Rainer Maria Rilke

From Notebooks and Personal Papers

translated from German
by David Need

Shearsman Books
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Introduction

Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) is recognized as one of the great poets of 20th century European modernism. He is best known for a range of works including *Letters to a Young Poet*, *The Book of Hours*, *New Poems* (Rilke's response to early Modernist plastic and visual arts), and the two collections that are considered his masterworks, *The Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*, completed toward the end of his life, in 1922.

From 1921–1926, Rilke lived in southern Switzerland, in a region called the Valais that constitutes the upper Rhone Valley and its surroundings. Following the completion of the *Elegies* and *Sonnets*, Rilke began to work in both French and German. A collection of French poems addressed to the landscape of Valais, *Quatrains Valaisans*, was published in 1926. In May of that same year, Rilke sent his publishers an arrangement of German-language poems as a possible manuscript; the bulk of these date to 1924, but the collection included both material culled from a recently recovered 1906 daybook and a final set of poems written over the last two years of his life. Rilke sent the last of these in August 1926; he would die of complications from leukemia just four months later.

This volume is the first English translation of these poems in the arrangement Rilke had set down in 1926. A number of the poems have been included in various volumes of selected late poems and all were translated by Leishman (1957) in his running translation of uncollected poems and fragments according to the sequence of these in Insel's 1955 *Complete Works*. The arrangement translated here has only appeared in German as *Aus Taschen-Büchern und Merk-Blättern*, (Insel-Verlag, 1950).¹

In many ways, this arrangement reflects Rilke's awareness of his illness and likely death. The bulk of the poems come from 1924 following the first onset (in the winter of 1923-4) of what would later be diagnosed as leukemia, and the last ten poems from 1922, 1925 and 1914-5 function as a final coda. The sense of the occasional about the collection as a whole and the at-times stark difficulty of the poetry thus stages an attitude Rilke wished to convey—about his work (and about what work can do), and about our place in death and life.

¹ That edition is subtitled “in chance order,” but this is to some extent a conceit. The arrangement reflects the order of poems as set down in a notebooks sent to Rilke’s publishers, and the inclusion of the material from the 1906 Capri journal and the last poems sent to the Kippenburgs in August 1926 follows the instructions given by Rilke in his letters from that time.
This volume presents Rilke’s last suite of poems in a bilingual edition. The translation is followed by three appendices designed to give readers background and guide to reading the work. These include an essay that details connections between this collection and Rilke’s earlier work, a set of notes on the poems that identifies key motifs and offers translations of earlier settings of these motifs, and an essay on non-dual language and the translator’s decision to render \textit{Raum} as ‘affordance’ throughout.
From Notebooks and Personal Papers

SAMPLER
Herbst

Oh hoher Baum des Schauns, der sich entlaubt:
nun heißt gewachsen sein dem Übermaße
von Himmel, das durch seine Äste bricht.
Erfüllt vom Sommer, schien er tief und dicht,
uns beinahe denkend, ein vertrautes Haupt.
Nun wird sein ganzes Innere zur Straße
des Himmels. Und der Himmel kennt uns nicht.

Ein Äußerstes: daß wir wie Vogelflug
uns werfen durch das neue Aufgetane,
das uns verleugnet mit dem Recht des Raums,
der nur mit Welten umgeht. Unsres Saums
Wellen-Gefühle suchen nach Bezug
und trösten sich im Offenen als Fahne—
………………………………………………
Aber ein Heimweh meint das Haupt des Baums.

(Herbst 1924)
Autumn

Oh loftier tree in our gaze, that scatters its leaves: now you’d say it had reached the boundlessness of the sky that breaks through its branches.
Full of summer, it shone, deep and thick, as if thinking about us—a friendly head.
Now all the inwardness along the streets will be the sky’s. And the sky doesn’t know us.

An outermost limit: so that we, like a bird in flight, throw ourselves through the newly opened-out, which repudiates us according to the law of affordance that now surrounds us with World. The wave-feelings at our seams look for purchase and console themselves in the open as color—

But the homesick are reminded of the head of the tree.

(Autumn, 1924)
…Wenn aus des Kaufmanns Hand
die Waage übergeht
an jenen Engel, der sie in den Himmeln
stillt und beschwichtigt mit des Raumes Ausgleich…

(Val-Mont, in Herbst 1924)
…As if a scale is passed from
the traders’ hands
to that angel, who stops it in the
sky and steadies it with the settling of the affordances…

(Valmont, in Autumn, 1924)
Ach, nicht getrennt sein,  
nicht durch so wenig Wandung  
ausgeschlossen vom Sternen-Maß.  
Innres, was ists?  
Wenn nicht gesteigerter Himmel,  
durchworfen mit Vögeln und tief  
von Winden der Heimkehr.

(Paris 1925)
Ah, not to be separated,  
not to be closed out from the scope of the  
stars by even the slightest screen.  
The inward—what is it?  
If not an even higher sky,  
tossed through with birds and deep  
with the winds of homecoming.

(Paris, 1925)
Unaufhaltsam, ich will die Bahn vollenden
mich schreckt es, wenn mich ein Sterbliches hält.
Einmal hielt mich ein Schoß.
Ihm sich entringen, war tödlich:
ich rang mich ins Leben. Aber sind Arme so tief,
sind sie so fruchtbar, um ihnen
durch die beginnliche Not
neuer Geburt zu entgehn?

(Paris 1925)
Ceaselessly, I want to finish this path,
it frightens me when someone mortal stops me.
A mother’s lap once held me.
Escaping it was like death:
I wrung myself into life. But are her arms too long,
are they too fruitful, to slip past them
into the beginning-like want
of a new birth?

(Paris, 1925)
Jetzt wär es Zeit, daß Götter träten aus bewohnten Dingens…
Ihr Oftgekommenen, Schläfer in den Dingens, die heiter aufstehn, die sich an den Brunnen, die wir vermuten, Hals und Antlitz waschen und die ihr Ausgeruhtsein leicht hinzutun zu dem, was voll scheint, unserm vollen Leben. Noch einmal sei es euer Morgen, Götter. Wir wiederholen. Ihr allein seid Ursprung. Die Welt steht auf mit euch, und Anfang glänzt an allen Bruchstelln unseres Mißlingens….

(Fragmentarisch, Muzot, Herbst 1925)
Now is the time that the gods would step out
of the things they had inhabited…
when they would crash off every wall in my
house. A new page. Just the wind,
in which each leaf, tossed in its turning, reaches out,
and fills the air like an ice floe:
a new atmosphere. O gods, gods!
You who had come so often, asleep in things,
who arise cheerfully, whom we assume are
there in the fountain, when we wash our neck and face,
and who carelessly add your being-rested
to that which seemed full, our already full lives.
May it once again be as it was in your morning, gods.
We repeat. You are the source of all.
The world arises with you, and origin sparkles
in all the cracks of our mistakes…

(Fragmentary, Muzot, Autumn 1925)