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=2630675
THE SIXTH ELEGY

The sixth elegy was begun in 1912, but most of the final version was written in 1913. The first thirty-one lines including the fig tree section were written in January and February 1913 in Ronda in Spain and the last three lines in late autumn 1913 in Paris. The remaining section expanding the Samson theme was added in 1922. Structurally the sixth elegy is the first of a group of elegies presenting the positive aspects of life. It counterbalances the fourth elegy with its emphasis on man's view of life as a duality. In the sixth elegy the symbols for Being as a unity wherein life and death become obverse sides of the same totality appear one after the other. Common to all of these symbols is the absence of growth and development.

1 The first symbol for nearly instantaneous fruitfulness is the fig tree. The blossoms of the fig tree are clustered within an outer sac which has the form of the fruit rather than the blossom. Insects must enter this covering through a small opening in the end in order to fertilize the blossoms so that the process of fertilization is inner or secret. The fig tree thus appears to spring directly into fruitfulness without the intermediate flowering stage. In this elegy fruitfulness implies the development of a full life productive of meaningfulness and also the presence of the fruit of death as an organic part of life itself. When the goal of life is fruitfulness, action—life—and goal—death—are identical, and life and death become an inseparable unity. The branches of the fig tree, which grow downward before turning upward at the tip, are compared to a fountain where the hydrostatic pressure causing the water to rise is created by introducing the water into the fountain at a height as far below the level of the fountain as the jet of water is to rise. Thus the two configurations—the image of the sap of the tree and the water jet of the fountain—gather energy through an initial downward flow for a final leap into fruitfulness. The image of instant fruitfulness is repeated in the sudden transformation of Zeus into a swan in the legend of Leda resulting in the immediate fulfillment of his desires.

5 For ordinary mortals, however, the beginning and the end appear to be separated by a long development. They prize the flowering stage—their youthfulness—and wish to remain in the springtime of life rather than to recognize that all the seasons of life have value. Such people, like the

45Kreutz, p. 92.
46Steiner, p. 130.
acrobats in the fifth elegy, are controlled by external circumstances. Their lives are dominated by distractions and confusion and find no unity of purpose and meaningfulness. By lingering in the blossom, they retard the development of the fruit of death as a part of life; when death comes, it is imposed from without like the death of Madame Lamort.

One image for the view of life and death as a unity has already appeared in the elegies in those who die young. Like the animals, the child lives in harmony with his world; he has not become aware of its existence as something outside himself, is not separated from it as subject. Being unaware of death as end, he accepts it as part of life. The sixth elegy adds another exception to the usual view of life as a polarity where life is viewed as a rising curve and the end as a falling curve. In the hero’s life death is organically integrated by the husbandman death—in contrast to the common image of the grim reaper—who cultivates his fruit within men. The falling and then rising configuration of the fig tree and the fountain of the first part of this elegy corresponds to the pattern in the life of the hero. Death bends the veins of the hero and of those who die young differently—like the fig tree and the fountain. For them death is seen as a rising curve since it is a continuation of life itself.

The smile of the acrobats signified acceptance of life in spite of its limitations. But for the hero and those destined to die young the limitations, especially the ultimate one of death, are sublimated into totality and are no longer experienced as boundaries. Thus they precede their smile, for they represent a more harmonious stage of development than the acrobats. The comparison to Egyptian sculpture points ahead to the landscape of the tenth elegy.

Rilke’s hero is not characterized by specific goals in life, for the very nature of life itself would cause such goals to change continually. The hero of the elegies is an existential hero whose actions are determined by deep inner necessity—the kind of person he is—rather than by external purposes and goals. His goals and actions are identical so that his life is a unity from beginning to end; he is, he does not grow or develop. His ability to choose and to make himself lies even before his beginning; when the choice is made, it applies to his entire life. Unlike ordinary mortals who seek permanence, he recognizes change as the very basis of life, with insecurity and danger inherent in it. Thus “he is forever moving onward into the changed constellation of his continual danger” where those who seek permanence and security cannot follow. Since his affirmation and accep-
tance of change as the very basis of life is in accord with the nature of the
dynamic universe, this pattern is exalted for its harmony and placed among
the stars shining in both the human and the angel worlds while the false
pattern of duality receives no affirmation.

The following section of four lines repeats the exaltation of the pattern
of the hero with the subjunctive wish to be young again and able to follow
the example of the Biblical hero, Samson. The subjunctive form emphasizes
the unattainability of the hero’s life for all but a few rare exceptions.
Although man may recognize validity in such a life, it remains beyond his
reach.

The nature of the hero’s life determines the nature of his relationship to
woman both as mother and loved one. His love like that of the child in the
fourth elegy is an inner absolute, not love for an external object or goal. As
in the fourth elegy, the immanent reality of the loved one is transformed
into absolute reality, transcending the object in the transformation. On the
positive side, such love is indestructable; but on the negative side lies the
tragedy of growing beyond those one loves. Since the hero cannot allow
his love to bind him to another, for this would deflect his unity of purpose,
he brings sorrow to those he loves when he outdistances them. The ravines
into which maidens plunge are related to the ravines of the third elegy so
that the sexual aspect of love symbolized in the primeval forest bears
suffering and sorrow for the woman as well as for the man. The sexual act
of love divides the unified world of the child from the fragmented adult
world with the result that such experience represents a plunge into the
chaos resulting from irreversible severance of childhood unity into seg-
ments. The hero’s love, like that of the child, is characterized by unity; it is
free, not bound to an object. He surmounts the experience of love rather
than allowing it to draw him into the world of ties and bonds to others.

Rilke’s hero acts from a deep inner unity where goals are identical with
the course of his life. Exterior goals do not exist for him, for they would lie
outside his already determined basic course. Identity of goal and action is a
concept which appears in Zen Buddhism, a philosophy in which Rilke
shared an interest with his philosopher friend, Rudolf Kassner.47 The hero,

47Rudolf Kassner, “Rainer Maria Rilke—wie ich ihn sah,” Die Zeit (27 December
1956), p. 6. Rilke might also have become acquainted with this concept through the study
of Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, where Aristotle says that the highest activity is that
activity whose goal is intrinsic to itself.
COMMENTARY: *The Sixth Elegy*

like the child—including those destined to die young—and the animals, lives in oneness with the universe so that death and life are integral parts of a whole where death appears as a continuation of life and a rising curve. In recognizing and seeking change as the very basis of life, the hero paradoxically attains enduring unity. The hero thus functions as a symbol for life and death as a unity in contrast to the duality which dominated the fourth elegy.