~ *I. A Tale of Two Castles:*
The Composition of the Late Poetry

The late poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) is one of the summits of European poetry in the twentieth century. As an inquiry into, and expression of, the human condition in the modern era, it has lost none of its relevance, and probably gained more.

The late poetry consists of the work Rilke completed between early 1922 and his death in late 1926. *Duino Elegies,* a set of ten long philosophical meditations, were in fact begun in 1912 and worked on intermittently over ten years, but more than half of the work belongs to February 1922. Besides this miraculous breakthrough, the same month also saw the unexpected birth and completion of a new work, *The Sonnets to Orpheus,* in two parts consisting together of 55 sonnets. The third part of the late poetry consists of the mostly short lyrics Rilke wrote in the following five years up to his death in December 1926.

The first of the two castles associated with the late poetry is Duino Castle, a huge structure occupying a promontory on the Adriatic Sea near Trieste, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The castle was on the front line of hostilities when Italy entered the Great War in 1915, and was irreparably damaged by bombardment from the Italian navy. It was the property of Rilke's aristocratic patron Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe. She and her husband also owned a palace in Venice, and a castle in what is now the Czech Republic. Rilke spent the winter of 1911–1912 in Duino castle, mostly alone. He was driven down by a chauffeur from Paris in the Princess's car, a trip which lasted nine days.

Rilke described his situation at Duino in a letter to Hedwig Fischer of 25 October 1911: "This castle, immensely towering above the sea . . . looks out with many of its windows (one of mine included) into the most open sea-space, directly into the universe, you might say, and into its generous, all-surpassing spectacles.” Two months later, though, he was feeling more confined than liberated by this unique setting. He confided to Lou Andreas-Salomé on 28 December: “This year I am enjoying the hospitality of friends here (for the time being all alone) in this strong old castle that holds one a little like a prisoner: it cannot do otherwise with its immense walls.”

One stormy evening he was out on the battlements when he seemed to hear a voice in the wind declaiming what became the opening lines of *The First Elegy.* Rilke also began several other *Elegies* at Duino: the *Second, Third, Sixth, Ninth* and *Tenth,* but only the *First* and *Second* were completed there. In 1913 he managed to complete the *Third* and add to the *Sixth,* and in 1915 wrote the whole of the *Fourth.* The Great War and its immediate aftermath seemed to destroy not only the aristocratic, cosmopolitan Europe that was his milieu, but also his poetic inspiration. It did not return until early 1922. Rilke was left stateless by the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian empire, though he eventually acquired a Czech passport through his birth and upbringing in Prague. He was also homeless, as his apartment in Paris had been taken over by the authorities and his property seized.

Finally, after a long search, and with the help of another wealthy patron, he found a modest castle of his own in Muzot (pronounced “Muzotte,” according to Rilke), a village in the French-speaking Valais region of Switzerland. He described it as a typical medieval *manoir,* consisting “only of one strong house-body . . . that included everything,” a shape that fitted him “like a suit of armour.” The image of containment echoes his description of Duino, as does the open outlook, “with views into the valley, over to the mountain slopes and into the most wonderful depths of sky” (letter to Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe, 25 July 1921).

It was from here that Rilke wrote to Princess Marie on 11 February 1922 to announce the completion of all ten *Elegies* and the unexpected arrival of *The Sonnets to Orpheus:* “Miracle. Grace. — All in a few days. It was a hurricane, as at Duino that time: all that was fibre, fabric in me, cracked and bent. Eating was not to be thought of . . . I went out and stroked, as if it were a great old beast, the little Muzot that had sheltered all this for me, that had, at last, *vouchsafed* it to me." W.H. Auden described this moment in 1938 in the nineteenth of his *Sonnets from China:*

Tonight in China let me think of one
Who for ten years of drought and silence waited,
Until in Muzot all his being spoke,
And everything was given once for all.
Awed, grateful, tired, content to die, completed,
He went out in the winter night to stroke
That tower as one strokes an animal.

– *II. The Spiritual Crisis of Modernity:* Duino Elegies

Rilke's ten long philosophical poems are called "elegies" for two reasons, the first connected with their form, and the second with their content. Formally, except for the *Fourth* and *Eighth,* they use an "elegiac metre," that is a dactylic metre (a dactyl being a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed ones) which is a loose variant of the elegiac distich (a pair of lines consisting of a dactylic hexameter and a dactylic pentameter). Rilke's lines are highly irregular in length and metre, but have a perceptible dactylic base. This combination of flexibility and continuity is perfectly adapted to the exploratory nature of the poems. The *Elegies* do not present achieved solutions, but rather invite the reader to participate in a discovery process which contains more questions than answers. The driving rhythm constantly renews the quest for meanings, producing within each poem a series of attempts at understanding which often end in bafflement or failure, but are immediately followed by a fresh attempt, using different voices (the poem has some of the polyphonic elements of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land,* also first published in 1922, which was originally entitled "He do the police in different voices"). The tentative, unsettled quality of the verse produces a sequence of possible approximations, and provisional insights rather than established certainties.

In terms of content, *Duino Elegies* belong to the German elegy tradition practised by Goethe, Schiller, Hölderlin and others. Here, the theme is not so much the lament for a dead person as a meditation on general issues of life-experience, spirituality and culture. In Rilke's case the central issue is the spiritual crisis of modernity. The general view presented by the poet sees modern culture as having lost the spiritual dimension of life. We are no longer in touch with gods or angels, and they have become terrifying to us. At the same time, with the replacement of traditional art and craft by mass-produced consumer goods we have lost much of the concrete texture of existence as well, lost the reassurance of having long-lasting traditional artifacts ("things" in the full sense) as part of our lives.

In Rilke's view, the combination of these two losses (of spirituality and of physicality) has made our experience shallow and superficial. Our buildings are inhuman, abstract structures, and our art mostly fails to contain and preserve our self-expression, as it did in earlier epochs, notably Classical Greece. We've become both spectators, watching the world and ourselves from a detached viewpoint, and performers, assuming and dropping roles which always fail to represent our inner feelings. Even a puppet show or a group of vagrant acrobats would be more authentic than the pretences we put on for each other in our family or society.

Modernity, for Rilke, resembles a huge nightmarish fun-fair, full of cheap distractions and false promises which we use to hide from authentic emotion and experience, especially the experience of grief. Grief and death are shunned and denied, yet paradoxically this creates great fear of them. We are dominated by the fear of loss, and clutch possessions and people all the more anxiously out of insecurity. We see the world in terms of fear for ourselves, fear for our future, fear of our individual destiny. This separates us from reality, so that we cannot see things as themselves. We are always *opposite* the world, never fully *in* it.

The poet contrasts this typically modern state of mind with other forms of consciousness, human and non-human. Angels (Rilke was concerned that his understanding of these beings as impersonal spiritual intensities roaming the cosmos should not be confused with the Christian conception) know that life and death constitute a single undivided realm, a double kingdom; unlike humans, who try to remain within the life portion, the angels inhabit both. Lovers sometimes catch a glimpse of spiritual intensity, but cannot fully open to it because they are usually too concerned with keeping each other; abandoned lovers are actually more able to experience this intensity through their grief. Heroes are those who aim directly for self-realization, choosing and controlling their destiny without fear of death. Children, until adults push them into growing up, accept death as something inward, not something dreadfully lurking in the future. Animals, without awareness of a separate identity, are unselfconsciously *in* the world, not mere spectators of it. They do not dread death, even if at times they feel nostalgia for the security of the womb. All of these forms of consciousness, neglected or suppressed in the modern world, hold powerful lessons for us if we pay attention to them.

Is there a way out of the modern predicament? The poet eventually arrives at certain possibilities. We can cherish the monuments and artifacts that remain to us from the past, the heritage of human culture. We can nurture our awareness of the dead, listen to their voices, and show humility and reverence towards these past existences. Most of all, we can diminish our self-preoccupation, our obsession with our personal identity, image, and performance, and accept the task that Nature has assigned us.

What is this task? Rilke reverses the common idea that we humans need Nature, and asserts that Nature needs us. Nature is seeking to perfect itself through human consciousness — only this can completely fulfill the natural world. Nature needs us to reflect her beauty back to herself, amplified by our delight. This delight, once embodied in more lasting artifacts, can now best be expressed in acceptance of transience. Transience should not be rejected, but celebrated and even intensified. Our task is no longer to preserve and contain, but enjoy and praise; to turn the visible into the invisible, and transpose the transient outer world into the even more transient dimension of consciousness.

The poet concludes that the solution to the spiritual crisis of modernity is not so much poetry, art and culture as such, but their use as the means to a higher, purer, more inward, more spiritual awareness, which is no longer so dependent on outer objectification.

The poet combines a lament for the passing of authentic "things," whether classed as handicraft or as artwork, with a finally optimistic sense of human destiny moving beyond the concrete and visible, into a more spiritual consciousness.

– *III. Living Poetically:* The Sonnets to Orpheus

Just as Rilke radicalized the traditional elegy form in *Duino Elegies,* he radicalized the sonnet form in *The Sonnets to Orpheus.* Certainly he maintained the fourteen lines and full rhyme scheme in all fifty-five poems, though some rhyme schemes are irregular. But metre and line-length are subjected to great variations. Some sonnets have long dactylic lines, reminiscent of the *Elegies,* which run up to fifteen or sixteen syllables, while others are pared down to two or three words. Furthermore, line-lengths can vary considerably within the same poem. Gone is the tidy containment of the traditional sonnet; a sense of irrepressible excitement seems constantly to push the edges of the form while always preserving the unifying force of rhyme.

The Sonnets are inscribed "as a memorial for Wera Ouckama Knoop," the daughter of a friend of Rilke's, who died in 1919 at the age of nineteen. Wera (pronounced Vera) appears in only a few of the sonnets, mostly near the beginning and ending of each cycle, and is usually seen as a dancer. She represents the theme of early death, already explored in the *Elegies.* In this aspect, *The Sonnets'* theme is closer to the normal English understanding of "elegy" as a lament for a dead person than is that of the *Elegies* themselves.

The second key figure is Orpheus, whose familiarity with Death's kingdom links him with Wera. The first cycle begins with Orpheus charming all the animals into silence with his lyre (a scene Rilke knew from an Italian Renaissance engraving by Giovanni Battista Cima da Conegliano), and ends with his dismemberment by the Maenads, the demented female followers of Dionysus. Although explicit scenes from the myth are few, Orpheus is invoked throughout, often directly addressed as "you." His spirit pervades not only the sphere of poetry, music and song symbolized by the lyre, but also represents