Duinesian Elegies

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APPENDIX A

Witold Hulewicz translated Rilke’s works into Polish. Needing assistance for his translation of the *Elegies*, he had written Rilke requesting information about their meaning. Rilke gave him his only interpretation of this work in a letter dated 13 November 1925 (*Briefe*, II, 478–85) and postmarked Sierre, which begins with a series of questions and Rilke’s answers to them. This translation begins with the fourth question, since the first three are not concerned with the *Elegies*.

Here, dear friend, I myself scarcely dare to say anything. In connection with the poems themselves some explanations could be attempted, but this way? Where would one begin?

And am I the one to venture to give the correct interpretation of the *Elegies*? They reach infinitely beyond me. I consider them a further elaboration of those basic premises which were already presented in the “Book of Hours,” which playfully and experimentally use a cosmology in both parts of the “New Poems,” and which then conflictingly condensed in “Malte” revert into life and very nearly lead to proof that this life extending into the unfathomable is impossible. In the “*Elegies*” life in the same circumstances once again becomes possible, indeed it experiences here that ultimate affirmation which the young Malte still could not attain, even though he was on the correct and difficult road of “des longues études.” In the “*Elegies*” affirmation of life and of death proves to be the same thing. What is experienced and praised here is that to affirm the one without the other in the last analysis would be a limitation excluding everything infinite. *Death* is the side of life turned away from us, the side unilluminated by us: we must seek to realize the broadest conception of our existence which is at home in both unbounded realms, is nourished inexhaustibly from both . . . The true configuration of life extends through both realms, the blood of the most comprehensive cycle circulates through both: there is neither a here nor a hereafter, but only the great unity in which the superior beings, the “angels,” are at home. And now the place of the problem of love in this world expanded by its larger half, in this world only now complete and unified. I am amazed that the “Sonnets to Orpheus,” which are every bit as “weighty” and filled with the same essence, are not more helpful to you in understanding the “*Elegies*.” The latter were begun in 1912 (at Duino), continued—fragmentarily—in Spain and Paris until 1914; the war completely interrupted this my greatest work when in 1922 I (here) ventured to take them up again, the “Sonnets to Orpheus” (which were not part of my plan) were dictated to me stormily within a few days and preceded the new elegies and their conclusion. They are of the same “birth” as the “*Elegies*,” as cannot be otherwise, and that they suddenly surfaced without my will in connection with a girl who
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died young brings them even closer to the source of their origin; this link is one more connection to the center of that realm whose depth and influence, every-where unbounded, we share with the dead and with future generations. We, living in the here and now, are not for one moment satisfied in the temporal world nor limited to it; again and again we pass over to earlier generations, to our origin, and to those who apparently will follow us. In that most comprehensive “boundless” world everyone exists, one cannot say “simultaneously,” for the suspension of time requires that they all exist. Frailty everywhere rushes into profound being. And so all formations of what exists here are to be used not as temporally bounded only, but so far as we are able are to be transposed into those higher spheres of meaning in which we share. But not in the Christian sense (from which I am moving more and more emphatically away), but in an intense and blessed awareness, that what is seen and touched here is to be transposed into the broader, the very broad-est sphere. Not into the other world, the shadow of which darkens the earth, but into a totality, into the totality. Nature, the things we associate with and use, are frail and temporary things; yet as long as we are here, they are our possessions and our friends, sharing cognizance of our limitations and joy, as they have been the confidants of our forefathers. So it is a matter of not regarding everything earthly with disfavor or disparaging it, but precisely because of its fragility which it shares with us, these phenomena and things should be comprehended and transformed by us in most intense understanding. Transformed? Yes, for it is our task to im-print this frail and unenduring earth so passionately and ardently in us that its essence is resurrected “invisibly” within us. We are the bees of the invisible world. Nous butinons éperdument le miel du visible, pour l’accumuler dans la grande ruche d’or de l’invisible. [We perpetually gather the honey of the visible world in order to store it in the great golden hive of the invisible one.] The “Elegies” show us at this work, the work of this continual transformation of the beloved visible and comprehensible world into the invisible vibration and stimulation of our nature, which introduces new frequencies of vibration into the universal spheres of vibration. (Since the various substances in the universe are only different rates of vibration, we make in this manner not only intensities of a mental variety, but who knows, new objects, metals, nebulae and constellations.) And this activity is strangely en-hanced and urged on by the increasingly rapid disappearance of so much that is visible which no longer will be replaced. Even for our grandparents a “house,” a “fountain,” a tower familiar to them, even their own clothing, their coat: these things were infinitely more to them, infinitely more familiar; almost everything was a vessel in which they found human elements present and stored up human elements. Now empty, neutral things crowd over from America, superficial things, appurtenances of life . . . A house in the American sense, an American apple or a grape vine from there has nothing in common with the house, the fruit, the
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grape, into which the hope and contemplation of our forefathers had entered . . .
The animated, the perceived things sharing cognizance with us are declining and can no longer be replaced. We are perhaps the last who have still known such things.

On us rests the responsibility not only to preserve their memory (that would be little and unreliable), but also their human and laral value. (“Laral” in the sense of household deities.) The earth has no other refuge than to become invisible: in us, we who share in the invisible world with part of our nature, (at least) have shares in it, and who during our life here on earth can increase what belongs to us by adding invisibility—in us alone can this intimate and continual transformation of the visible world into invisibility which is no longer dependent on being visible and tangible be carried out, as our own destiny continually becomes more intensely present and invisible at the same time. The Elegies set up this standard for life: they assert, they celebrate this awareness. They set it carefully into its traditions by laying claim to very ancient traditions and reports of traditions for this supposition, and even in the Egyptian cult of the dead the “Elegies” invoke a sense of such connections. (Although the “Land of Lament” through which the older “Lament” leads the dead youth is not to be equated with Egypt, but only to a certain extent with a reflection of the land of the Nile in the desert clarity of the consciousness of the dead.) When one makes the mistake of clinging to the Catholic conception of death, the hereafter and eternity in the Elegies or Sonnets, then one strays completely from their point of origin and prepares the way for even more basic errors. The “angel” of the Elegies has nothing to do with the angel of the Christian heaven (more nearly with the angel figures of Islam) . . .
The angel of the Elegies is that creation in which the transformation of the visible world into invisibility which we carry out appears already completed. For the angel of the Elegies all earlier towers and bridges are existing, because they long have been invisible, and the still standing towers and bridges of our existence are already invisible, although (for us) still physically present. The angel of the Elegies is that being which stands for the idea of recognizing a higher order of reality in invisibility.—Therefore “awesome” to us because we, his lovers and transformers, still cling to visible reality.—All the worlds of the universe are rushing into invisibility as their next deeper reality; a few stars literally grow more intense and perish in the boundless awareness of the angels—, others are allotted to beings which transform them slowly and with difficulty, in whose terror and ecstasy they attain their nearest invisible reality. We are, let it be emphasized once more, we are in the sense of the Elegies these transformers of the earth; our entire existence, the soaring and plunging of our love, all this fits us for this task (in addition to which basically no other exists). (The Sonnets portray details of this activity which appears here under the name and patronage of a deceased maiden whose immaturity and innocence hold open the door of the grave so that having entered, she belongs
to those powers which keep the life half of totality fresh and open toward the other vulnerable half.) The Elegies and the Sonnets contribute mutually to each other—, and I see an infinite blessing in the fact that with the same breath I was enabled to fill both sails: the little rust-colored sail of the Sonnets and the gigantic white sail of the Elegies.

Dear friend, perhaps you will find here some advice and information, and beyond that help yourself along. For I do not know whether I could ever say more.

Yours,

R. M. Rilke