

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies* [First, Second, and Third] (1912)

Abstract

In 1912, during an extended stay at the home of Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe, the Castle Duino near Trieste, Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) began writing the first elegies in the cycle of poems that would eventually become known as *Duino Elegies*. He continued his work in 1913 and 1915, but first finished the cycle in February 1922, having been interrupted both by the dramatic political events and a personal creative lull. The poems were published the following year with a dedication to Princess Marie. Rilke's evocative language, his symbolism and daring use of metaphor combine to make *Duino Elegies* a unique achievement in the history of German poetry. The complexity of the elegies' content and the profundity of their references, often drawn from religion, reflect Rilke's conception of the human condition. At the same time, these elements also make the elegies some of the most demanding poems in the German language.

Source

The First Elegy

WHO, if I cried out, might hear me – among the ranked Angels?
Even if One suddenly clasped me to his heart
I would die of the force of his being. For Beauty is only
the infant of scarcely endurable Terror, and we
are amazed when it casually spares us.

Every Angel is terrible.
And so I check myself, choke back my summoning
black cry. Who'll help us then? Not Angels,
not Mankind; and the nosing beasts soon scent
how insecurely we're housed in this signposted World.
And yet a tree might grow for us upon some hill
for us to see and see again each day. Perhaps
we have yesterday's streets. Perhaps we keep
the pampered loyalty of some old habit
which loved its life with us – and stayed, never left us.

But, oh, the nights – those nights when the infinite wind
eats at our faces! Who is immune to the night, to Night,
ever-subtle, deceiving? Hardest of all to the lonely,
Night, is she gentler to lovers? Oh, but they only
use one another as cover, to hide what awaits them.

Do you *still* not know it? Throw that emptiness
out of your arms and into the air that we breathe:
does it widen the sky for the birds – add zest to their flight?

Yes, *you* were needed. Every springtime needed you.
Even stars relied on your witnessing presence
when a gathering wave surged from the past – or when
some violin utterly offered itself

as you passed by a half-opened window. All this was your mission.
Did you discharge it? Were you not ever distracted
by anticipation? As if all Creation existed
only to signal a mistress? (Where would you keep her?
With those great foreign Conjectures coming and going
by night as by day?)

Yet, if you must, sing of lovers –
those famous passions, still not immortal enough:
those whom you almost envied – those who were cheated,
abandoned. You thought them more ardent than those
who are quenched and requited. Ever again recommence
your unachievable task: you must praise!
For the Hero, remember, lives on. To the Hero
death is no more than his recentest birth; his reason for being.
And Nature herself, exhausted, takes lovers back
into herself – as if there were strength to achieve them,
but only one time . . . And you . . . ?
Have you sufficiently thought about Gaspara Stampa;
remembered that somewhere a woman whose lover had left her
might, reaching beyond herself, pray: Let me be as she was . . . ?
Is it not time for these oldest of heartaches, now
at last, to bear fruit for us? Is it time that, still loving, we learned
how to leave our beloved and, trembling, endure it?
As an arrow endures the bowstring and focused on flight
becomes . . . more than itself. Nothing stays still.

Voices. The voices. Oh, my heart, hear,
as once only The Holy could hear, the huge cry
which raised them up from the depths. Who could believe
that, unheeding, they never once rose from their knees?
Not by far could you bear to hear God's voice. Yet, listen:
borne on the wind, in voices made of the silence,
those who died young endlessly whisper a message.
Wherever you go, in churches of Rome or of Naples,
does not their destiny softly address you?

Or, as that day in Santa Maria Formosa,
a tablet compels your heightened attention.
What do they ask me to do? To wipe out those feelings
of outrage – which hamper their spirit's free flight.

How strange . . . no longer to live upon Earth! . . . Strange
no more to depend upon practices only just learned
nor to expect from roses – nor to expect
from any thing of exceptional wonder – interpretation
of Mankind's future. No longer to live
as we used to, our hands ever frightened. To throw
away the names we were given: toys that have broken.
Strangely – to lose our desire for things we desire.
To see all those things which once stood related
freed of connection – fluttering in space!

And Death is demanding; we have much to atone for
before little by little we begin to taste of eternity.
Yet . . . the living are wrong when they distinguish so clearly:
Angels, it's said, are often unsure
whether they pass among living or dead.
Ever-racing, the current whirls each generation
through both those kingdoms. In both it outsounds them.

In the end, the early-departed need us no longer,
gradually weaned from things of our World
as the babe grows away from the gentle
breasts of its mother. But we? Who have such deep need
of great mysteries, we who rarely progress without mourning
. . . can we do without them?

Does it mean nothing, the myth
in which earliest Music in mourning for Linos
dares to invade desolate wilderness? A young man
not far from immortal, suddenly gone! And forever!
And the shocked emptiness for the first time
resounds with what ravishes, comforts and aids us.

The Second Elegy

EVERY Angel is terror. I know it, yet still, alas!
I must sing you – you, great near-deadly birds
of the soul! Where have they gone, the days of Tobias
when one of those brilliant ones stood at the door
of the unexceptional house? Dressed for the journey
he was not at all terrible, a youth to the youth
who eagerly spied him. But should the Archangel –
dangerous, masked by the stars – should *he* tread
but a step lower and closer we should be struck down
by our hammering hearts. What *are* you?

Fortune's favourites, early-successful,
Destiny-pampered; you stand as our very peaks
and our summit, seem crested and touched
by the rose of Creation; pollen of Godhead's own flowering;
limbs of the light; paths, stairways, thrones,
realms of pure being; emblazoned delight;
riots of sense's enchantments: and, of a sudden, alone –
you are mirrors: you pour out your beauty
but your faces gather it back to yourselves.

For whenever we feel – we evaporate;
we breathe ourselves, breathless, away; from ember to ember
burn with less fragrance. And when someone tells us:
Yes, my heart beats for you only; this room
and this springtime contain only you – Why, what of it?
He still cannot hold us; we disappear in him, around him.
And those who are beautiful . . . ? Oh, what might restrain them?
Appearance ceaselessly comes and goes in their faces . . .

As morning dew rises we lose what was ours . . .
the heat steams from us as from dishes uncovered.
What of our laughter, what of the watchfulness;
of the heart's surges, building, fading . . . ?
. . . Alas, that *is* us.
Does then the cosmos in which we are gradually melting
not take a touch of our flavour? Not even
a taste of us? And the Angels, do they truly gather up
only their own . . . what flows out from them?
Isn't some of our essence, sometimes, by chance,
gathered up with it? Haven't we become
part of their nature? Just as women in pregnancy
share the same look, unknown to themselves,
. . . a look of abstraction . . . ?
(Why should they notice, caught in the whirling return into *self*?)

Lovers, if they knew how, might speak wondrously
under the night's silent air . . . It is as though
all things concealed us. See, our trees *stand*
and the houses we live in endure. Only we,
we alone drift past all of it – as if air
no more than changed places with air. And all things
conspire to silence us – we who embarrass them
yet remain, perhaps, their unsayable hope.

Lovers: you who suffice for each other might answer
questions about us. You clasp one another: . . .
. . . what's your authority?
Listen: sometimes my lonely hands reach out
to possess one another; sometimes my used-up face
comforts itself in them. These things touch my senses . . . but who
could find in them franchise for daring to *be* . . . ?
Yet you, who increase each by the other one's rapture
until, overcome, each begs the other: Enough! . . . You,
in the hands of each other growing to greater abundance
than vines in the greatest of years; you
who may perish, quite overpowered by your lover;
it is you that I ask about us. I know
why your touching's so fervent: those caresses preserve!
You safeguard forever the spot which your gentle hands cover
and, beating beneath, you feel the true pulse of permanence . . .
so that every embrace is almost to promise: Forever!
But yet: after those first frightened glances; when
yearning has stood at the window; and after
that first walk (once through the garden together) . . .
are you still the same, Lovers? When you raise
lips to the lips of the other, drinking each other
. . . strange, how those drinkers depart from it all.

Careful in gesture, die not the figures upon
Attic stelae amaze you? Is not Love, is not Parting

laid on the shoulders so lightly as to suggest
they are utterly different from ours? Consider the hands:
they press lightly, for all the strength of the torsos.
Those disciplined people knew this: We reach only so far.
This much is ours: to touch one another like this.
The Gods bear upon us more fiercely – but that is a matter for Gods.

Might not we find somewhere secret – simple and decent
and human? Some strip of our own fertile ground
to lie between river and rock? For, as theirs did,
our own heart exceeds us: we cannot trace it in pictures
. . . (which tame it);
nor in godlike sculptures which yet more control it.

The Third Elegy

ONE thing to sing the beloved: how different, alas! to sing
of that secret and wicked river-god of our blood!
What can that young man, marked from afar by a girl,
know of that Lord of Desire; of that implacable head
bursting again and again – up from the fathomless depths!
Still unconsenting, often . . . often as if she were *nothing* . . .
stirring the night awake to unending uproar.
O the god of our blood, his barbed, cruel trident;
O ominous wind from his breast of spiralling seashell!
Listen, the night moulds itself into caverns and tunnels.
O stars, does not a lover's delight in the face of his mistress
come straight from you? Does not his knowledge
. . . of her shining features
flow to him out of the night's shining stars?

Alas, it was not you, his mother,
who bent the bow of his eyebrows to urgent expectancy.
Nor is it your presence, maiden so moved by him,
curving his lip to such a fervent expression.
You, whose footfall is light as the dawn's . . .
can you really believe that the sound of your gentle approach
could so discompose him? Yes, you touched fear in his heart,
but terror itself came rushing back too, with that touch.
Call to him: it isn't easy to hold him back
from those bitter engagements; yet that's what he wants
and so he wins free and escapes them. Unburdened, he learns
to live in his secret retreat, his place in your heart;
there he takes up his self and begins it.

Did he ever *really* begin it?
Mother: you made his model . . . it was you who began him;
new, even to you. Bending your body
over the eyes newly-opened, you were a whole world familiar.
Where did they go? the years when your slender figure,
alone, stood in the path of weltering chaos?
You shielded him from so much; made innocent
the bedroom which night had turned sinister; brought from the store

of your sheltering heart a human dimension to night-space.
And the candle, you placed it . . . not out there in the dark,
you brought it close to shine on your nearness, shining in friendship.
Each unexplained sound, you would smile and explain it
as if you had known in advance every creak of the boards . . .
and he heard you; he relaxed, reassured. So many portents
demanded your tender alertness; his cloaked Fate,
tall by the wardrobe – and in folds of the curtains his Future,
fugitive, restless.

And the boy? He feels his heavy eyelids dissolving
in the sweet foretaste of sleep which you conjure. Lies there
unburdened . . . and seems one protected. Yet
who can ward off, who safeguards his future?
Who stills the whirlpool raging inside him, the tempest of Origin?
Oh, how the child – sleeping; dreaming; feverish –
lets himself get carried completely away!
Such a new creature; so timid; already so deep entangled
in vine and creeper – all the activity writhing inside him
starting to weave itself into pattern; looping and choking;
predatory . . . animal. Yet how completely he gave himself to it.
Loved. Doted on all that wildness
inside him. Loved and gave himself up to exploring
the primitive beckoning forest within him; and over
its silent decay his shining green heart stood.
Loved. Loved it and left it behind him, outgrowing
his own roots . . . reaching for urgent *beginning*. Loving,
he finds himself wading in ancestral blood, goes down
into chasms where Terrors lie, sated; gorged
with the flesh of his fathers. They know him; nodding and winking;
. . . sharing the secret.
The Unspeakable smiled at him – you, his mother, were
never as tender; how could he not answer with love
the thing that lay smiling . . . ?
Loved it before even you. It was present
from the first day you bore him, dissolved in the waters
. . . that carried his making.

Understand this: we do not love as flowers love,
all out of one single year. Whenever, wherever we love
the ageless juice rises . . . fills us, suffuses our limbs.
Dearest: that we might love, hold within us,
not the awaited One, but the Many;
their ferment too great to be numbered. Not one single child
but all fathers; like the ruins of mountains
they lie buried within us. Not one child
but the dry river-bed of long-ago mothers
– and all silent landscapes, whether their skies
show cloudless or stormy. Dearest: all this was before you.

As for yourself? Why then . . . it was you

who teased out prehistory from deep in your lover:
what emotion, from creatures long-gone, burst up into light!
What of the women who loathed you, and what of the spirits
of darkhearted men you roused in the veins of the young?
Dead children sought you.
But softly, now, softly: it is time
to do him some kindness, time to stand by him;
time to lead him close up to the garden . . . to help him
outbalance the night . . . to contain him.

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