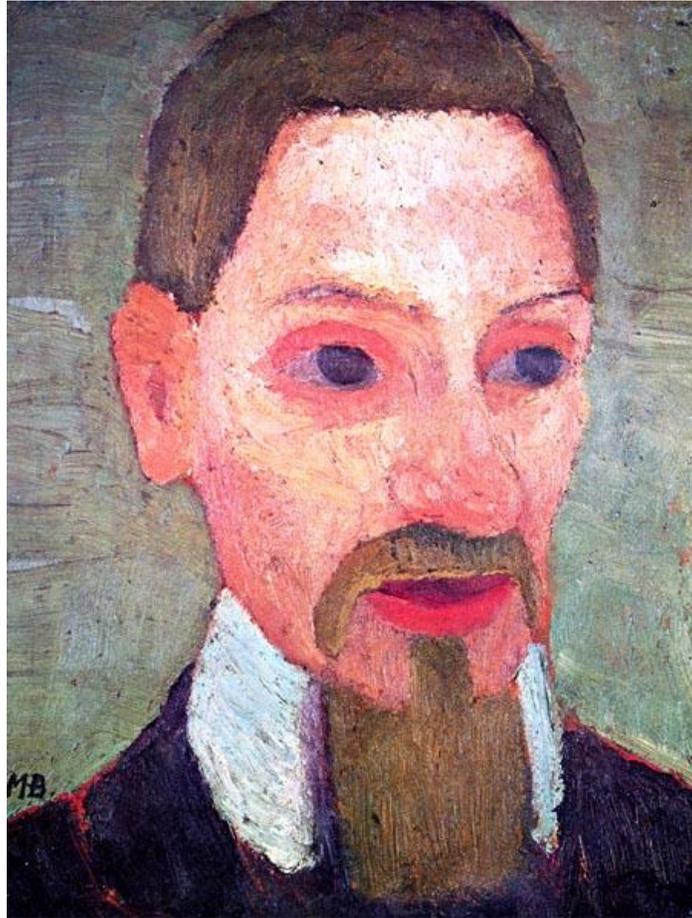


Rainer Maria Rilke

A Selection of Rilke's French Poems



'Portrait of Rainer Maria Rilke'
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Translator's Introduction

Rilke's French poems created during the last four years of his life, after the Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus, were an expression of gratitude to the landscape of the Valais in Switzerland, which he felt had made the completion of the former works possible. Quiet but subtle, these poems communicate his deep love of the French language, and provide silvery echoes of the elegies and sonnets, 'in a borrowed tongue'.

‘C’est presque l’invisible qui luit’

It’s almost the invisible that gleams
above the winged slope;
a fragment of night’s clarity remains
to a day mixed with silver.

See the light weighs not at all
on these obedient contours;
while someone consoles the villages
out there, for being distant.

‘C’est qu’il nous faut consentir’

We must indeed consent
to such extreme forces;
boldness is our challenge
despite the great repentance.

And then it often happens
that what we face alters:
the calm becomes storm,
the abyss forms the angel.

Do not fear the detour.
The organ must thunder
for the music to resound
with all the notes of love.

‘Cette lumière peut-elle’

Can the light render
a whole world to us?
Is it rather the fresh
shadow, quivering and tender,

that entangles us,
that so resembles us
and turns and trembles
about a strange support?

Shadows of frail leaves
on road and meadow.
sudden familiar gesture,
that adopts and melds us
to a too-fresh clarity.

‘Chemins qui ne mènent nulle part’

Paths that lead nowhere
between two meadows,
diverted from their goal
with art, one might say,

paths which often have
nothing before them
but pure space
and the season.

‘Comme un verre de Venise’

As a Venetian glass knows
this grey, in being born,
and the indecisive clarity
of which it's to be enamoured,

so your tender hands
have dreamed in advance
of slowly balancing
our over-full moments.

‘Comment encore reconnaître’

How to recognise once more
what sweet life effected?
Perhaps by contemplating
the traces, in my palm,

of those lines and creases
we acquire in closing
this hand of nothingness
on the void.

‘Douce courbe le long du lierre’

Gentle curve beside the ivy,
vague track where the goats linger,
lovely light a silversmith
would mount in stone.

Poplar in its perfect place
opposing its vertical
to the slow robust leafage
that spreads and stretches.

‘Eau qui se presse, qui court - ’

Racing, flowing water – forgetful
water the distracted earth drinks,
stay a moment in the hollow
of my hand, remember!

Clear and rapid love, indifference
almost absence, hastening by,
between your coming and going
over-much, make a trembling stay.

'Là, sous la treille, parmi le feuillage' (Eros:IV)

There beneath the vine, among the leaves,
it so happens that we may divine him:
the rustic brow of a savage child,
the ancient mutilated mouth...

The grapes that front him, growing heavy,
and seeming weary of their heaviness,
for a brief moment bring us near the terror
of this fine deceptive summer.

And his raw smile, which he infuses
into all the fruits of his proud scenery,
acknowledges the guile all around,
that gently cradles him to sleep.

'Doux pâtre qui survit' (Ivory fragment)

Sweet shepherd who tenderly
survives, in role,
with the remnants of a ewe
on his shoulders.

Sweet shepherd who survives
in yellowed ivory,
to play the shepherd.

Like yourself, your
absent flock endures,
in the slow melancholy
of your attendant figure,

that summarises, in infinity,
the respite from busy pastures.

‘Il suffit que, sur un balcon’

It suffices that, on a balcony,
or at the casement of a window,
a woman hesitates...for her to be
the one we lose
on seeing her appear.

And if she lifts her arms
to tie her hair, tender vase:
how much our loss by that
gains sudden emphasis
and our misfortune, verve.

‘J’ai une telle conscience de ton’

I have such consciousness of your
being, rose entire,
that my assent confounds you
with my heart in celebration.

I breathe you in, as if you were,
rose, all of life,
and feel myself the perfect friend
of such a friend.

‘Ô la biche : quel bel intérieur’

O, the doe: what lovely depths
of ancient forests live in your eyes;
what rounded confidence
mixed with so much fear.

All that borne by the vivid
gracefulness of your leaps.
But nothing ever reaches
the un-possessive
innocence of your brow.

‘Je ne veux qu’une seule leçon, c’est la tienne,’ (The Fountain)

I only wish one lesson, which is yours,
fountain who plunge back into yourself –
that of the dangerous jet to whom falls
a heavenly return to terrestrial life.

Nothing is such an example to me
as your multiple murmur;
you, light temple column
destroyed by your own nature.

In your fall, how each stream of water
that ends its dance, moulds itself.
Let me be the student, emulator,
of your innumerable nuances!

Yet, more than your song, what sways me to you,
is that moment of delirious silence,
when, at night, across your liquid flair,
passes your own return, a breath removes.

'Le silence uni de l'hiver'

The universal silence of winter
is replaced, in the air,
by a singing silence;
each voice that woos
adds a contour there
perfects an image.

And all this is only the depth
of what might be the action
of our heart, that surpasses
the multiple design
of this silence, full
of inexpressible daring.

‘N’es-tu pas notre géométrie,’

Are you not our geometry,
window, so simple a form,
that effortlessly circumscribes
our vast life?

She, whom we love, never more beautiful
than when she appears
bordered by you; since you indeed
render her almost immortal.

All danger is abolished. Being
stands there in the midst of love,
around it this little space,
which one controls.

Ô mes amis, vous tous, je ne renie'

O my friends, all of you, I deny
none of you; not even that passer-by,
who was only an open, hesitant
glance of inconceivable life.

How many times, a being, despite itself,
halts, with eye or gesture,
the imperceptible flight of others
by, for a moment, rendering it manifest.

Those unknown. They form a large part
of our fate which every day completes.
O discreet unknown, my heart entertains
perfect possession, attracting your gaze.

‘Ce ne sont pas des souvenirs’

It is not the memories
that maintain your presence in me;
neither are you mine
by the force of a fine desire.

What renders you here,
is that ardent detour
a slow tenderness
described in my blood.

I have no need
to see you appear;
it sufficed me to be born
to lose you a little less.

‘Puisque tout passe, faisons’

Since everything passes, let us forge
a passing melody;
that which quenches our thirst
conquers us.

Let’s sing what leaves us,
with love and art;
let us be quicker than
the swift departure.

‘Qu’il est doux parfois d’être de ton avis,’

How sweet sometimes to share your opinion,
O my body, elder brother,
how sweet to be strong
with your strength,
to feel you, leaf, stem, bark,
and all you still may become,
you, so close to the spirit.

You, so frank, so whole,
in your manifest joy
at being this tree of gestures,
which, for an instant, slows
the pace of the heavens,
to set its life there.

‘Rose, eût-il fallu te laisser dehors,’

Rose, was it necessary to leave you
outside, exquisite beloved?
What can a rose do there, where
the spell cast on us is exhausted?

Point of return. Here you are
who, distraught, share
this life with us, this life
not so old as you.

‘Sur le soupir de l’amie’

With a friend’s sigh
the whole night rises,
a brief caress
traversing a dazzled sky.

It’s as if an elemental force
of the universe, became
once more the bearer
of all lost love.

‘Tout ici chante la vie de naguère,’

Everything here sings the life of long ago,
not in the sense that consumes tomorrow;
one divines, brave in their primal strength,
the wind and sky, the hand, the bread.

It’s not a yesterday encroaching everywhere,
fixing these ancient contours forever,
it’s the earth, content with its own image,
consenting now to its first day.

‘Une rose seule, c’est toutes les roses’

A single rose is every rose,
and this: the irreplaceable one,
the perfect, the flexible term,
framed by the text of things.

How, without her, ever to utter
whatever our hopes were,
and those tender intervals
within continual departure.

‘Vers quel soleil gravitent’ (The Orchard: II)

Towards what sun gravitate
so many weighty desires?
Of this ardour you utter
where is the firmament?

To please one another
must we lean so much?
Let us be light, light
on the earth disturbed
by so many opposing forces.

Look at the orchard, then:
so inevitably weighty:
yet of that same ill
it forms the summer’s virtue.

‘V’oici encor de l’heure qui s’argente,’

Here once more, the hour that’s silvered
mixed with soft evening the pure metal,
and adds to the slow beauty
the slow return of a melodious calm.

Ancient earth resumes, and changes:
a bright star survives our efforts.
Scattered sounds, fleeing the day, gather,
returning all to the voice of the waters.

