most difficult in all the elegies to

34Guardini, p. 187.
35Guardini, pp. 189–90.
translate. The German speaks of the capital letter of “Dastehen,” and the capital “D” refers not only to the role of the capital letter and the role of the word itself but also to the triangular composition of the Picasso painting. Unfortunately there is no good English translation which retains the compactness and plasticity of the German and begins with the initial “D.” The best possible solution appears to be to expand to two words which capture the double significance of the acrobatic symbolism—the positive aspect of man’s patient endurance of the trials of life while exposed to its negative limitations in complete defenselessness. The only other possibility would be “diligence,” which touches the more positive aspects of the German but misses the negative ones. In speaking of the capital letter of a word (all German nouns are capitalized), Rilke meant the beginning or possibility of whatever the word signified. Thus the acrobats represent the possibility of enduring life patiently, of persevering and striving in spite of the sorrows and limitations which they experience. It is significant that Rilke used “Dastehen,” to stand there, rather than “Dasein,” to be there, which emphasizes the physical aspect of the role of the acrobats, for they, like all mankind, are physical entities placed within a world of physical reality where they are buffeted about relentlessly. Their lot as playthings of life is compared to that of the pewter plates which King Augustus the Strong of Saxony (1670–1733), later King of Poland, sometimes rolled up to entertain his guests.

The next section presents the acrobatic performance as a whole in the symbol of a rose. The spectators come and stand like petals around the performers, who are like the pistil of the rose which the pollen—the dust—fertilizes. “The pounder”—“der Stampfer”—is one who stamps his foot, perhaps the lead acrobat who signals the beginning of the acrobatic act in this manner and sets the timing, but it may also be a ram, a pestle, or a pounder with technological connotations as in “die stampfende Maschine.” “Der Stempel” is not only the botanical term, pistil, but also refers to the piston in a machine, so that the two terms may imply a view of modern man reduced to the level of a machine in the repetitive, empty performance of the acrobatic routine. The terms, “Stampfer” and “Stempel” also conjure up phallic images related to the rhythm of life as well as the rhythm of the life.

36Guardini, pp. 190–91.
37Steiner, p. 107.
performance, giving three distinct layers of meaning in these two terms related in both sound and meaning. The critics in general are uncertain whether “der Stampfer” refers to an individual acrobat or to the acrobats as a group. The singular form of the noun seems to indicate an individual, but the complete picture of the acrobats surrounded by the crowd of onlookers would indicate the entire troupe as the pistil in the center of the rose. Unlike the rose, the fruit which the acrobats produce is false; it is the mere semblance of perfection. Like their audience, they themselves remain unaware of the futility of their endeavor, for they hide it under the glittering, shallow surface of show business glamor and the fixed smile of the performer. The smile of the audience is as superficial as that of the performers, for the performance merely entertains and distracts them. They find no deep or lasting meaning in it. Yet later the smile is seen to have positive value, for it denotes a willing acceptance of the burden of life wherein lies the significance of these acrobats.

From the general picture of the acrobatic performance we turn to an examination of the individual members of the troupe. The first one examined is the former weight-lifter now grown old who has shrunk up so that his skin appears large enough for two men. Now he only beats the drum for the performance, recalling certain traits in the figure of Père Rollin in the letter of 14 July 1907.

The young man is described in German quite literally as the son of a neck and a nun, where neck implies a muscular man. The meaning of the combination is shown in the second half of the description: he combines muscle or physical perfection with the innocence, the guilelessness, of a nun. His innocence, however, derives from ignorance and inexperience, not from the innate harmony of children and animals.

The next four lines return to the function of the entire troupe in the elegy. Pointing ahead to the role of sorrow in the tenth elegy, the acrobats are described as toys given to a child sorrow. As playthings of the capriciousness of a child, these acrobats know sorrow; they are exposed to the heartbreaks of life without defense. But although they endure their sorrow patiently, they remain unaware of its positive role; they are the toys of external forces and lack inner stability.

From this interlude highlighting the positive possibility of sorrow and

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38Steiner, p. 110.
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suffering in human life, the elegy describes the figures of the children and their deeper reality. The first figure is that of the boy whose description returns to the fruit symbolism. The acrobatic act of which he is part has not yet reached perfection, and the child who is supposed to balance on the others is not yet able to do so. In terms of the seasons the act does not reach the maturity of autumn. Like unripe fruit in summer, the young boy falls prematurely over and over again as the acrobats continually practice. He falls against the earth which is the ultimate grave of everyone, emphasizing the double image of the danger of the acrobatic activity and the finiteness of all human life. From this picture we turn to one of the positive possibilities of the child—his love for his mother which the harshness of such life has not yet destroyed. He tries to express his love in a tender look, to break through the crust of physical existence and express his inner nature, but his human emotion is destroyed in the world of cruel reality. He is unable to communicate his love to his mother, for her tenderness has been destroyed by the harshness of her life. Almost immediately the child is called back to the unceasing practice that is his life and the pain of the leaps and falls which his smile surmounts.

The following section of four lines, like the four-line unit preceding the one devoted to the boy, is a brief interlude highlighting the meaning of the acrobats and signifying a transition from a negative to a positive view of life. The positive aspect is emphasized by the presence of the angel who comes to collect the acrobat’s smile and store it under its Latin name, “Subrisio Saltat.” Since the smile is only human, it is limited or small-flowered; yet it represents the presence of the absolute world in man’s inner being, lending meaning and therefore joy to life in spite of its tribulations. It is to be praised as a healing herb, even though we do not entirely comprehend its meaning, for it belongs to the joys of the angel world beyond our comprehension.

From this interlude we turn to the figure of the little girl denied her childhood and imprisoned within the silk and fringes of her costume. Deprived of the freedom to be a child, she is offered for sale in the marketplace like fruit on the pans of a scale. In the second section the fruit of the rose symbol was false, the young boy falling was described as unripe fruit,

39Guardini, p. 200.
40Guardini, p. 201.
and here the girl is described as fruit of equanimity, stressing her reduction to the status of an unfeeling thing. Fruit and fruitfulness generally have a positive connotation for Rilke, but the fruit of the acrobats is human and therefore faulty. The last phrase of this section which has been translated “in the midst of shoulders” could also be translated “below the shoulders” since the German “unter” means both “among” and “under.” The critics disagree about the meaning, and it is possible that Rilke meant to imply both meanings. It may portray the child being held up before the audience, but this phrase may also highlight the physical nature of what is for sale—the human body or physique in contrast to mind or soul. Additional insight into the symbolism may be provided from the field of sculpture since Rilke’s long concern with the plastic arts is well known. A bust commonly portrays the subject from the shoulders up, and this portion of the human body represents the unique qualities of the individual—the qualities of mind and soul which are not for sale. The picture as a whole is clear. What can be more pitiful than for a child to be denied the opportunity to be a child, to be deprived of one of the truly great positive areas of human life? Yet that is the lot of these children and still they smile and accept it.

The next section turns from examination of the individual acrobats to study the nature of their action. After long practice before achieving perfection, the act suddenly falls into place, and everything comes off with the smoothness of perfect coordination. Since the constant effort of the acrobats produces only physical perfection which becomes empty routine after it has been achieved, their success remains an illusion. The last two lines of this section summarize the significance of the acrobats for the elegies and provide a transition to the following section. “Die vielstellige Rechnung” could be a “many-digited number” as others have translated it, but it could also be a long sum or a complex equation. It clearly stands for the complexities of life in the bounded world of physical reality. “Zahlenlos aufgeht” could indicate that the number or equation equals zero, as some critics think, or it could also mean that the equation balances or that it equals infinity or boundlessness. The resolution of the mathematical expression can thus stand for death as the ultimate limitation (equals zero); for death as the other side of life, as a transformation into the boundless world of the

41 This suggestion was made to me by Professor Harvey I. Dunkle, a colleague at San Diego State University.
hereafter (equals infinity); or for the coordination of the worlds of man and angel (balances). Furthermore, the boundless world appears within the real world in man’s inner realm, so that this figure could encompass the coordinate existence of the worlds of man and the angel, of the here and the hereafter, and the simultaneous existence of bounded reality and the unbounded inner realm within man’s world. Since the fifth elegy is structurally the center of the elegies, it is the balance point between these two worlds. The acrobats balance the positive and negative aspects of life against each other, which is their significance for the elegies.

In the next-to-last section the stage of the acrobats suddenly becomes the stage of life. As the figure of an unknown will propels the acrobats about, the figure of Madame Lamort—death—propels mankind. Madame Lamort is not organic death developing within the individual as a part of life; she is the death which is imposed from without, murdering life. Her death is capricious because it is external and therefore beyond control. It is like a public performance because its essential ingredient is appearance. With its cheap, artificial decorations, it is a fitting end—a winter hat where winter is equated with death\(^42\) to a life of destiny. Destiny here connotes all the conflicting and confusing bonds and ties which come from without, a life at the mercy of external forces and lacking inner stability like that of the acrobats.

The final section transposes the perfection of the acrobats on the physical plane to the perfection of love in the angel world. Love is related to the angel world when it is an inner absolute no longer linked to a specific object. Since man can never fully know the angel world in life, this section is in the subjunctive, emphasizing the unattainability of this level for the living. Although love belongs to both worlds, as an absolute it can reach perfection only when freed into the infinity of the angel. There in the perfection of complete transformation lovers may be able to execute acts of love as the acrobats perform their acts on the physical plane. The smile of the acrobats then would become the true smile of the lovers,\(^43\) and their carpet would be stilled. The search for perfection would be over, and their wanderings would end in attainment of joys not yet revealed to the living. Life with all its limitations offers man the possibility of patient endurance, willing

\(^{42}\)Guardini, p. 217.
\(^{43}\)Guardini, p. 224.
acceptance of the challenge of life, and the possibility of love. But perfection beyond the physical level lies outside the experience of the living. Genuinely absolute love is the ultimate reality which in the limited reality of human life the lover can reach only in momentary self-transcendence. The rows of onlookers surrounding the acrobats become the audience of dead who applaud and reward the lovers, denoting the significance of love in the absolute world of the hereafter.

The fifth elegy stands in the middle of the cycle as the balance point between the positive and negative aspects of human life. On the one side are the negative elements of the innate limitations of physical reality which buffet man about and the ultimate limitations of death and man’s awareness of it. The fulcrum, the transition from the negative to the positive, is located almost exactly half way through the elegies where the approving angel appears to accept the smile of the acrobat. On the other side of the balance are the positive elements of love, patient endurance, and acceptance of sorrow as a meaningful element inherent in our existence as physical entities. Although the world of the angel remains separated from our physical world, there are signs pointing to its coordination with ours. Wherever such signs may be found in the elegies, they are signified by the appearance of the angel and lend greater depth and increased meaningfulness to our own world of physical reality.

Stahl, p. xvi.