

= Duino Elegies =

The Duino Elegies ( German : Duineser Elegien ) are a collection of ten elegies written by the Bohemian @-@ Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke ( 1875 ? 1926 ) . Rilke , who is " widely recognized as one of the most lyrically intense German @-@ language poets , " began writing the elegies in 1912 while a guest of Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis ( 1855 ? 1934 ) at Duino Castle , near Trieste on the Adriatic Sea . The poems , 859 lines long in total , were dedicated to the Princess upon their publication in 1923 . During this ten @-@ year period , the elegies languished incomplete for long stretches of time as Rilke suffered frequently from severe depression ? some of which was caused by the events of World War I and being conscripted into military service . Aside from brief episodes of writing in 1913 and 1915 , Rilke did not return to the work until a few years after the war ended . With a sudden , renewed inspiration ? writing in a frantic pace he described as a " boundless storm , a hurricane of the spirit " ? he completed the collection in February 1922 while staying at Château de Muzot in Veyras , in Switzerland 's Rhone Valley . After their publication in 1923 and Rilke 's death in 1926 , the Duino Elegies were quickly recognized by critics and scholars as his most important work .

The Duino Elegies are intensely religious , mystical poems that weigh beauty and existential suffering . The poems employ a rich symbolism of angels and salvation but not in keeping with typical Christian interpretations . Rilke begins the first elegy in an invocation of philosophical despair , asking : " Who , if I cried out , would hear me among the hierarchies of angels ? " ( Wer , wenn ich schrie , hörte mich denn aus der Engel Ordnungen ? ) and later declares that " every angel is terrifying " ( Jeder Engel ist schrecklich ) . While labelling of these poems as " elegies " would typically imply melancholy and lamentation , many passages are marked by their positive energy and " unrestrained enthusiasm . " Together , the Duino Elegies are described as a metamorphosis of Rilke 's " ontological torment " and an " impassioned monologue about coming to terms with human existence " discussing themes of " the limitations and insufficiency of the human condition and fractured human consciousness ... man 's loneliness , the perfection of the angels , life and death , love and lovers , and the task of the poet . "

Rilke 's poetry , and the Duino Elegies in particular , influenced many of the poets and writers of the twentieth century . In popular culture , his work is frequently quoted on the subject of love or of angels and referenced in television programs , motion pictures , music and other artistic works , in New Age philosophy and theology , and in self @-@ help books .

= = Writing and publication history = =

= = = Duino Castle and the first elegies = = =

In 1910 , Rilke had completed writing the loosely autobiographical novel , Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge ( The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge ) in which a young poet is terrified by the fragmentation and chaos of modern urban life . After completing the work , Rilke experienced a severe psychological crisis that lasted for two years . In 1912 , still facing this severe depression and despair , Rilke was invited to Duino Castle by Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis ( 1855 ? 1934 ) ( born Princess Marie zu Hohenlohe @-@ Waldenburg @-@ Schillingsfürst ) whom he had met a few years before . The princess ( who was twenty years older than Rilke ) and her husband Prince Alexander ( 1851 ? 1939 ) enthusiastically supported artists and writers .

While at Duino , Rilke and Princess Marie discussed the possibility of collaborating on a translation of Dante Alighieri 's La Vita Nuova ( 1295 ) . After the Princess left to join her husband at their Lautschin estate , Rilke spent the next few weeks at the castle preparing to focus on work . During these weeks , he was writing Marien @-@ Leben ( The Life of Mary ) . While walking along the cliffs overlooking the Adriatic Sea near the castle , Rilke claimed to hear a voice calling to him speaking the words of the first line , Wer , wenn ich schrie , hörte mich denn aus der Engel Ordnungen ? ( " Who , if I cried out , would hear me among the hierarchies of angels ? " ) which he quickly wrote in

his notebook . Within days , he produced drafts of the first two elegies in the series and drafted passages and fragments that would later be incorporated into later elegies ? including the opening passage of the tenth elegy .

Rilke would only finish the third and fourth elegies before the onset of World War I. The third was finished in 1913 in Paris , the fourth in early 1915 in Munich . The effects of the war ? particularly his traumatic experiences being conscripted into the Austro -@- Hungarian army ? triggered a severe renewal of his depression that rendered him unable to write for several years .

= = = Château de Muzot and the creative hurricane = = =

Because of his depression , Rilke was unable to return to writing for several years , and only in 1920 was he motivated to focus towards completing his work on the Duino Elegies . However , for the next two years , his mode of life was unstable and did not permit him the time or mental state he needed for his writing .

In 1921 , Rilke journeyed to Switzerland , hoping to immerse himself in French culture near Geneva and to find a place to live permanently . At the time , he was romantically involved with Baladine Klossowska ( 1886 ? 1969 ) . At the invitation of Werner Reinhart ( 1884 ? 1951 ) , Rilke moved into the Château de Muzot , a thirteenth @-@ century manor house that lacked gas and electricity , near Veyras , Rhone Valley , Switzerland . Reinhart , a Swiss merchant and amateur clarinetist , used his wealth to be a patron to many twentieth @-@ century writers and composers . He bought Muzot to allow Rilke to live there rent @-@ free and focus on his work . Rilke and Klossowska moved there in July 1921 and later in the year Rilke translated writings by Paul Valéry and Michelangelo into German .

With news of the death of his daughter 's friend , Wera Knoop ( 1900 ? 1919 ) , Rilke set to work on Sonnets to Orpheus . The Sonnets frequently refer to Wera , both directly where he addresses her by name and indirectly in allusions to a " dancer " or the mythical Eurydice . Rilke wrote to the young girl 's mother stating that Wera 's ghost was " commanding and impelling " him to write . In a rush of inspiration , Rilke worked on the Sonnets and renewed his focus towards completing the remainder of Duino Elegies . In one week , Rilke completed the unfinished elegies , and from 2 February to 23 February 1922 he completed all the 55 sonnets of the two parts of Sonnets to Orpheus . Rilke considered both collections to be " of the same birth " . In a letter to Klossowska on 9 February 1922 , Rilke wrote : " what weighed me down and caused my anguish most is done ... I am still trembling from it . ... And I went out to caress old Muzot , just now , in the moonlight . " Two days later , completing the last of his work on the Elegies in the evening , he wrote to Lou Andreas @-@ Salomé that he had finished " everything in a few days ; it was a boundless storm , a hurricane of the spirit , and whatever inside me is like thread and webbing , framework , it all cracked and bent . No thought of food . "

= = = Publication and reception = = =

Duino Elegies was published by Insel @-@ Verlag in Leipzig , Germany in 1923 . Prominent critics praised the work and compared its merits to the works of Hölderlin and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe . In 1935 , critic Hans @-@ Rudolf Müller was the first to describe the collection as inherently " mystical " and promote Rilke as a " mystic " spiritual guide .

In My Belief : Essays on Life and Art , German novelist Hermann Hesse ( 1877 ? 1962 ) describes Rilke as evolving within the confines of exploring his existential problems , that " at each stage now and again the miracle occurs , his delicate , hesitant , anxiety @-@ prone person withdraws , and through him resounds the music of the universe ; like the basin of a fountain he becomes at once instrument and ear . "

However , during the 1920s , many of the younger generation of German @-@ language poets and writers did not like Duino Elegies because of the poems ' obscure symbols and philosophy . The German poet Albrecht Schaeffer ( who is associated with the literary circle of German lyric poet Stefan George ) dismissed the poems as " mystical blather " and described their " secular theology "

as " impotent gossip " .

Theodor W. Adorno's *Jargon of Authenticity* ( 1964 ) suggested that the poems are essentially evil : " The fact that the neoromantic lyric sometimes behaves like the jargon [ of authenticity ] , or at least timidly readies the way for it , should not lead us to look for the evil of the poetry simply in its form . It is not simply grounded , as a much too innocent view might maintain , in the mixture of poetry and prose . The evil , in the neoromantic lyric , consists in the fitting out of the words with a theological overtone , which is belied by the condition of the lonely and secular subject who is speaking there : religion as ornament . " Adorno further believed the poems reinforced the German value of commitment that supported a cultural attraction towards the principles of Nazism .

= = Symbolism and themes = =

Throughout the *Duino Elegies* , Rilke explores themes of " the limitations and insufficiency of the human condition and fractured human consciousness ... mankind's loneliness , the perfection of the angels , life and death , love and lovers , and the task of the poet . " Philosopher Martin Heidegger remarked that " the long way leading to the poetry is itself one that inquires poetically , " and that Rilke " comes to realize the destitution of the time more clearly . The time remains destitute not only because God is dead , but because mortals are hardly aware and capable even of their own mortality . " Rilke explores the nature of mankind's contact with beauty , and its transience , noting that humanity is forever only getting a brief , momentary glimpse of an inconceivable beauty and that it is terrifying . At the onset of the First Elegy , Rilke describes this frightened experience , defining beauty as

Rilke depicted this infinite , transcendental beauty with the symbol of angels . However , he did not use the traditional Christian interpretation of angels . He sought to utilize a symbol of the angel that was secular , divorced from religious doctrine and embodied a tremendous transcendental beauty . In this , however , Rilke commented that he was greatly influenced by the depiction of angels found in Islam . For Rilke , the symbol of the angel represents a perfection that is " beyond human contradictions and limitations " in a " higher level of reality in the invisible . " Where there is incongruity that adds to mankind's despair and anxiety is due to human nature keeping us clinging to the visible and the familiar . As mankind encounters the invisible and unknown higher levels represented by these angels , the experience of the invisible will be " terrifying " ( in German , schrecklich ) .

As mankind comes in contact with this terrifying beauty represented by these angels , Rilke is concerned with the experience of existential angst in trying to come to terms with the coexistence of the spiritual and earthly . He portrays human beings as alone in a universe where God is abstract and possibly non-existent , " where memory and patterns of intuition raise the sensitive consciousness to a realization of solitude . " Rilke depicts the alternative , a spiritually fulfilling possibility beyond human limitations in the form of angels . Beginning with the first line of the collection , Rilke's despairing speaker calls upon the angels to notice human suffering and to intervene . There is a deeply felt despair and unresolvable tension in that no matter man's striving , the limitation of human and earthly existence renders humanity unable to reach out to the angels . The narrative voice Rilke employs in the *Duino Elegies* strives " to achieve in human consciousness the angel's presumed plenitude of being " ( i.e. being , or existence , in German : Dasein ) .

Rilke uses the images of love and of lovers as a way of showing mankind's potential and humanity's failures in achieving the transcendent understanding embodied by the angels . In the Second Elegy , Rilke writes that " Lovers , if they knew how , might utter / wondrous things in the midnight air . " ( *Liebende könnten , verstünden sie's , in der Nachtluft / wunderbar reden .* ) He depicts " the inadequacy of ordinary lovers " and contrasts a feminine form of " sublime love " and a masculine " blind animal passion . " At the time the first elegies were written , Rilke often " expressed a longing for human companionship and affection , and then , often immediately afterwards , asking whether he could really respond to such companionship if it were offered to him ... " He notices a " decline in the lives of lovers ... when they began to receive , they also began to lose the power of giving . " Later , during World War I , he would lament that " the world has fallen into the hands of men . " In

the face of death , life and love is not cheap and meaningless and Rilke asserted that great lovers are able to recognize all three ( life , love , and death ) as part of a unity . Rilke asserted that the true meaning of love could be understood through death providing love a meaning in this unity ? that " the nature of every ultimate love ... is only able to reach the loved one in the infinite . "

In a 1923 letter to Nanny von Escher , Rilke confided :

" Two inner experiences were necessary for the creation of these books ( The Sonnets to Orpheus and The Duino Elegies ) . One is the increasingly conscious decision to hold life open to death . The other is the spiritual imperative to present , in this wider context , the transformations of love that are not possible in a narrower circle where Death is simply excluded as The Other .

The Fifth Elegy is largely inspired by Pablo Picasso 's 1905 Rose Period painting , Les Saltimbanques ( " The Acrobats " , also known as " The Family of Saltimbanques " ) in which Picasso depicts six figures pictured " in the middle of a desert landscape and it is impossible to say whether they are arriving or departing , beginning or ending their performance . " Rilke depicted the six artists about to begin their performance , and that they were used as a symbol of " human activity ... always travelling and with no fixed abode , they are even a shade more fleeting than the rest of us , whose fleetingness was lamented . " Further , Rilke in the poem described these figures as standing on a " threadbare carpet " to suggest " the ultimate loneliness and isolation of Man in this incomprehensible world , practicing their profession from childhood to death as playthings of an unknown will ... before their ' pure too @-@ little ' had passed into ' empty too @-@ much . ' "

Because of the profound impact that the war had on him , Rilke expressed a hope in an 1919 letter that the task of the intellectual in a post @-@ war world would be to render the world right . It would be " to prepare in men 's hearts the way for those gentle , mysterious , trembling transformations from which alone the understandings and harmonies of a serener future will proceed . " Rilke envisioned his Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus as part of his contribution .

= = Influence = =

Rilke 's reputation in the English @-@ speaking world rests largely on the popularity of Duino Elegies . The collection has been translated into English over twenty times since it was first published in 1931 by London 's Hogarth Press in England as Duineser Elegien : Elegies from the Castle of Duino in a translation by Edward and Vita Sackville @-@ West . It was first translated for the American market in 1939 in a translation by J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender published by New York 's W. W. Norton & Company . Other translations have included those by poet David Young ( 1978 ) , Grateful Dead lyricist Robert Hunter ( 1989 ) , poet Galway Kinnell with Hannah Liebmann ( 1999 ) , Stephen Cohn ( 1989 ) , poet Alfred Poulin ( 1975 ) , and poet Gary Miranda ( 1981 ) .

In the United States , Rilke is one of the more popular , best @-@ selling poets ? along with thirteenth @-@ century Sufi mystic Rumi ( 1207 ? 1273 ) , and 20th century Lebanese @-@ American poet Kahlil Gibran ( 1883 ? 1931 ) . In popular culture , Rilke is frequently quoted or referenced in television programs , motion pictures , music and other works when these works discuss the subject of love or angels . Because of his work being described as " mystical , " Rilke 's works have also been appropriated for use by the New Age community and in self @-@ help books . Rilke has been reinterpreted " as a master who can lead us to a more fulfilled and less anxious life . "

Rilke 's work , and specifically , the Duino Elegies have been claimed as a deep influence by several poets and writers , including Galway Kinnell , Sidney Keyes , Stephen Spender , Robert Bly , W. S. Merwin , John Ashbery , novelist Thomas Pynchon and philosophers Ludwig Wittgenstein and Hans @-@ Georg Gadamer . Critics and scholars have discussed Pynchon 's use of Rilke 's lyricism and concepts of transformation in his novel Gravity 's Rainbow . The first lines of Gravity 's Rainbow mirror the first lines of first elegy , portraying the screaming descent of a V @-@ 2 rocket in 1944 London , and the novel has been described as a " serio @-@ comic variation on Rilke 's Duino Elegies and their German Romantic echoes in Nazi culture . " The British poet W. H. Auden ( 1907 ? 1973 ) has been described as " Rilke 's most influential English disciple " and he frequently " paid

homage to him " or used the imagery of angels in his work . In the 1936 poem cycle *Sonnets from China* , Auden directly alluded to Rilke 's writing of the *Duino Elegies* .

The reference here to stroking " that little tower " is derived from a series of letters written while Rilke was completing the *Elegies* including a letter he wrote to Klossowska , and one to his former lover , Lou Andreas Salomé . In the letter to Andreas Salomé , he writes " I went out and stroked the little Muzot , which protected it and me and finally granted it , like a large old animal . "

In later years , Rilke 's *Duino Elegies* and the *Sonnets to Orpheus* influenced Hans Georg Gadamer 's theories of hermeneutics ? understanding how an observer ( i.e. reader , listener , or viewer ) interprets cultural artifacts ( i.e. works of literature , music , or art ) as a series of distinct encounters . Gadamer , using examples of Rilke 's poetry in his writings , interprets these works as an experience of a divine " totality " that we must approach with a childlike innocence and ignorance ? that only through interpreting and reinterpreting can we cope with or solve the existential problems of humanity 's significance and impermanence . Gadamer points out that man is in a condition influenced by an anonymous , alienated , and mechanical world that has evolved to stand as an obstacle to his ability to make sense of such experiences .