

AUGUST 9 2021 READING OF RILKE'S FOURTH ELEGY

It is in a sense totally the wrong question to ask what is the *meaning* of a Rilke Elegy. And the issue is not the standard sort of excuse that character a poem has many possible meanings.

Rilke has a mythological closure, and that is what is much more important. This is a valuable concept with Rilke, which is that Rilke's poetry describes the whole of all that exists in precision. It is a grave error, in our opinion to seek to attempt to understand Rilke by external comparisons.

You have to stand in total void and see every element clearly. Oh trees of life, when does your winter come? Let's slow down right there. Existence has trees of life; these trees are of life; these trees are of Life; Life and trees are combined here, and so this is existential but concrete and immediately when does your winter come? The compactness and expanse and deep resonance of the winter of the trees of life is poetic genius in cosmic scale. It's not clever, you see. It is sublime and divine to ask the existential trees of life when their winter comes. These Trees of Life are mysterious beyond human comprehension, and we do not understand how winter comes to them, for they are of knowledge that is mysterious to Man.

The mood here is cosmic. The mood here is sad and elegiac too, to ask Trees of Life about coming of winter.

I won't go into line by line analysis but this is very important to understand that there is mystery of Nature in Life whose winter is know to Trees of Life. And that is real Nature, the Nature from whose source Life exists, not the sort of sham life studied by molecular biologists, the pretense of knowing the answer to source of Life.

We are not in harmony, our blood does not forewarn us like migratory birds ... and somewhere lions roam and never know any weakness. The knowledge of the mystery of living existence that is known by the Trees of Life is not known to us, so we are overtaken by winter. We are surprised and unprepared and weak against living existence and of the winter. We are not in the know, in harmony with existence.

We don't even know the vital contour of our own emotions ... one can hold the whole of death to ones heart gently and refuse to go on living.

I jumped to the end of the poem, the knowledge that is an answer to the knowledge that is not available in the mystery. And this is quite an interesting set of resonances, for that which makes us so weak and lacking against the unknown Nature that the Trees of Life know, of winter lets us understand over a long set of considerations that we have some special knowledge after all, that blood of migratory birds might not tell us, that we know of death and we hold on to it, and perhaps this particular facet of our human life, that we are capable of always understanding our death makes us a little different from the lions who know things and Trees of Life and birds. And this is a great revelation as well, that there is in

knowledge of death great revelations about who we are as human beings that make us uncomfortable and ignorant of much of what is simply known to Trees of Life.

Now to truly grasp the profound quality of Rilke's poetry you have to understand that he is dealing with all the deepest questions of the Axial Age and all the mythologies of the world. He says what is so mysterious about Life that we humans do not understand at all. He does not then say in his poetry "And the Sun God Ra descended through the clouds and said I, the Mighty God Ra, say unto thee with knowledge that thou shalt hold death close to thy hearts and then thou shalt be complete and the Kingdom of Ra will open for you afterward." He is not making a Divine pronouncement of this sort; he is saying I, Poet, shall tell you the truth and not God. It is implicit and his confidence is far beyond the confidence of Muhammad and Christ in a way, for his zealous answer is a different answer from them. And it is ambitious and completely his. He does not say "I, Poet Rilke, shall tell you what Almighty God does not." He is a deeply mature poet and does not need to tell you that, and that is the mark of a truly ambitious poet, who tells you the answer without seeking to convert you at all to the world where He, Rilke, is God. To go beyond Godhood is necessary for a great poet, something not easy to understand for many people. But that is just the way it is.