THE SEVENTH ELEGY

The seventh elegy was written in Muzot on 7 February 1922, the final version of the conclusion on 26 February 1922. Structurally it continues the basic and significant positive turn which began with the sixth elegy, presenting the positive aspects of love in contrast to the negative, erotic side of love in the third one. Love provides man with a unique mode of relationship to the angel, for in love man creates things which combine existence and essence. When he takes such objects into his inner world, he shows them to the angel who cannot perceive them as reality. Love is thus man's window to transcendence, and it becomes neither necessary nor desirable to draw the angel into the human world.

The very beginning of the poem provides a clue to the new orientation when man's attempt to woo the angel, to summon the angel into the earthly sphere, is rejected as outgrown. The hiatus between man and the angel was delineated in the first elegy where the experience was so painful that it produced the desperate cry of the opening lines which despaired of finding meaning within the human sphere alone. The seventh elegy repeats the theme of separation between the world of man and that of the angels, but here it is accepted as the established order. The affirmation of the disjunctive nature of the two spheres is so strong that the earlier longing of man for the angel and his desire to bring the angel realm into his own world is rejected not only as impossible but also undesirable.

1 The first section compares man's wooing of the angel to two images—the song of the bird in the springtime and the wooing of lovers. We have already noted that the bird is related to the angel both as winged creature and through its oneness with the universe. Lovers, too, are related to the angel world, for beyond the reality of specific love there opens up the absolute value of the act of love, enabling the individual to transcend momentarily his limited reality and to sense the absolute world of the angel. Yet even these figures of the bird and the lovers which stand at the outermost limits of life touching the angel realm beyond are living creatures subject to all the innate limitations of physical reality. They are earthbound and therefore unable to communicate with the angel as absolute to absolute, and the angel as absolute has no place in their world. Man must therefore renounce his longing for that which he cannot know and cease trying to pull down into his sphere that which does not belong there. He must forsake
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wooing the angel, even though he could woo as ethereally as the song of the lark in spring or as intensely as the wooing of lovers. He must find his meaning within his own world.

10 The second section reiterates the image of the song of the lark in spring, rising from the first tentative chirps to the final soaring trill. But like the rising jet of a fountain, the flight of the bird and the swelling song are not rising curves alone. Predictably they contain within themselves a falling curve as well; the rise of the water jet and the flight of the bird are still subject to the force of gravity, and the flight of the bird and its song are limited by its mortality. Yet precisely here the change in mood from the previous elegies becomes perfectly clear. In the earlier elegies the theme of man's limitations would have signified a downward pessimistic turn; here it causes no more than a slight hesitation, a momentary pause, before the song of praise continues for the birds, the trees, the flowers and all the marvels and beauties of nature flourishing in the benign warmth of summer. The rising song of praise for all nature including human life parallels the swelling song of the lark in the first portion of this section and culminates in the themes of sleep and night with their mythological evocation of death. But now the theme of death does not bring even momentary hesitation. The rising curve of praise continues and we pass almost imperceptibly from the human to the angel world, prefiguring the path of the youth in the tenth elegy. The linking element here as there is the stars which are common to both worlds. They are the manifestations of the absolute realm visible in man's world, although only imperfectly, as the real stars are only imperfectly visible, the light rays distorted by the atmosphere through which they must pass. Only in death can man know them perfectly, whereby even the ultimate limitation of death becomes a rising instead of a falling curve as it is in the sixth elegy for those destined to die young and for the hero. The coexistence of the two worlds suffices to lend value to human life. The urge to bring the angel into our world is no longer needed or wanted. Our world has value, too, as this song of praise attests.

27 The following section returns to the theme of the final lines of the first one, the wooing of lovers. The love which calls is the love of Gaspara Stampa in the first elegy, the universal love of the child in the fourth elegy, and the love of the hero in the closing lines of the sixth elegy. The call of such love is not possessively directed toward a single object; it has become a timeless absolute which penetrates beyond the human world to the realm
of the dead where maidens respond. All who are in the realm of the dead could perceive such a call, but only those whose lives had been deficient on earth would wish to desert the perfection of the realm of the dead for the limitations of human life. Those who come are mistakenly answering the call of eroticism described in the third elegy. They are like Christine Brahe in *Malte Laurids Brigge* who remains in this world as a ghost, unable to find in death the angel world which she had never known in life, or like the earlier mothers in the river bed of inheritance in the third elegy.\(^48\) The caller gently explains to them the nature of their error: they have failed to seek the quality of intensity in life.\(^49\) Only in moments of greatest intensity can an understanding be reached which transcends the level of factual knowledge to find a unity of man’s inner and outer worlds which beyond childhood is his sole contact in life with the angel realm. Such a moment of intensity lends value to all of human life, and it is a function of quality rather than quantity.\(^50\) Love is a primary path to this experience, for true love more than any other emotion is characterized by intensity.\(^51\) In love for an individual, the lover in the depth of his feeling may transcend the limiting effect of the object to find pure love itself and thus in the blissful chase pass beyond the loved one into the absolute world of universal love, of nothingness and limitless space. This nothingness is not the obverse of something or physical reality but of the bounded world of subject-object vision; it is boundlessness. In such love the lover once again may find temporarily the same oneness and harmony with the universe which was the child’s way of life.

In the next section Rilke restates once more his emphatic affirmation of the value of human life. Yet many would ask how all human life could be meaningful. What meaning could possibly be found in the lives of those like the acrobats of the fifth elegy? Where is there meaning or value in the lives of the poor in the ghettos and slums of the cities where life is made of frustration, desperation, and privation? Yet these seemingly deprived ones experience moments of intensity which make even lives such as theirs meaningful. The true value of human life is the inner, intangible realm of intensity where in momentary self-transcendence the individual senses a

\(^{48}\)Guardini, p. 265.

\(^{49}\)Kreutz, p. 105.

\(^{50}\)Guardini, p. 266.

\(^{51}\)Buddenberg, pp. 194–95.
harmonious universe wherein he himself plays a meaningful role. Signifi-
cantly it is again maidens who even in these circumstances achieve validity, 
for the third elegy has already pointed to Rilke’s belief that woman is freer 
than man and thus more capable of rising above the specific to the universal. 
The really deprived ones of our world are not those who live in material 
want, but those who are poor in spirit. They search for value in the world of 
possessions, success, and good fortune with its rewards of recognition and 
the envy of others. Their laughter is superficial and disharmonious like the 
false goals of happiness and prosperity which they seek. It bears no relation 
to the smile of the fifth elegy. They never learn that they are pursuing a 
chimera, that in grasping for the fleeting external world, they have missed 
the permanence and value of the inner world. They are truly poor, for the 
real riches of human life lie beyond their reach in the intangible, inner realm.

The following section continues the theme of the inner world, the 
structure of which is expanded and elucidated. In addition to the duality of 
inner and outer spheres, the one usually considered the inner sphere is also 
a duality. One part of it is the mind. and the mind relates to the factual 
external world. The pictures in the following lines describe what modern 
industry calls rationalization of production where the world is treated 
solely as a physical phenomenon. It constructs buildings and houses to serve 
specific purposes, and the deeper intangible attributes of love, feeling, and 
beauty fall away, for they are not functions of the mind. 52 The external 
world which was once enriched with meaning has been stripped of all 
except practical function; it has shrunk into less and less. 53 The ultimate 
product of our age is the power plant. Although the power it produces is 
intangible, it is of momentary duration, a suitable symbol for the fleeting 
impermanence of all life and the physical backdrop before which it plays. 
Such power is without form and meaning, of value only for what it 
produces. The reference to tense energy may imply beyond the specific 
energy form all the aimless busyness and rush of modern life. Many Rilke 
scholars criticize Rilke for an inability to relate to the modern industrial 
world. Yet here he has comprehended and described one of the chief 
difficulties facing modern industry: the lowering of productivity due to the 
inability of workers to relate to work whose meaning is derived solely from

52Kreutz, p. 108.
53Guardini, p. 272.
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income earned by it. Extensive studies have shown that modern job satisfaction is derived more from a feeling of accomplishing something meaningful and from a sense of being valued for this accomplishment than from salary.\(^{54}\)

The world has not always been so limited. Once man related to his world differently. Beyond the involvement of his mind was the additional involvement of the second element of the inner world which Rilke calls "heart." This is closely related to Karl Jaspers's concept of "soul," that part of man which stands in relationship to God, or in Rilkean terminology, the absolute world of the angel. Here Rilke introduces in the elegies his second path of man's relationship to the angel, the inner path which is uniquely human.\(^{55}\) The temples of this stanza are any structure which was created with love and deep concern and has been loved and venerated. They exist not only as visible, tangible, real entities but also invisibly within the hearts of those who love them. In this way they bridge the worlds of man and the angel. But modern man who judges everything in terms of practical use, who either denies or disregards the existence of the world of the heart, ignores or fails to appreciate such structures. He sees them only as physical entities and does not recreate them within his heart where they might acquire the true permanence of the absolute.

We live in a time of transition. The past and its temples no longer have meaning for us; our age has been disinherited. We have lost our sense of direction and cannot relate to the future. The inability to relate to the future can become positive if it strengthens our ties to the past and directs our attention to preserving in both the inner and outer worlds those structures of the past which stand as monuments to the unity of the temporal and the eternal. Like all constructions of man, such structures exist in the temporal world and are as subject as any modern cerebral creation to change and destruction. Yet in all their impermanence they stand as witnesses to the presence of the absolute world of the stars within our own, drawing the stars from their eternal, unchanging realm into ours. All such structures are temples whether they serve a religious function or not, for they are of the angel world. As such they can be shown to the angel, who can see only what

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\(^{55}\)Guardini, p. 316.
is absolute and for whom all that was created without love remains invisible. Examples of such structures are pillars which reach for the heavens, pylons which form the entrances to Egyptian tombs and symbolize man’s ability to enter the absolute world, the sphinx which towers with its human face to the stars, and cathedral spires soaring in their upward thrust above the changing world of man. All these examples illustrate man’s upward reach toward the angel world. Towers and pylons may also be regarded as phallic symbols, reiterating the role of love as window to the absolute. This oneness of human and angel worlds which can be attained even within our own limited reality may be the basis for the dedication of the next elegy to Rudolf Kassner, who relates it to the Buddhist concept of “Zen,” which he believes to be characteristic of his own and Rilke’s works. He describes it as unity of thought and action, of goal and striving for the goal, of having no concept or theory to separate goal and action which are thus sublimated into a unity of Being.

Man’s imprisonment in the world of time and space has aspects of limitation, yet using this space is also man’s unique opportunity. Miraculously he can unite in what he creates in his own earthly space the realms of heaven and earth, of man and the angel. Such an accomplishment deserves man’s highest praise, which is the function of this elegy, but since such creation also extends into the angel realm, all that man creates with love is worthy of the praise of the angel as well. Even the angel must acknowledge such accomplishments as Chartres; or music, which lacking in external form can soar even higher as pure configuration of emotion; or greatest of all, the experience of love which in transcending its object reaches the angel realm. They are expressions of the absolute within our own world.

The final section returns to the opening theme. Man should not try to summon the angel into his earthly sphere. The realms of man and the angel are forever separated; the absolute world of the angel could only be terrible to man. This does not mean that man cannot stand in relationship to the angel, but that rather than seeking the absolute directly, he must seek

56Rilke, Briefe II, 485.
58Kassner, p. 6.
59Steiner, p. 178.
60Guardini, p. 288.
it within his own finite world of time and space where, in all that he creates with love, infinity is also expressed. Man's call to the angel is therefore like an outstretched arm reaching upward in search for absolute values, but the hand remains open as defense against angel awesomeness and as admonition to the angel to remain within his own realm. Man's hand could grasp only what is object for him. The absolute angel cannot become object for man, for it can enter only man's inner world, not the outer object world of reality. Thus the problem stated in the first elegy of the relationship between man and the angel reaches its solution in the seventh elegy. Although the realms of man and angel are forever separated, man can find the absolute within his own world in love and in utilizing his space for objects which he creates with love and transforms into enduring inner absolute being related to the angel world. From the final resolution of the problems of the relationship between man and angel stated with such anguish in the first elegy now springs in the second section of the seventh elegy a lyrical song in praise of life scarcely surpassed anywhere and a decisive turn toward complete acceptance and praise of human life including all its limitations.