Duinesian Elegies

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APPENDIX C

In a letter dated 1 February 1914 (Rilke, Briefwechsel mit Benvenuta, pp. 22–23) Rilke wrote of his journey to Egypt in January, February, and March, 1911. Many of the references recur in the tenth elegy.

My friend, in Berlin take a look at the bust of Amenophis the Fourth in the center glass-roofed pavilion of the Egyptian Museum (I could tell you much about this king); sense from this face what it means to be face to face with the infinite world and in such a limited surface to create a balance with the entire figure by means of the accentuated arrangement of a few features. Couldn’t one turn away from a starry night to find in this countenance the same law flourishing, the same greatness, depth and incomprehensibility? I have learned to observe from such things, and when later in Egypt they stood before me in great numbers, in their very own nature, comprehension of them swept over me in such waves that I lay almost an entire night facing of the great Sphinx as though cast out from all my life in its presence. You see, I haven’t gotten to music yet, but I’m familiar with noises, and one of the strangest came to me there; shall I tell you about it?

You undoubtedly know that it is difficult to be alone in that place; it has become a completely public place; the most fortuitous foreigners are dragged there in droves;—yet I had skipped the evening meal: even the Arabs sat at a distance around their fire; I had gotten rid of one of them who had noticed me by buying two oranges from him; and moreover the darkness protected me from being seen. I had waited for darkness out in the desert, then I came in slowly with the Sphinx to my back and calculated that the moon would have to come up behind the nearest pyramid now bathed intensely in the light of the sunset, for it was full moon. And when I had finally walked around the pyramid, the moon not only stood rather high in the sky, it poured such a flood of moonlight over the endless view that I had to shade my eyes from its light with my hand in order to find my way between the boulders and the excavations.—The back part of the body of the Sphinx does not rise significantly above the plain of sand, for since the first excavations it has been covered over again several times, and up to now it has been considered satisfactory to keep the front side free up to the paws so that removal of the ground results in a downward slope toward the Sphinx resembling half a funnel. On this steep slope facing the gigantic figure I sought a place and lay wrapped in my coat, in fear, endlessly communing. I do not know whether I was ever so completely conscious of my life as in those night hours in which it lost all value: for what was it compared to all this? The level on which it was played out grew dark, everything that is world and life proceeded on a higher stage on which a constellation and a God lingered silently. You also will remember

138
having experienced this: that the view of a scene, of the ocean, of the endlessly starry night imbes us with the conviction of connections and insights which we are not able to comprehend: this is precisely what I experienced here very intensely; here there arose a figure which was oriented toward heaven; on which the millennia had produced nothing but a little disdainful decay, and it was completely unimaginable that this thing bore human features (the completely recognizable features of a human face) and that in its exalted position they sufficed. Oh, dear friend, I told myself that this, this which we alternately leave to destiny and take into our own hands, must be capable of signifying something great if its form can endure in such surroundings. This face had assumed the habits of space, individual portions of its gaze and of its smile had been destroyed, but the rising and setting of the heavens had reflected upon it enduring feelings. From time to time I closed my eyes and although my heart pounded, I reproached myself with not feeling this deeply enough: did I not have to reach a point in my astonishment where I had never been before? I said to myself: just imagine you had been carried here with eyes blindfolded and put down here obliquely in the deep, scarcely blowing coolness and now you open your eyes . . . And when I actually opened them now, good heavens,—it took a good while before they recovered, comprehended that creature, the mouth, the cheek, the forehead on which moonlight and shadow flowed from expression to expression. How many times already had my eye attempted this detailed cheek; up there it rounded so gently, as if there were room for more places than down here among us. And then, just as I observed it again I suddenly was drawn in an unexpected manner into its confidence, and I got to know it, then I experienced it in the most complete sensing of its roundness. Not until a moment afterward did I comprehend what had happened. Just imagine this: behind the protrusion of the crown on the head of the Sphinx an owl had flown up and slowly, indescribably audible in the pure depth of the night, had brushed the face with its gentle flight: and now there emerged in my hearing which had grown very sharp in the long stillness of the night the contour of that cheek, sketched there as if by a miracle.