

Rilke and the Contemporary Reader

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One charge that could justifiably be laid against much contemporary poetry in the British Isles is that it is indulgently anecdotal. There seem to be two kinds of anecdotalism at large, with more than one source. One (often found among older poets) is the degenerate phase of a kind of writing traceable to Larkin, inclined to the proverbial without Larkin's selectiveness or formal memorability; the other (whose exponents are on the whole younger) owes much to Frank O'Hara as filtered through Huddersfield. Both kinds trade on an attachment to authenticity which is felt to outbid both technical reach and thematic scale. Both serve a misconceived 'democratic' notion of poetry as entertainment, in which equality (a notion misplaced in this context) emerges not in diversity but as sameness. These problems are mirrored among the avant-garde, where the pleasure principle is tirelessly punished. One might almost suspect that among some writers there is a strange underlying antipathy towards language itself. In one sense, given that very little work from any period of poetry survives, this hardly matters; but it does suggest a widespread lack of imaginative confidence. At the same time, some of the most interesting contemporary poets are powerfully drawn to the work of a modern poet who was prepared to stake everything on the imagination's resources.

Since his work was translated into English by Leishman and Spender, Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) has never lost his popularity with English-speaking poets and readers. The "Santa Claus of loneliness" appealed to Auden, to Lowell in *Imitations* and to Randall Jarrell. More generally, a certain recognizable, religiose tone and an atmosphere of yearning have long been installed in American poetry, for good or ill. Poets as different as Louise Glück and Jorie Graham show clear affinities with Rilke, while legions of inferiors are, we might say, emotionally imitative of the German poet. Translations of Rilke accumulate steadily, among them those by C. F. MacIntyre, M. D. Herter Norton, Michael Hamburger, Stephen Mitchell and Stephen Cohn. There is nothing surprising in this, perhaps: Rilke is clearly a major modern poet, so it is natural for poets and translators turn to his work, and for the readership of poetry, insofar as one exists, to do the same.

Yet it seems that interest in Rilke is undergoing a phase of

intensification at present. To speak only of Britain and Ireland, 2002 saw Jo Shapcott's *Tender Taxes*, her versions of the poems which Rilke wrote in French towards the end of his life; Michael Hamburger's *An Unofficial Rilke* (1980) was republished as *Turning Point: Miscellaneous Poems 1912-1926* in 2003. *Faint Harps and Silver Voices* (2000), the selected translations of Hamburger's long-standing collaborator Christopher Middleton, naturally included a solid representation of Rilke. Don Paterson is soon to publish a version of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*; Seamus Heaney has recently published translations from the sonnets in the *TLS*; Robert Saxton's *Manganese* (2003) contains versions of ten of them. Robin Robertson included 'Falling', a fine version of the 1902 poem 'Autumn', in *Slow Air* (2002); Rilkean angels occur in the work of W. N. Herbert. There would be no shortage of other examples. For some years Michael Hofmann has been preparing *Rilke in English*, an anthology of translations by many hands in the Penguin Classics series, scheduled for publication in 2007 and setting Rilke alongside writers of founding importance in European literature such as Virgil, Horace and Dante. If you can find a poetry section in a bookshop nowadays, it is likely to include more than one selection of Rilke's work. Could the same be said of Valéry, whom Rilke considered "the one nearest to me among the poets of my generation", his peer among his contemporaries, and the poet whose work he credited with breaking several years' stalemate in the composition of the *Duino Elegies*? Only demand, or a sure sense of its imminence, can explain Rilke's prominence. This is especially striking when we consider how little modern and contemporary German literature is readily available in Britain, despite Hofmann's heroic rate of output of new translations of fiction. Even the place of Thomas Mann's novels appears to be at risk on the shelves of Waterstone's among the three-for-two banalities.

How are we to account for the phenomenon of Rilke's appeal? It may of course simply be that there are interesting translations available. Among these is the work of some leading poets who are not trained linguists but who are drawn to approach Rilke because of his peculiar power to engage the reader. Jo Shapcott has asked:

The fascination for poets [...] is it that Rilke's poems demand both that you pour yourself into them, and that you open yourself to them in a way that makes the act of reading more like writing – or, at least, some connected experience like conversing, touching, praying? The relationship of the reader to these poems is unlike any other I can think of.

Perhaps "praying" is a little worrying (for reasons I'll return to below), but

Shapcott is surely right to suggest that the *address* of Rilke's poems – sometimes involving “you”, often using “we” to active effect rather than as mere rhetorical reinforcement – does work to implicate the reader as a companion of a sort, a privileged listener rather than an accidental passer-by or a punter who pays on the door. This has something to do with the peculiarly privileged status which Rilke spent much of his time engineering and sustaining. To Rilke's admirers during his lifetime, that European parish of rich women and compliant publishers, his appeal was often that of a prophet, an emissary from a higher power. The archangel in a suit had a more-than-literary function, one markedly apparent even in a culture where literature was often required to operate at a visionary degree of elevation. Even so, Rilke's role retained a strong personal dimension, as his vast and meticulous correspondence suggests. And the poems clearly reach beyond a supportive coterie. With their combination of scale, exhilarating and eerie perception, and their marked respect and courtesy towards the reader, they make it hard to resist the attempt to translate them, though numerous honourable examples testify to the extreme difficulty of the task. It seems too that the most interesting translations are often the most boldly interventionist, and there is a precedent for this in Rilke's own practice. In his translations of Valéry, as his biographer Donald Prater expresses it, Rilke retained the “outward form of the verses: yet his images are often subtly different, and the thought sometimes elusively changed, resulting in a German poem with a beauty of its own but going beyond translation in the strict sense – ‘as if a piece written for the harpsichord were played on an organ.’”

There may be less desirable features to the attraction Rilke is exerting; or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, in some of the meanings that are projected on to him. This negative potential is glancingly apparent in an American context. In his essay ‘Trafficking in the Radiant: The Spiritualization of American Poetry’, published in the July/August 2005 edition of *American Poetry Review*, the critic Ira Sadoff noted that “In the past two decades, Rilke has replaced Neruda as one of our most influential poets” – the political surreal displaced by romantic prophecy, perhaps. Sadoff juxtaposes this with a renewed interest in Eliot, as evidence of a reactionary evasiveness at work in American culture in general (although, as in Britain, poetry hardly registers on the cultural instruments there). He diagnoses an attempt by some to escape from our fraught times, an attempt which plays into the hands of an increasingly prescriptive and monolithic religious-political Right, whose apocalyptic visions are founded on precisely the materialism which some are fleeing in order to join the more fiery Protestant churches.

Sadoff has little time for things of the spirit, and not much more – in this essay at any rate – for poems themselves. He quotes a garrulous but compassionate piece of residual Catholicism by W. S. DiPiero and damns its presumptuous sympathy and submissiveness. Then, turning to T. S. Eliot, he argues:

In Eliot's anti-Semitism, the Jew becomes his threatening object of desire: his projective identification of Jews as representing the body, externalizing his feelings of guilt and shame onto the material body of the Jew, originates in his longing to transcend the body and the world: the implication of which is that the body is a source of debasement, sin and decay.

Sadoff may well be right in his formulation. Certainly the problem of Eliot's loathsome attitudes – or Pound's – is never going to be talked away as a mere unfortunate characteristic of the times. Yet the quoted example provides a rather unsatisfying way of reading poems, since it converts them from events into summaries. In doing so it excludes the three-dimensional dramatic life which is so important in drawing us to poetry in the first place, and which – though not for Eliot in this case, it would appear – is also the source of its frequent opposition to received ideas and prejudices. Sadoff intends to dispute the truth-content of his examples, but he's actually opposed to what he infers the poets *feel* – about the suffering of others, about Jews. As Rilke wrote in *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge*: "Poetry isn't, as people imagine, merely feelings (these come soon enough); it is experiences." One can agree with Sadoff's interpretation while also thinking that there must be more to the poetry in the first place if it is to deserve greater literary attention than the ravings of a neo-Fascist website.

What exactly might Rilke signify in the terms Sadoff sets out? It seems reasonable to suggest that the metaphysical cast of Rilke's imagination exerts a strong attraction when Christianity – arguably doomed from the moment it began to defend and reform itself in the light of secular pressures – may be in terminal decline in Europe as a whole. Rilke, a lapsed Catholic whose religious views were predictably idiosyncratic, is perhaps felt to meet a spiritual need or aspiration without requiring adherence to an explicit dogma. For example, he finds room for sexuality where Christianity is still often hobbled by shame. Indeed, he sees sexuality as an aspect of necessity:

Again and again, though we know the landscape of love
and the little graveyard with its lamenting names

and the terrible reticent gorge, in which the others
end: again and again we go out in couples
under the ancient trees, lie down again and again
among the wild flowers, facing the sky.

(Translated by Michael Hamburger.)

Rilke also privileges the interior life, which has a powerful appeal in a time of widespread political exhaustion and despair, when many people fear that the democratic state may either have run its course or be facing extinction at the hands of those elected to sustain it. To some this must seem like an evasion. To others it will be essential to try to take the measure of life in terms subtler than those allowed by the widespread impoverishment of language and argument which seems to accompany the gradual closing of the circle of state control: after all, what are we claiming to be civilized *about*? Rilke (who himself seems to have lacked any power of sustained political attention) insists that there is more to life than what we see or directly experience, and that what appears negative – in particular, death itself – needs to be grasped as part of a larger whole.

If these are among the reasons for Rilke's appeal, then we may be in dangerous territory. For all that Rilke deliberately and painfully and with complete seriousness sacrificed himself, and others, and much else besides, to his work and to the (by no means immutable) convictions it embodies, the ideas associated with him are problematic because their borders with wishfulness and sentimentality are conspicuously insecure. We live in a period of designer religion and low-cost spirituality, when profundity is another product to be bought off the shelf. A New Age Rilke would not be Rilke at all, of course, and there is nothing to be said to readers who might seek to adapt him to this end. It should be acknowledged, though, that serious-minded Anglophone readers too have often found the spiritual climate of the *Duino Elegies* and the *Sonnets to Orpheus* unpalatable, partly because of the work's blithe indifference to potential accusations of pretension and partly because there is little precisely comparable material in the English tradition (Rilke himself in return shows a corresponding lack of interest in English poetry). A reputation for otherworldliness, for having 'gone beyond', for table tapping and gauzy imprecision, clings to Rilke, but this is misleading. There is in fact no point in reading Rilke in order to *evade* the world: however rarefied the climate into which his work led him, it was clearly part of *this* world – hence the steady focus on death – and must have seemed to him pointless otherwise. His great poem 'To Hölderlin' (September 1914) praises his predecessor for an act of imaginative

restoration. Of Hölderlin's "night landscape" he writes: "No one / Renounced this more nobly and no one / Restored it so nearly intact, or asked for less." The tribute is to a poet who extended the sense of imaginative possibility. In December 1926, in "Komm du, du letzter, den ich anerkenne" ("Now come, the last that I can recognize"), Rilke, dying in extreme pain from leukaemia, described his condition unsparingly:

...Ganz rein, ganz planlos frei von Zukunft stieg
ich auf des Leidens wirren Scheiterhaufen,
so sicher nirgend Künftiges zu kaufen
um dieses Herz, darin der Vorrat schwieg.
Bin ich es noch, der da unkenntlich brennt?
Erinnerungen reiß ich nicht herein.
O Leben, Leben: Draußensein.
Und ich in Lohe. Niemand der mich kennt.

...Quite pure of forethought, futureless and free
I mounted suffering's tangled, criss-crossed pyre,
so sure there was no purchase to acquire
for this heart's future, all its store now silent.
What burns there, so transmuted? Is that I?
Into this fire I drag no memory.
To be alive, alive: to be outside.
And I ablaze. With no one who knows me.

(Translation by Michael Hamburger)

Not an iota of that unique, many-eyed poetic intelligence is allowed to lapse: the personal cry is dramatized in full, seen by the author and known by the reader as an utterance both representative and particular.

And perhaps what draws some very gifted poets to immerse themselves in Rilke's work and to make new versions of it lies in Rilke's insistence that poetry is not something other than poetry. In recent years, as I suggested above, readers could have been forgiven for thinking that some of those involved in poetry actually hate it, whether knowingly or not – in some cases by ignoring the demands of technique and in others by excluding the aesthetic from an arid and repetitive poetry-as-critique. In his witty and wide-ranging *Defence of Poetry*, given as the T. S. Eliot lecture, 'The Dark Art of Poetry', Don Paterson argued that "the insistence on poetry's auxiliary usefulness – for example in raising issues of cultural identity, as a form of therapy, or generating academic papers [...] has encouraged it to think far

less of itself, and so eroded its real power to actually inspire readers to think or live differently.” In passing, Paterson seems to overstate the case against criticism (derided as “academic papers”). He is not alone, apparently. In 1903 Rilke wrote in the first of his *Letters to a Young Poet* (and was later to repeat):

there is nothing which touches works of art so little as does the language of criticism[...] Few things are in fact as accessible to reason or to language as people will generally try to make us believe. Most phenomena are *unsayable*, and have their being in a dimension which no word has ever entered; and works of art are the most unsayable of all – they are mysterious presences whose lives endure alongside our own perishable lives.

This kind of thing seems guaranteed to provoke the irritated scorn of many Anglophones: a precious up-itself-ness which throws out a real point – the integrity of the work of art – along with a bathful of richly-scented posturing and spilt religion. Rilke’s contention, though, is at bottom wholly serious, and in fact very close to Paterson’s: the work of art, the poem, has its own imaginative life. To approach it as merely a version of something that already exists – for example, as a highly decorated or elaborated commonplace – is to lose the chance of contact with it. Rilke himself was embarrassed by his own academic unreadiness, finding systematic reading a torture, and was at times inclined, like many poets outside the academy, to pull rank by ascending a secret staircase to The Truth. But this is not to dispose of criticism. Literature cannot function in the absence of reflection, or of readers who respond to the complexity of the original work with a corresponding quality of attention. The challenge for critics is to find language which is neither posthumous Mandarin, nor a sealed tunnel of ideological anxiety, nor the fleeting chatter of the times. In the case of Rilke this involves, clearly, a strong sense of the dramatic, of the poem as a process whose gaze is often in large part directed to the future.

The force of “Now come, the last that I can recognize”, where no personal future remains, arises partly from the fact that for Rilke death has been not only the inescapable human fate but also a kind of moral / imaginative imprimatur. To hold such a belief is one thing; to test what Empson called “the trigger of the literary man’s biggest gun” in the event itself is another. A comment by Michael Hamburger on an earlier phase of Rilke’s work is also applicable to its end: “Rilke’s personal confessions and his existential affirmations or negations are inseparable from questions about

the function of poetry and poets.” To live was for Rilke to be writing, or thinking about it, or, in the case of the *Duino Elegies*, waiting for years on end for a particular imaginative opportunity to re-present itself. Vocation is hardly a strong enough word for this commitment. There is no evasion in Rilke’s lines on facing death, any more than in Keats’s address to Fanny Brawne. It is understandable that translation does not wholly capture the tone of: “O Leben, Leben: Draußensein”, where memory, longing, agony, acceptance and understanding are all simultaneously present. The lyric power of the piece depends on a lifetime of intelligence applied to making poems.

That intelligence enabled Rilke to move happily among language which in other hands might have seemed inert and abstract: it seems as though what Hamburger calls Rilke’s “virtuosity of feeling” enables him to lend substance to terms which the contemporary reader in English may at first be inclined to reject, for example from *Sonnets to Orpheus*: Grief, Triumph and Yearning, all personified; the Unsayable; permanence, the heart, not-being, destiny, the Earth. At the same time, natural imagery – wind, earth, roots, the rose and so on – is continually employed for philosophical ends without (and this is the intriguing part) losing its original valency. The rose never feels like a token or a surface pretext but is, rather, charged with an interior light. Concrete and abstract coexist successfully, partly, one suspects, because of Rilke’s evident command of tone, gesture and timing, partly because such a practice remained a live possibility in German.

When Rilke completed the *Duino Elegies* (published 1923), Anglo-American modernism had been cleansing the stables of exhausted romanticism and its attendant parochialism, trying at once to restore precision to language and to renew its power of connotation. William Carlos Williams spoke of his objections to Eliot and Pound’s recourse to Europe and of his desire for “no ideas but in things”, but Rilke’s work, though it approaches the matter from a quite different direction, is also concerned with the inseparability of ideas and things. Where Williams seems to have sought to subordinate ideas (for which read abstractions) to the dramatizing power of a poetry rooted in speech, Rilke moved to abolish the distinction between concrete and abstract by dint of imaginative inclusiveness (which sounds a little like Eliot’s myth of the unified sensibility, a gift apparently lost by the time of the English Civil War). The concentration on the particular in the *Neue Gedichte* is not, of course, undertaken purely for its own sake, though its subjects – the Panther, the Cathedral, the Angel, the Merry Go Round – have their own existence, but to refresh and clarify contact between the inner and outer worlds, to provide “a more convincing, more powerful name” for the poet’s internal response. By the *Sonnets to Orpheus* the act of

naming through poetry has become a means of both bridging and acknowledging the distance between the inner and outer, a kind of celebration of tragedy, a drama of redemptive knowledge, an affirmation of imaginative power, by virtue of which the very existence of the unattainable ensures a triumph for the imagination:

Singe die Gärten, mein Herz, die du nicht kennst; wie in Glas
eingegossene Gärten klar, unerreichbar.
Wasser und Rosen von Ispahan oder Schiras,
singe sie selig, preise sie, keinem vergleichbar.

Zeige, mein Herz, daß du niehmals entbehrst.
Daß sie dich meinen, ihre reifenden Feigen.

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This is rendered by Stephen Cohn as:

O sing, my heart, the gardens you know not – they are as
gardens poured into glass; clear, unattainable.
water, roses of Isfahan, of Shiraz,
sing them, delight in them, all incomparable.

Prove, O my heart, that you cannot live without them,
that their figs ripening now ripen for you [...]

Although Cohn has provided some of the most interesting and readable Rilke translations, especially of the *Duino Elegies*, here the ungrateful pen itches to amend the word order of the first line and to understate the rhythm (which is faithful to the exultant drive of the original) in order to have something to brace the exoticism against – a case in point about interventionism. In the light of this passage, it is useful to note one of the ways Rilke himself commented on the task of writing the *Sonnets to Orpheus*:

I keep always referring to them as sonnets. They are perhaps the freest and most transfigured verse that might be understood as belonging to this form – usually so quiet and consistent. But it was the very task of transforming the sonnet, of picking it up and, as it were, taking it along on the run, without destroying it, that was in this instance my particular problem and my project.

Allowing for the self-confidence, the excited response to a technical challenge is of a sort that could be found in many poets (though Lowell in particular comes to mind) and it makes it plain that that matter and method are inseparable – a truism, but one frequently denied in practice in contemporary poetry. Cohn, however, reaches a surprising conclusion in introducing his version of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*:

It is a wonderful and teasing truth that poetry's power of invocation, its music, story, images, illuminations, *everything* of real importance, may be owed to the relatively unimportant conventions of rhythm or rhyme.

In that sense, how can these “conventions” be “relatively unimportant”? “Conventions” of the kind to which Cohn refers only exist in use. And they are not simply passes allowing admission to the building. They are the building. Cohn goes on:

What seems profoundly true of Rilke is that the best of this poet is to be found in the stuff of the poetry; in the nature of its language and of something almost beyond language, its fabric, cadences and imagery, sound and progression. Not discourse. Mystery.

Cohn's own work as a translator tends to undermine his argument in this instance. His version of *Sonnet 2, XVIII* ('Tänzerin: o du verlegung'), though it takes an odd liberty with the third line quoted, manages to suggest Rilke's extraordinary ability to appear not simply to write about time, but to make it present, to *write time*:

Aber er trug auch, er trug, den Baum der Ekstase.
Sind sie nicht seine ruhigen Früchte: der Krug,
reifend gestreift, und die gereifere Vase?

Und in den Bildern: ist nicht die Zeichnung geblieben,
die deiner Braue dunkler Zug
rasch an die Wandung der eigenen Wendung geschrieben?

And it bore fruit too, the tree of your rapture:
are not these things its inanimate harvest? – the pitcher
striped like a gourd, the vase even riper and richer?
And there are pictures: does not the drawing remain

of your dark eyebrows instantly captured
on the surface prepared by yourself in your turning?

Anyone devoted to poetry is likely to have experienced the vertiginous feeling of encountering a poem or a passage or a phrase which by means of originality or compression exceeds what it has hitherto seemed possible to say. Some poets are lucky enough to feel a whole imaginative circuit surge into life without deliberate intent. These are mysterious experiences – but not, surely, otherworldly ones. Craft, alertness, long thought, timing, reading, good fortune – all play their part, and Mystery is what apprentices seek to be trained in.

The Michael Hamburger translations quoted here are taken from *Turning Point: Miscellaneous Poems 1912-1926* (Anvil, 2003). The Stephen Cohn translations are from *Sonnets to Orpheus with Letters to a Young Poet* (Carcenet, 2000).

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