

SONNETS TO ORPHEUS
RAINER MARIA RILKE



Translated into English with Commentary by
A. S. KLINE

POETRY IN TRANSLATION

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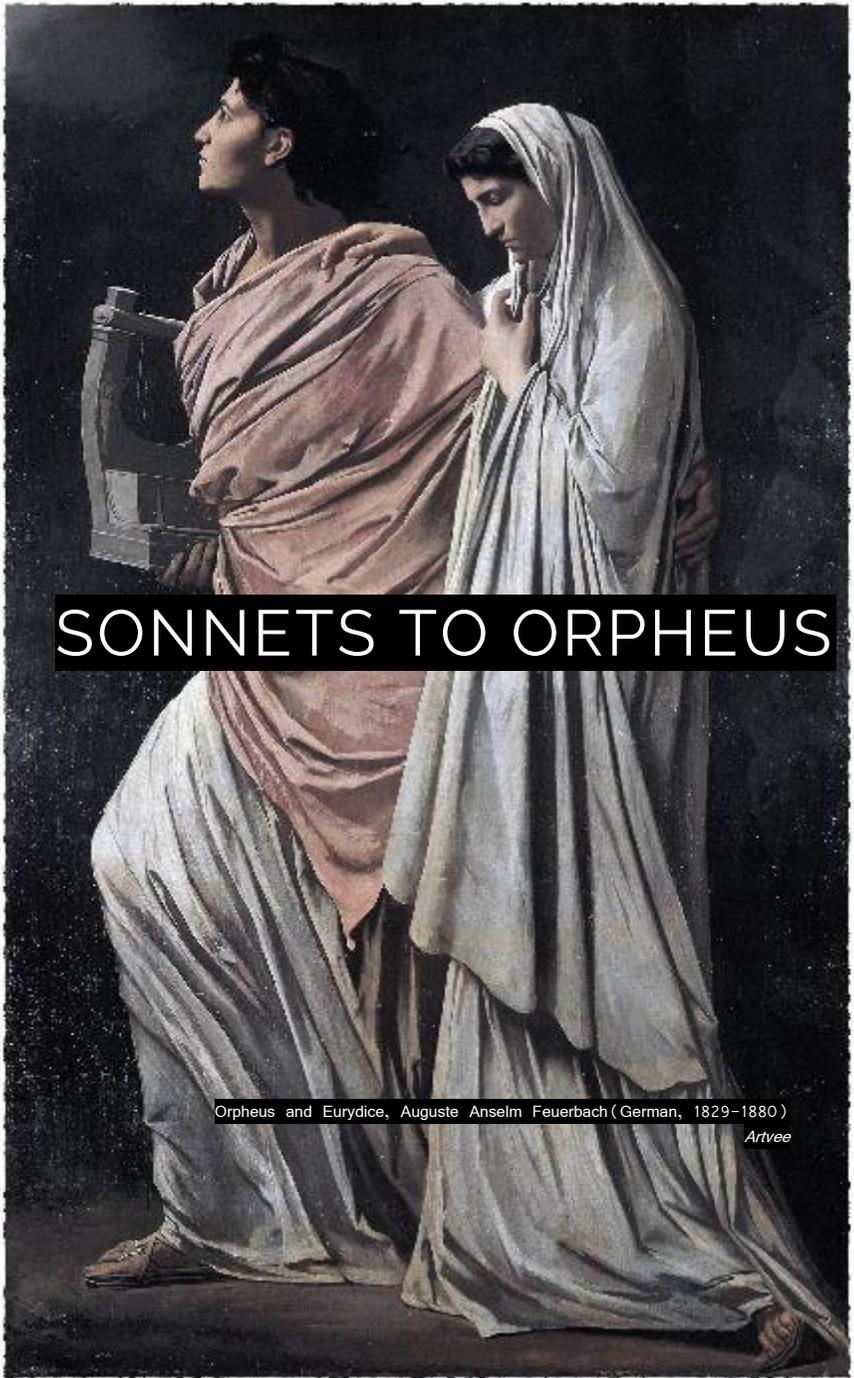
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SONNETS TO ORPHEUS

Orpheus and Eurydice, Auguste Anselm Feuerbach (German, 1829-1880)

Artvee

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) wrote the 'Sonnets to Orpheus' over an intensely creative three-week period in February 1922, during which he also completed the 'Duino Elegies'. The Sonnets were prompted by the earlier death of Wera Knoop, a childhood friend of his daughter Ruth, and in them Rilke develops the theme of the double-realm of life and death, pursuing, as in the Duino Elegies, his desire to more-closely integrate what he saw as the valid sphere of death with the claims of life.

The descent of Orpheus, the mythical poet-musician of Thrace, into the underworld in a failed attempt to reclaim his dead wife Eurydice, and his subsequent death at the hands of the Bacchantes, provided Rilke with the framework of the sonnets. Elements of the Hellenistic Orphic rites of Dionysus may also have influenced Rilke's thinking, in which adherents of the cult sought union with the divine in order to acquire mystic knowledge.

The poems also resonate with other deaths which figure elsewhere in his work. The overall tone of the sonnets is, however, positive and life-affirming. Rilke's poetry was not, as he himself stated, intended as death-seeking, but rather a celebration of life, and an act of praise, in which death is recognised primarily in terms of the memories of the dead recalled by the human mind, and their influence on the living. In that sense the double-realm is certainly both valid and authentic.

The translations below do not attempt to recreate the rhyming verse forms used by Rilke, focussing instead on clarity of meaning and poetic intention. The first line in German of each sonnet is given in its heading, while an index of first lines in English is provided at the end. The division of the fifty-five sonnets into Part I, of twenty-six poems, and Part II, of twenty-nine, is Rilke's, and reflects their two main phases of composition, either side of his completion of the 'Duino Elegies', rather than a structural division dictated by poetic form or content. It is recommended that the 'Duino Elegies' are read prior to, and in conjunction with, the sonnets, as the two works illuminate each other, reflecting the interwoven nature of their completion and final editing.

PART I

I, 1 (DA STIEG EIN BAUM. O REINE ÜBERSTEIGUNG!)

A tree climbed there. O pure uprising!
Oh, Orpheus sang! O towering tree of hearing!
And all was still. Yet even in that hush
A new beginning, hint, and change, was there.

Creatures of silence pressed from the bright
Freed forest, out of nest and lair:
And they so yielded themselves, that not by a ruse,
And not out of fear, were they so quiet in themselves,

But simply through listening. Bellow, shriek, roar
Seemed small in their hearts. And where there was
Just barely a hut to receive it,

A refuge out of their darkest yearning,
With an entrance whose gate-posts trembled –
There you crafted a temple for their hearing.



Orpheus Playing to the Animals
Master of the Orpheus Legend (artist)
Italian, active fourth quarter of the 15th century
The National Gallery of Art

I, 2 (UND FAST EIN MÄDCHEN WARS UND GING HERVOR)

And it was almost a girl, and she came out of
That single blessedness of song and lyre,
And shone clear through her springtime-veil
And made herself a bed inside my hearing.

And slept within me. And her sleep was all:
The trees, each that I admired, those
Perceptible distances, the meadows I felt,
And every wonder that concerned myself.

She slept the world. Singing god, how have you
So perfected her that she made no demand
To first be awake? See, she emerged and slept.

Where is her death? O, will you still discover
This theme, before your song consumes itself? –
Where is she falling to, from me?... a girl, almost ...

I, 3 (EIN GOTT VERMAGS. WIE ABER, SAG MIR, SOLL)

A god can do so. But tell me how a man
Is supposed to follow, through the slender lyre?
His mind is riven. No temple of Apollo
Stands at the dual crossing of heart-roads.

Song, as you have taught it, is not desire,
Not a proclamation of final achievement:
Song is being. A simple thing for a god.
But when are we *in being*? And when does *he*

Turn the earth and stars towards us?
Young man, this *is* not your having loved, even if
Your voice forced open your mouth, then – learn

To forget that you sang out. It fades away.
To sing, in truth, is a different breath.
A breath of nothing. A gust within the god. A wind.



Meleager and Atalante

Master of the Orpheus Legend (artist)

Italian, active fourth quarter of the 15th century

The National Gallery of Art

I, 4 (O IHR ZÄRTLICHEN, TRETET ZUWEILEN)

O you tender ones, sometimes progress
Deep inside the breath not meant for you,
Let it part before your face and, behind you,
Tremble, once more, as it flows together.

O you blessed ones, O you healers,
Who seem to be, where the heart begins,
Arrows fired from the bow, and the target,
You whose smile ever shines through tears,

Don't be afraid to suffer the heaviness,
Return its weight once more to the Earth;
Mountains are heavy, the seas are heavy.

Even the trees you planted as children
Soon became too heavy. You cannot bear them,
But the air... but the space ...

I, 5 (ERRICHTET KEINEN DENKSTEIN. LAßT DIE ROSE)

Raise no gravestone. Only let the rose
Bloom every year to favour him.
Since it is Orpheus. His metamorphosis
Into this and that. We need not strive

For other names. Once and for all
It is Orpheus, when he sings. He comes and goes.
Is it not much already that he, sometimes,
Stays, for a while, in the petal of the rose?

Oh, he must vanish, for you to understand!
And though he himself feared his vanishing,
Even as his word surpasses the being-here,

He is already there, where you cannot go.
The lyre-strings fail to constrain his hands.
And he responds, by his passing-beyond.

I, 6 (IST ER EIN HIESIGER? NEIN, AUS BEIDEN)

Does he hail from here? No, from both
The realms his expansive nature grew.
Knower, bend the branches of willow
So, you may understand the willow roots.

When you go to bed, leave on the table
Neither bread nor milk; they bring the dead;
But he, who is the Summoner, mingles
There, under the mild gentleness of eyelids,

Their apparitions with everything seen,
While the magic of rue and fumitory,
Is as true to him as the clearest relation.

Nothing lessens a valid form for him.
Whether it be in the room, or the grave,
He praises the jug, the bracelet, the ring.

I, 7 (RÜHMEN, DAS ISTS! EIN ZUM RÜHMEN BESTELLTER)

Praising, that's it! One appointed to praise,
He emerged like ore from the silent stone.
His heart, oh, the transient wine-press, among
Humankind, of an inexhaustible wine.

When the divine mode grips him
The voice from his mouth never fails.
All becomes vineyard, all becomes grape,
Matured in his sentient south.

Neither the must in the tombs of the kings
Nor from the gods that a shadow falls,
Detracts at all from his praising.

He's a messenger, who always remains,
Still holding, far through the doors of the dead,
A dish with fruit they can praise.

I, 8 (NUR IM RAUM DER RÜHMUNG DARF DIE KLAGE)

In the region of praise alone may Lament walk,
That Nymph of the weeping fountain,
Watching over what flows about us,
So, it may fall here, bright, on the stone

That supports the gates and the altar.
See, round her motionless shoulders,
Dawns the feeling that she is the youngest
Among her siblings here in the mind.

Jubilation knows, Longing confessed,
Only Lament's still in the process of learning,
With childish hands counting her ancient woes.

Then, suddenly, in the sky, awkward, unpractised,
She holds up our voices, a starry constellation,
A concatenation their breath yet fails to cloud.

I, 9 (NUR WER DIE LEIER SCHON HOB)

Only one who has raised the lyre,
Already, among the shades,
May sense how to return
The unending praise.

Only one who ate, with the dead,
Of the poppy, that is their own,
Will not lose the slightest
Note ever again.

Wish even the image in the pond
That blurs for us, often:
Know the reflection.

Only within the double sphere
Will the voices become
Kind, and eternal.



Aeneas Descending to the Underworld
Master of the Orpheus Legend (artist)
Italian, active fourth quarter of the 15th century
The National Gallery of Art

I, 10 (EUCH, DIE IHR NIE MEIN GEFÜHL VERLIEBT)

To you, never lost from my feelings,
You ancient Sarcophagi, my greetings,
That the glittering water of Roman times
Flows through like a verse while walking,

Or that open wide, like the charmed eyes
Of some awakening shepherd in August –
Full of silence, and honeysuckle –
Out of which joyous butterflies go soaring.

All those who are snatched from limbo,
I greet, all the newly-reopened mouths,
Who know now what true silence means.

Are we certain, friends, or uncertain?
The juncture of both brings that doubt
Shown by the eyes in a human face.

I, 11 (STEH DEN HIMMEL. HEIBT KEIN STERNBILD 'REITER'?)

Halt the stars. Is there not one called the 'Rider'?
That which is strangely imprinted within us,
The pride of the Earth? And then a second,
That he urges on and restrains, that bears him?

Is not the sinewy nature of Being pursued so,
And tamed? Turned to this side and that,
By merely the lightest of pressures,
Into a fresh tract of space. And the two are one.

Or are they? Do not either mean the path
That the two of them both travel together,
Still nameless, between 'Table' and 'Field'.

Though a concatenation of stars deceives,
Yet we are happy to believe awhile
In its configuration. And that is enough.

I, 12 (HEIL DEM GEIST, DER UNS VERBINDEN MAG)

Hail to the spirit, that holds us together,
Since we only exist by shape and form.
And in miniscule steps the clock ticks,
Set beside our actual day.

Without knowing our own true place,
We achieve real relationship;
The antennae feel the antennae,
And suffer the distance between...

Pure tension! O music of forces!
Is it not through a venial struggle,
That disaster's deflected from you?

Though the anxious farmer labours
So that the seed becomes harvest,
It is never enough. Earth must bear.

I, 13 (VOLLER APFEL, BIRNE UND BANANE)

Fullness of apple, pear, blackcurrant,
Gooseberry...it all speaks life and death
In the mouth...I anticipate...
Go read it in some child's face

As they taste it; it comes from afar. Are you
Slowly becoming nameless in your own mouth?
Where there were words, find a flow,
Strangely surprised from the flesh.

Dare to say what an 'apple' is called,
This sweetness that deepens within,
Gently ripening in taste,

To become, clear, alive and transparent,
Ambiguous, sun-kissed, earthy, and here:
Oh, experience feeling. Infinite joy!

I, 14 (WIR GEHEN UM MIT BLUME, WEINBLATT, FRUCHT)

We're involved with flower, vine-leaf and fruit.
They don't only speak the language of seasons,
A vision of colour that rises from darkness,
Betraying perhaps the jealous glances

Of the dead themselves, who enrich the Earth.
What do we know of her part in this?
It has long been her art to brand the clay
Freely, with her distinguishing mark.

The question is: does it bring them pleasure?
Urging the fruit forth; labouring enslaved,
To enclose and offer it, to us their masters?

Are they the powers that sleep in the roots,
And indulge us simply out of abundance,
Something between mute effort and kisses?

Part I

I, 15 (WARTET..., DAS SCHMECKT... SCHON ISTS AUF DER FLUCHT)

Wait...that taste...It's already in flood...

A slight music only, a throbbing, a murmur.

You girls, you warm, you silent ones, dance

The dance of the fruit that's tasted and known.

Dance the orange; how could one forget

How, drowned in itself, it defends

Itself against its own sweetness; the fruit,

You possess, has been sweetly changed into you.

Dance the orange. The warmer landscape,

Fling it from you, so that ripeness may glow

In your native air! Shining, unveiled.

Scent after scent. Create the connection

With the pure, the resisting rind,

With the juice that fills the fortunate mouth!

I, 16 (DU, MEIN FREUND, BIST EINSAM, WEIL....)

You, my friend, are lonely, because...

With our words, with our gestures,

We gradually make this world our own,

Our weakest, most perilous, perhaps.

Who can gesture towards a scent?

And, of the many forces that threaten,

You feel a multitude. You know the dead,

And shudder at the spell that is cast.

See, now is a time to endure the mass

Of bits and pieces as if they were whole.

To help would be hard. Do not, above all,

Plant me in your heart, I'm growing too swiftly.

Yet I will guide my master's hand to say,

Here, now. Here is Esau in his own pelt.

I, 17 (ZU UNTERST DER ALTE, VERWORN)

In the depths, ancient tangle,
The mass of old roots,
The hidden source,
That is never seen.

Spiked helms and hunting horns,
Speaking of greyness,
Men in fraternal rage,
Women like lutes...

Branch thrusting at branches
None of them free... one there!
Oh climb...Oh climb...

Though they are broken still,
Yet the one there, on high,
Bends to a lyre.

I, 18 (HÖRST DU DAS NEUE, HERR)

Do you hear the new, Master,
Roaring and trembling?
The harbingers, heralds, come
That proclaim it.

True no hearing is whole
Amidst this raging,
But the machine demands
That its role be praised.

See, how the machine heaves
And takes its revenge,
Distorting and weakening us.

Gaining its strength from us,
Let it, without passion,
Urge us onward, and serve.

I, 19 (WANDELN SICH RASCH AUCH DIE WELT)

Though the world alters swiftly
Like patterns of cloud,
All that's perfected
Returns to its ancient place.

Beyond the change and departure,
Further away, and freer,
Your prelude still endures
God of the lyre.

Suffering is not grasped,
Love is not learned,
Nor is that which takes us far-off

In death ever unveiled.
The song alone, over the earth,
Celebrates, sanctifies.



The Sacrifice of Iphigenia
Master of the Orpheus Legend (artist)
Italian, active fourth quarter of the 15th century
The National Gallery of Art

I, 20 (DIR ABER, HERR, O WAS WEIH ICH DIR, SAG)

But to you, Master, what shall I dedicate
To you, who taught creatures to listen? –
A memory of a spring day,
Its evening, in Russia – a horse,

From the village, a white horse came,
Alone, a rope at his forefoot,
To be fettered alone in the meadow,
All night – how his full mane shook

Over his neck, in tune with his spirits.
In his roughly-hindered gallop,
How the fount of the species rose!

He felt the vastness – deep down!
He sang, and he heard – your legendary
Cycle enclosed within.

His image, I dedicate.



The Sacrifice of a Bull
Master of the Orpheus Legend (artist)
Italian, active fourth quarter of the 15th century
The National Gallery of Art

I, 21 (FRÜHLING IST WIEDERGEKOMMEN. DIE ERDE)

Spring has returned, once more. The Earth
Is like a child that knows many a poem,
Many, oh many...for her long labour
Of learning she's granted this prize.

Her teacher was strict. We admired
The white of the old-man's-beard,
What, we ask, should the green, the blue,
Be called: she knows, she knows!

Earth, in your freedom, lightly you play
With the children. We'd love to catch you,
Joyful Earth. For the joyful succeed.

Oh, all that the teacher has taught her,
The many things printed on roots
And tall intricate stems: she sings, she sings!

I, 22 (WIR SIND DIE TREIBENDEN)

We are the shoots,
But the pace of time
Treats us as slight
In the ever-enduring.

Everything urgent
Will swiftly be gone,
Initiate first, in us
The lingering.

Youth, don't brave mere speed,
Or throw yourself into
Every attempt to fly,

All things here are at rest:
The dark and the light,
The flower and the book.

I, 23 (O ERST DANN, WENN DER FLUG)

Oh, only *then*, when the flight,
No longer for its sake alone,
Soars into the heavenly
Stillness, enough in itself

To sail out, lightly, in space
With a skill that succeeded,
In play, the wind's darling,
Rocking there, slender and sure –

Only when a pure 'where to'
Prevails against youthful pride
In the dynamic ascent,

Will it, hastened by victory,
Close to the far-off distance,
Be, that which it alone reaches.

I, 24 (SOLLEN WIR UNSERE URALTE FREUNDSCHAFT, DIE GROßEN)

Will we retain our old friendship with the great gods,
That fail to woo us, our harsh steel raised so sternly,
Knowing them not, rejecting them now, or suddenly
Being forced to search them out on our ancient maps?

Those formidable friends, who bear the dead from us,
Without touching our turning wheels, at any point?
Our banquets are distanced from them, our bathing
Removed, and their messengers now far too slow,

Whom we always overtake. Alone now, wholly
Dependent upon, yet not knowing each other,
We no longer treat the paths as lovely meanders,

But like flights of steps. In the furnace the old fire burns,
There alone, while the hammers are raised in the steam,
Ever larger. While we, like swimmers, lose strength.

I, 25 (DICH ABER WILL ICH NUN, DICH, DIE ICH KANNTEN)

But *you* now, *you* whom I knew like a flower
Whose name I did not understand,
Once more I'll remember, and show them you, stolen one,
Beautiful player of the unsuppressible cry.

A dancer first, sudden one, body filled with hesitation,
Pausing, as if one had cast your young being in bronze:
Grieving, listening – Then, from the riches on high,
Music fell through your altered heart.

Illness was close to you. Already seized by the shadows,
Your blood ran darkly, yet, though suspicious of flight,
It still drove outwards into your natural springtime.

Again and again, broken by darkness and fall,
Earthbound, it gleamed. Until after that dreadful pounding,
It passed through the inconsolable open door.

I, 26 (DU ABER, GÖTTLICHER, DU, BIS ZULETZT NOCH ERTÖNER)

But you, divine one, sounding out till the end,
Surrounded by the swarm of rejected maenads,
Have drowned their shrieks with order, lovely one;
Out of the chaos, your music rose in reply.

None could destroy your head, or your lyre,
How they rushed to attack you, how the sharp
Stones they hurled at your heart, were melted
In you, and endowed, there, with hearing.

Finally, urged by revenge, they shattered you,
While your sounds still lingered in lions, in stones,
And in birds, and trees. You're still singing there!

O lost god! O everlasting sign of the way!
Only through enmity that tore you to shreds,
Are we, the hearers, a mouth for Nature.



The Death of Orpheus
Master of the Orpheus Legend (artist)
Italian, active fourth quarter of the 15th century
The National Gallery of Art

PART II

II, 1 (ATMEN, DU UNSICHTBARES GEDICHT!)

Breath, you, invisible poem!
Always about individual
Being, pure exchange of space. Counterweight,
Through which I rhythmically exist.

Single wave who's
Eventual sea I am,
You, the sparest of possible seas,
Gainer of space.

How many of these, spaces, were places already
Within me? Many a breeze
Is like some child of mine.

Do you know me, air, filled with my former places?
You once smooth bark,
Bole, and leaf of my words.

II, 2 (SO WIE DEM MEISTER MANCHMAL DAS EILIG)

Just as the master, sometimes, in haste,
Strikes a true line from the paper drawn near,
So, a mirror will often draw the divinely
Unique smile of some girl, deeper within,

As she faces the morning, alone –
Or in the gleam of the evening lights;
And, upon the breath of the real face,
Later, descends the merest reflection.

What did her eyes discern in the ashes
Long smouldering there in the hearth;
Glimpses of life, vanished forever?

Oh, who can know of our losses on Earth?
Only those whose voices, nonetheless, praise,
Who sing of the heart, born to wholeness.

II, 3 (SPIEGEL NOCH NIE HAT MAN WISSEND BESCHRIEBEN)

Mirror, none have ever truly described
What you are in your being.
You, like a sieve full of nothing but holes,
Filled with intervals of time.

You who squander the empty hallway,
When evening falls, as in some far forest,
And the chandelier, a sixteen-point stag,
Vanishes into your inaccessibility.

Sometimes you are full of paintings.
Some seem to have settled within you.
Others you've shyly sent on their way.

But the loveliest will remain – until
Into those frames, contained within,
Bright Narcissus, dissolving, enters.

II, 4 (O DIESES IST DAS TIER, DAS ES NICHT GIEBT)

O this is the creature that has never been.
They never knew it and yet none the less
Its movements, aspects, slender neck,
Up to the still bright gaze, were loved.

True it never *was*, yet, it was, through their love,
A pure creature. They left it room enough.
And in that space, clear and un-peopled,
It raised its head lightly and scarcely needed

Being. It was never nourished with food,
But only the possibility of being.
And that gave the creature such power

That a horn grew from its brow. One horn.
In its whiteness it drew near a virgin girl –
And was in the silvered mirror, and in her.

II, 5 (BLUMENMUSKEL, DER DER ANEMONE)

Flowery unfolding, that of the windflower,
Gradually opening in the meadow,
Until the polyphonic light pours
Into its lap from the sonorous sky,

Into the silent starry flower,
Unfolding in endless reception,
Sometimes so overwhelmed by abundance
That the lulling sense of falling

Is scarcely capable of returning
Those far-flung borders of leaf to you,
Enduring strength of how many worlds!

We, the violent ones, last longer,
But when, and in which of all our lives,
Are we, finally, open receptors?

II, 6 (ROSE, DU THRONENDE, DENEN IM ALTERTUME)

Rose, you enthroned one, to those in ancient times
You were a single-rimmed chalice,
But to us you are the full, countless flower,
The inexhaustible object.

In your richness, you seem like fold on fold,
Clothing a body of nothing but splendour,
Yet at the same time your single leaf,
Is refusal, avoidance of every garment.

For centuries your scent has called out
To us – its sweetest name.
Suddenly it's like fame, here in the air.

Still, we don't know what to call it, we...
Guess, and the memory we summon
Goes to meet it, from sweet hours recalled.

Sonnets to Orpheus

II, 7 (BLUMEN, IHR SCHLIEßLICH DEN ORDNENDEN HÄNDEN VERWANDTE)

Flowers, at the end, you find hands arranging you,
(The hands of young girls, now, as long ago)
You who lie, end to end, on the table,
Wearied, and tenderly hurting,

Waiting for water, so you might revive,
In the death that's already begun – then be,
Suddenly, raised between moistened tips
Of sensitive fingers that soothe you far more

Than you thought them able to, delicate ones,
On finding yourselves again, in some vase
Slowly cooling; warmth, like a girlish confession

Of dull wearisome sins, flowing from you,
Who celebrate being culled; warmth, like a bond
With them, who thrive in communion with you.



Mars and Venus

Master of the Orpheus Legend (artist)

Italian, active fourth quarter of the 15th century

The National Gallery of Art

II, 8 (WENIGE IHR, DER EINSTIGEN KINDHEIT GESPIELEN)

(In memoriam Egon von Rilke)

You few, childhood playmates long ago,
In gardens scattered throughout the city,
How we found, and hesitantly liked, each other,
And, like the Lamb with the written scroll,

Spoke silently. When we found delight,
No one owned to it. Whose was it then?
How it dissolved among those going by,
And in the anxieties of the endless year.

Carts passed by us, vanishing strangers,
Houses surrounded us, solid but untrue;
None knew us. What was real in it all?

Only the ball flung high. Its glorious arc.
Not even the children...though sometimes one,
Oh, a vanishing one, beneath its fall.

Part II

II, 9 (RÜHMT EUCH, IHR RICHTENDEN, NICHT DER ENTBEHRLICHEN FOLTER)

Judges, don't boast that torture's redundant,
That necks no longer bow beneath chains.
Nothing's enhanced, not one heart...because
A longed-for spasm of tenderness melts you.

The scaffold returns what it received through
The ages, like a child re-giving the presents
From its last birthday. Into the high, pure, foolishly
Open heart, the god of true mercy would walk

Otherwise. He would come powerfully,
Seize us more radiantly, as a god will.
More than the breeze round an anchored ship,

Not less than the secret, quiet awareness
That in silence subdues us within,
Like the gentle play of the child of an infinite pairing.

II, 10 (ALLES ERWORBNE BEDROHT DIE MASCHINE, SOLANGE)

The machine would threaten all we have done,
If it dared to exist in spirit, not simply serve us.
Lest the controlling hand show a sweet hesitation,
It cuts the stone more exactly, to build more firmly.

It never lingers long enough for us to escape it,
To leave it, oiled, to itself, in the silent factory.
It is life – and thinks it best if the same exact
Intent arranges all, and creates, and destroys.

But for us existence is still enchanted, our origin
In a hundred places, a play of pure forces, no one
Encounters without kneeling in admiration.

Words are still sensitive to the unsayable,
And music, ever-renewed, from quivering stone
Still builds its heavenly house in unusable space.

Part II

II, 11 (MANCHE, DES TODES, ENTSTAND RUHIG GEORDNETE REGEL)

Many calmly-ordered norms for death have arisen,
Since ever-conquering man insisted on hunting.
More than the snare and the net, I know you,
You, strips of canvas, hanging in caves of karst.

You were set there quietly, as though as a signal
To celebrate peace. But then a lad shook the edge,
And, from some cavern, the night threw a handful
Of pale fluttering doves to the light...yet that too is lawful.

May the hunter not experience regret,
Nor the onlooker either, for such an act,
Though it be vigilant, prompt in its action.

Killing's a grievous form of our straying...
While what happens within ourselves
Is pure, to the calm and serene spirit.



Meleager Hunting the Calydonian Boar
Master of the Orpheus Legend (artist)
Italian, active fourth quarter of the 15th century
The National Gallery of Art

Part II

II, 12 (WOLLE DIE WANDLUNG. O SEI FÜR DIE FLAMME BEGEISTERT)

Will transformation. O long for the flame,
Where a Thing escapes you, splendid in change:
That designing spirit, master of what is earth,
Loves only the turning-point in the form's curve,

What closes itself, to endure, already freezes:
Does it feel safe in the refuge of drabbest grey?
Wait: the hard's warned, by the hardest – from far away,
A blow – the absent hammer is drawing back!

Who pours out like a spring, knowing knows him:
And leads him delighted through the bright creation,
That often ends with the start, and begins with the end.

Every fortunate space is a child or grandchild of parting,
Whose passing-through amazes. And Daphne, altered,
Since she became laurel, wants you to alter to breeze.

Sonnets to Orpheus



Apollo and Daphne

Master of the Orpheus Legend (artist)

Italian, active fourth quarter of the 15th century

The National Gallery of Art

II, 13 (SEI ALLEM ABSCHIED VORAN, ALS WÄRE ER HINTER)

Be in front of all parting, as though it were now
Behind you, like the winter gone by.
Because among winters is one so endlessly winter
Only by over-wintering does your heart still survive.

Be always dead in Eurydice – climb, with more singing,
Climb with praising, back to the pure relation.
Here, in the failing place, the exhausted realm,
Be a sounding glass that rang as it shattered.

Be – and know, at that time, the state of non-being,
The infinite ground of our deepest vibration,
So that you may wholly complete it this one time.

In both the used-up, and the hollow and dumb
Recourse of all nature, the un-tellable sum,
Joyfully count yourself one, and destroy the number.

Sonnets to Orpheus



Orpheus and Eurydice Before Pluto
Master of the Orpheus Legend (artist)
Italian, active fourth quarter of the 15th century
The National Gallery of Art

II, 14 (SIEHE DIE BLUMEN, DIESE DEM IRDISCHEN TREUEN)

See the flowers, those, so true to the Earth,
To whom we lend fate from the margin of fate –
But who knows! If they regret withering,
It is for us to be their regret.

All would soar. Only we walk round complaining,
Laying down Self from it all, delighted with weight:
Oh, to Things what wearisome teachers we are,
While endless childhood succeeds in them.

Let someone fall into profound slumber, and sleep
Deeply with Things – O how easily they'd come
Differently to a different day, from the mutual deep,

Or perhaps remain: and flowers would bloom, and praise
Their convert, one now like them
All those mute brothers and sisters, in the winds of the fields.

II, 15 (O BRUNNEN-MUND, DU GEBENDER, DU MUND)

O fountain-mouth, you Giver, you Mouth,
Inexhaustible speaker of one pure thing –
You, marble mask in the flowing face
Of water. And, in the land behind,

The aqueducts' sources. From further,
Past graves, from Apennine slopes,
They bring you your speech, that then,
Past the darkened age of your chin,

Falls, down to the basin below.
This is the sleeping recumbent ear,
The marble ear you always speak to.

An ear of the Earth. She only talks
To herself like this. Place a jug there,
It seems to her that you've interrupted.

II, 16 (IMMER WIEDER VON UNS AUFGERISSEN)

Torn open by us, again and again,
The god is the place that heals.
We are the eager ones, seeking to know,
While he is joyously scattered.

Even the pure, the sacred offering,
He receives in no other way into his world
Than by being himself the free pole,
Both counterpoised, and unmoving.

Only the dead drink
From the source we but *heard* here,
When the god silently beckons them, the dead.

We are offered only its sound. While the lamb,
With its greater feeling for silence,
Seeks out the bell.

Sonnets to Orpheus

II, 17 (WO, IN WELCHEN IMMER SELIG BEWÄSSERTEN GARTEN, AN WELCHEN)

Where, in what blissfully watered garden,
On what leafless trees, from what tender blossom,
Do the strange fruits of consolation ripen?
Those delicacies found in the trampled meadow,

Perhaps, of your need. Do you sometimes wonder
At the size of the fruit, at its wholeness,
It's softness of rind, how some careless bird
Failed to be there before you, or a jealous worm

From beneath. Are there trees where angels perch,
Slowly, strangely, tended by hidden gardeners,
So, they sustain us without them being ours?

Have we ever been able, we Shades, we Shadows,
With our too-quickly-ripe, swift-decaying actions,
To disturb the summer's serene equanimity?

II, 18 (TÄNZERIN: O DU VERLEGUNG)

Dancer, oh movement,
Vanishing in passing, how you performed.
And that whirl at the end, a sapling swaying,
Did it not take possession of this harsh year?

Did it not bloom, so your earlier motion
Suddenly surrounded its crown of silence?
And, above, wasn't that summer, the sun,
The warmth, the undying warmth in you?

It bore fruit too, fruits, your tree of rapture,
Aren't these they: the richly-striped pitcher,
And, there, the more-slowly maturing vase?

And in the portraits: does not the sketch remain,
That the line of your darkened brow drew
On the whirling-about of its whirling?

II, 19 (IRGENDWO WOHT DAS GOLD IN DER VERWÖHNENDEN BANK)

In the bank somewhere, gold is accommodated.
It lives on close terms with thousands. But here
The blind beggar is like the location of some lost coin,
Is akin to some dusty corner under the cupboard.

Money, it would seem, is at home in the stores,
Clothing itself there in silk, furs, carnations,
He, the silent one, stands, here where it pauses
For breath, all that wealth, sleeping or waking.

Oh, how does it close at night? That ever-open hand?
Pale, and wretched, and wholly destructible
Tomorrow fate overtakes it, extends it to all.

If but one watcher might comprehend and praise,
In amazement, that endless feat of endurance!
Sayable to those who sing. Audible to the god.

Part II

II, 20 (ZWISCHEN DEN STERNEN, WIE WEIT; UND DOCH, UM)

The stars...how distant, yet how much further
What is found here. One, for example a child...
And, beside that child, a second, another –
Oh, how unbelievably distant.

Fate measures us with Being's measure,
Perhaps; such that, to us, it seems strange.
Think of the distance between woman and man,
Whenever she moves apart, and considers, him.

All's distance – nowhere the circle closes.
Look at the bowl on the neatly-laid table,
At the peculiar face of the fish.

Fish are dumb, people say...but who knows?
Is there not, in the end, a place where one might
Speak the language of fish, without speaking it?

Sonnets to Orpheus

II, 21 (SINGE DIE GÄRTEN, MEIN HERZ, DIE DU NICHT KENNST; WIE IN GLAS)

Sing those gardens, my heart, that you know nothing of.
Like gardens enclosed in clear glass, unattainable.
The fountains and roses of Isfahan, Shiraz,
Sing them, as blessed; praise them, incomparable.

Show, my heart, that you're never deprived of them,
That their ripening figs are still meant for you,
That with them you frequent, midst blossoming branches,
The swelling breeze that caresses the face.

Avoid the mistake of fearing some deprivation
As a result of that decision once made: to be!
Silken thread, you are a part of the weave.

Whatever the image you're joined to, within,
(Be it only for a moment, in a life of pain)
Feel that the whole of the glorious tapestry is meant.

Part II

II, 22 (O TROTZ SCHICKSAL: DIE HERRLICHEN ÜBERFLÜSSE)

Oh, despite fate, the glorious effervescence
Of our existence, overflowing in parkland,
Or as stone statues, carved beside keystones,
Bearing the arches, treed beneath balconies!

Oh, the brass bell that raises its clapper,
Each day against dull everyday life;
Or that pillar in Karnak, that column,
That outlasts the 'eternal' temples.

Today, in the same way, that over-abundance
Soars past, from the horizontal yellow
Of day to the blinding outflow of night.

Though the tumult fades, leaves no trace behind,
The arcs of airy flight, those that create them,
Are, perhaps, not nothing, but those once merely imagined.

II, 23 (RUF E MICH ZU JENER DEINER STUNDEN)

Summon me to that hour, among those
Of yours, that, endlessly, resists you,
Close and imploring like a dog's face,
But turning away, as you think, at last,

You might finally comprehend it.
What is elusive is yours most of all.
We are free. We're released from that
Which we thought had made us welcome.

Anxious, we long for something to hold,
Often too young for what is ancient,
Too old for what never existed.

We, truly here, only when we praise,
We, that, alas, are the branch and the axe,
And the sweetness of ripening danger.

Part II

II, 24 (O DIESE LUST, IMMER NEU, AUS GELOCKERTEM LEHM!)

Oh, the delight, ever new, of loosened soil!
There was scant help for the earliest venturers.
Yet cities rose beside fortunate bays.
Water and oil, nonetheless, filled the jars.

Gods, in bold strokes we define them,
Which fate morosely erases, again and again.
And yet they are the immortals. Behold,
We may in the end obey those who listen.

We, one species, through the millennia,
Parents filled evermore with the child we bear,
That will, one day, shake, then transcend, us,

We, endlessly daring, what time we yet have!
And only death, silently, knows what we are,
And what's gained from what's lent to us.

II, 25 (SCHON, HORCH, HÖRST DU DER ERSTEN HARKEN)

Listen, can you hear the first plough
Already labouring? The human rhythm
Once more, in the subdued silence,
Of early spring's winter-hardened soil.

It never seems banal, what is to come.
What came to you so many times before
Seems now to reappear as if it were new.
Ever longed-for, you never seized it, it seized you.

Even the leaves of once-wintery oak-trees,
Shine in the evening with colour to come.
Sometimes the breezes exchange a sign.

The bushes are black. Yet the heaps of dung
Are an even deeper black in the fields.
Every hour that goes by seems younger.

II, 26 (WIE ERGREIFT UNS DER VOGELSCHREI...)

How we are moved by the bird's call...

Some single screech uniquely created.

Yet the children scream, as they play

Outdoors, beyond the need for screaming.

Screaming at random. Into this world-space,

Of cosmic space (into which the whole

Bird-call enters as people enter our dreams)

They drive their screams like wedges.

Oh, where are we? Ever more freely,

Like the loose dragon-kites we chase

At half-height, brimming with laughter,

Torn by the wind. God of song, so order

The screaming throng that, in rushing, they waken

A flowing current bearing the head and the lyre.

II, 27 (GIEBT ES WIRKLICH DIE ZEIT, DIE ZERSTÖRENDE?)

Does it truly exist, Time, the destroyer?
On the silent hill, will *it* raze the castle?
Will the Demiurge, then, violate you,
Heart, that forever belongs to the gods?

Are we really so dreadfully fragile
As fate would have us believe?
Is the promise, deep at the roots
Of childhood, afterwards stilled?

Oh, the ghost of the transient,
Through receptive innocence
Passes, like smoke.

As that which we are, the doers,
We apply to that which remains,
The godlike strength of the known.

II, 28 (O KOMM UND GEH. DU, FAST NOCH KIND, ERGÄNZE)

Oh, come and go. You, almost a child still, add,
For a moment, your dance-move
Into the pure constellation of dances
In which dull orderly Nature's

Transiently overcome, for she was stirred
To total hearing only when Orpheus sang.
You were still moved by those things
And easily surprised if any tree took time

To follow after you into the listening.
You still knew the place where the lyre
Was lifted, in sound – the un-heard centre.

For it, you tried out your lovely steps,
In hope; to turn, one day, your friend's face,
And course, towards healing celebration.

II, 29 (STILLER FREUND DER VIELEN FERNEN, FÜHLE)

Quiet friend of the many distances, feel
How your breath still enlarges space.
Let yourself ring out, a dark cradled bell
In the timbering. That, which erodes you

Gains a strength from your sustenance.
Go out and in, through transformation.
What do you know of the greatest loss?
Is drinking bitter? Then, become wine.

Be, in this night made of excess,
The magic art at the crossroads of senses,
The feel of their strange encounter.

And, if the earthbound forget you,
Say to the silent Earth: I flow.
To the rushing water: I am.

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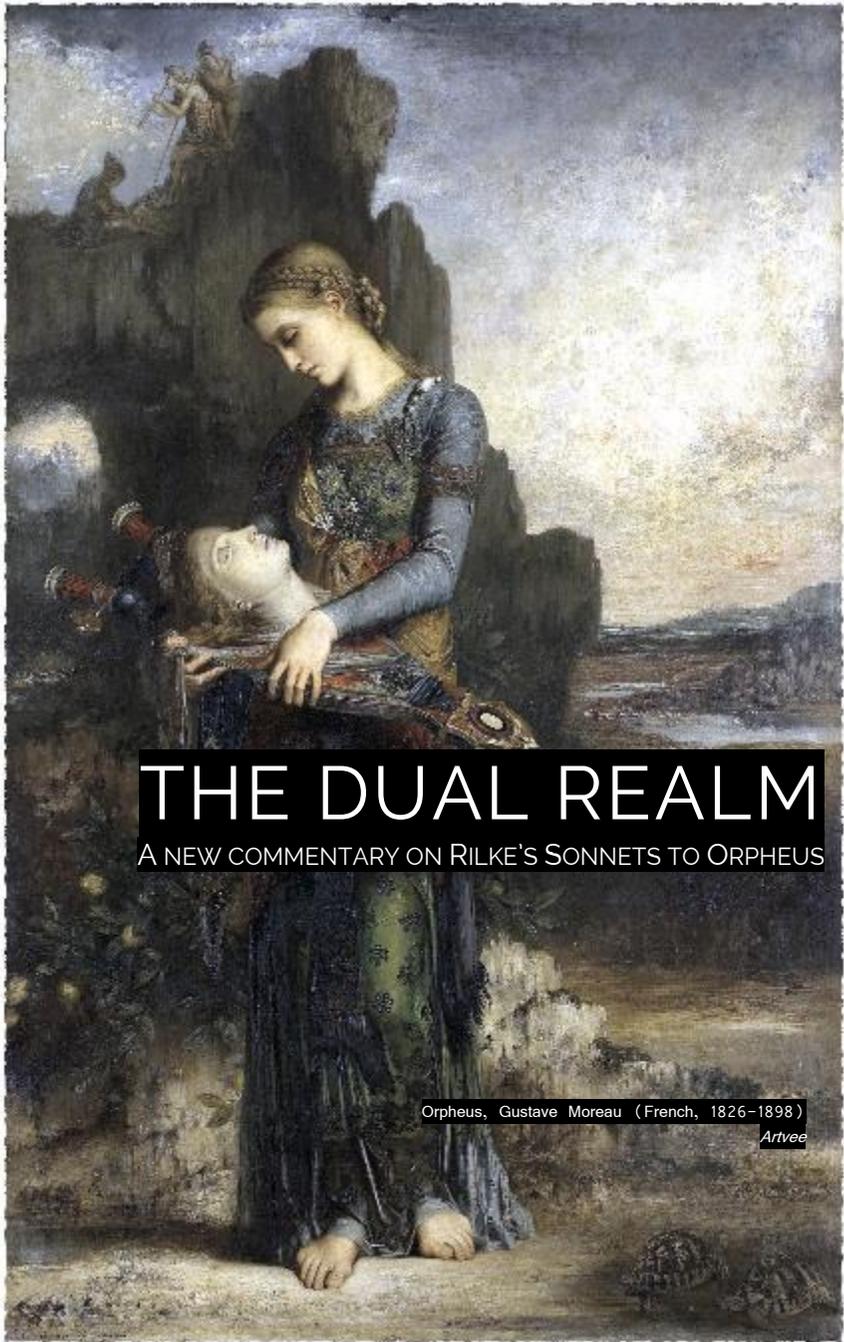
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THE DUAL REALM

A NEW COMMENTARY ON RILKE'S SONNETS TO ORPHEUS

Orpheus, Gustave Moreau (French, 1826-1898)
Artvee

TRANSLATOR’S INTRODUCTION

The following commentary on each of the sonnets is a companion piece to my commentary on the Duino Elegies (‘The Fountain of Joy’) which if read first will also help to illuminate the sonnets. Rilke, pursuing one of his most significant themes, the deeper integration of death with the claims of life, wove remembrance of the most significant deaths in his own life into the texture and contents of his poems. In particular he was deeply moved by the early death of his young cousin Egon von Rilke (1873-1880), that of the Expressionist painter Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907) who died shortly after giving birth to her daughter Mathilde, and that of the young dancer Wera Ouckama Knoop (1900-1919) a friend of his daughter. His correspondence with Wera’s mother, was renewed in 1921, and her sending him a book of notes Wera had written was one of the elements that inspired the composition of the sonnets. The set of sonnets was ‘written as a memorial’ to Wera, according to Rilke’s dedication of the published work.

Rilke created a framework for the series, by employing elements from the Greek myths, in particular the resonant cycle concerning Orpheus, the Thracian poet-musician, who visited the underworld (in the journey known as *katabasis*), and was torn to pieces by the followers of Dionysus. Rilke, who was ever-troubled by thoughts of transience and mortality, nonetheless seeks to stress a positive celebration and praise of life, both here and in the Duino Elegies. The difficulty in reading Rilke lies not so much in the complexity of his thought, and his occasional abstruseness, but in the reader’s reaction to Rilke’s view of the realm of death.

It is far from clear to what extent Rilke believed in his own imaginative realms, that of the Angels in the Duino Elegies (who, as he made clear, are not the angels of Christianity or Islam) or that of Orpheus (viewed as a god) in the sonnets. Equally disconcerting perhaps for many modern readers is his constant use of personification, anthropomorphism, and the pathetic fallacy, all means by which he tries to infuse more conscious life and purpose into the world than, from a scientific perspective, it contains. In doing so he simply continues an age-old poetic custom, but one that leaves him on the

traditionalist side of his art rather than that of modernity, though intellectually he is a modernist in the sense of being an heir of nineteenth century existentialism (particularly that of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard) and later of post-World War I angst.

In reading the sonnets, it is for the reader to decide whether they believe in the external reality of a tangible or wholly spiritual realm of the dead, or whether to treat Rilke's conception of it as an intellectual and emotional journey of the mind, a metaphorical invocation of the manner in which the fact of death and human mortality impinges on and influences our lives, through loss, grief, memory, and commemoration, and may lead to both anguish and inspiration. In either case, Rilke enriches our perceptions, and challenges us, in a profound and creative manner, to reflect on our own lives and on the human condition.

It is worth repeating Rilke's own comments here. In a letter from 1923 he writes: *'Whoever does not sometimes give full consent, and a joyous consent, to the dreadfulness of life, can never possess the unutterable richness and power of existence, can only walk at its edge, and one day, when judgement is given, will have been neither living nor dead. To show this identity of terror and bliss, these two faces of the same immortal head, indeed this single face...this is the true significance and purpose of the Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus.'*

And previously in 1922 he had written *'Here is the angel, who doesn't exist, and the devil who doesn't exist, and the human being who does exist stands between them, and (I can't help saying it) their unreality makes him more real to me.'*

Yet in 1925 he writes: *'Death is the side of life turned away from us, unilluminated by us: we must try to achieve the greatest possible consciousness of our existence, which is at home in both of these unlimited provinces, and inexhaustibly nourished by both...there is neither a here nor a beyond, but only the great unity, in which the Angels those beings that surpass us, are at home.'*

Finally, consider this letter from 1923: *"Death is not beyond our strength it is the measuring line on the vessel's brim, and we read 'full' whenever we reach it...I am not saying we should love death, but we should love life so generously, so without calculation and discrimination, that we involuntarily come to include, and to love, death also (the half of life turned away from us)...because we have kept it a stranger it has become our enemy...it is a friend, our deepest friend...and that not in the...sense of life's opposite a denial of life: but our friend precisely when we most passionately and vehemently assent to*

being here, living and working on Earth, to Nature and love. Life says simultaneously Yes and No. Death (I beg you to believe this!) is the true Yea-sayer. It says only Yes, in the presence of eternity.'

He employs, and toys with, metaphors to such an extent that he himself often seems to hold both the beliefs suggested above simultaneously. The shadow world is at one moment real, an afterlife of some kind, and at the next is a pure flight of the imagination. Orpheus is both a real external power and in the next instance a spiritual force engendered within the mind. It seems not to have mattered to Rilke, who perhaps saw any conflict amongst these ideas as a general expression of the indecisiveness of the species in regard to the subject, and ultimately irrelevant to the true tasks of seeing life and death as a single whole, of transforming the visible into the invisible within ourselves, and of celebrating and praising that whole.

Before commenting on each of the poems, a consideration of the myth of Orpheus and the associated cult of Orphism follows.

Sonnets to Orpheus



Orpheus and his Lute

Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones (English, 1833 – 1898)

Artvee

THE MYTH OF ORPHEUS, AND THE CULT OF ORPHISM

The best, most accessible, and most poetic retelling of the myth of Orpheus can be found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, while Virgil also relates the story in Book IV of his *Georgics*. Ovid writes, at the start of Book X, of Orpheus' descent into the underworld in a fruitless attempt to rescue his wife Eurydice, and at the start of Book XI of the death of the poet at the hands of the Maenads, or Bacchantes, the followers of the god Dionysus-Bacchus.

The first passage establishes Orpheus' credentials as one who has passed through the realms of life and death, experiencing both our world and the mythological afterlife. This allows Rilke to absorb the Greek underworld, the realm ruled by Dis, and by the abducted Persephone, into his poetry, and therefore the region of the Shades, the disembodied spirits of the dead. The link to Persephone as a mode of the primal Goddess of pre-Greek thought, is important. As a goddess of vegetation and the cycle of the seasons, spending part of her time above the earth and part below it, Persephone is both a proponent of life and a ruler over the dead. Indeed, she is, in some respects, a more potent symbol of both than is Orpheus himself.

Orpheus however is, mythologically, the first human poet and player of the lyre, and an originator of poetic 'song' eclipsed only by the divine Apollo, the guardian of both. He therefore, in Rilke's eyes, stands as the symbolic master of poets and poetry, referred to indeed as the lord or master in the sonnets, and treated there as himself a divinity. In descending into the underworld, he deliberately entered into the realm of death, as Rilke would have us do emotionally and intellectually. In pursuing the shade of a woman (Eurydice, fatally bitten in the heel by a viper) he echoes Rilke's conjuring up of the shades of Wera and Paula, and in his failure (an error, a backward-glance, induced in the myth by an excess of longing) Orpheus perhaps reflects Rilke's own sense of continual failure, but of renewed desire, to seamlessly join the twin realms of death and life, and make them one.

Orpheus, the son of the Muse Calliope, is blessed, through his powers of music and song, with the ability to draw wild creatures to him, and living

trees, and even inanimate stones, almost granting the latter life. That kind of anthropomorphism is a fundamental part of Rilke's poetic style. Orpheus' song can manifest itself in the form of a lost girl, while Orpheus himself can act as the gatekeeper between worlds, always opening a path for others to follow, especially as concerns poetic effort, inasmuch as it seeks to enliven, celebrate and praise.

Orpheus, who can be seen as an adherent of Apollo the god of the lyre, and therefore of order, is here opposed mythically to Dionysus the god of chaos (an idea Nietzsche expounded in his first work 'The Birth of Tragedy'). He is therefore attacked and destroyed, torn limb from limb, by the followers of that god (who is the Bacchus of the Romans), the Maenads or Bacchantes, a throng of frenzied women, whose song is the scream, and whose music is the ululation. His detached head floats down the river Hebrus to the sea still singing, and then to the island of Lesbos, where it gives out oracular utterances, in the manner of Bran in Celtic mythology. In this mode Orpheus, though dead, possesses a mental life beyond life, and is still enshrined in the mortal world. His lyre became the constellation of Lyra, and therefore both his singing prophetic head, represented by the poetic tradition, and his mode of musical expression, represented by the constellation, both still have a 'living' presence in the world.

Rilke also transfers to Orpheus some of Apollo's attributes and powers, that of healing, for instance (Apollo both kills with his arrows and acts as a healer, brings disease and cures it, so unifying the two realms); of presiding over the ordered dance as an art-form; and of uttering prophetic truth, though sometimes ambiguously. These dimensions of Orpheus are explored, sometimes only touched on lightly, in the dance of the sonnets.

Orpheus was a key personage in the Ancient Greek and Hellenistic cult of Dionysus, known as Orphism, which celebrated the suffering and death of the infant Dionysus at the hands of the Titans, who were struck by Zeus' thunderbolt in retribution, and turned to ashes. From the ashes, human beings took bodily form, the resurrected 'twice-born' Dionysus infusing them with spirit. The texts in which the cult originated were apparently attributed to Orpheus, hence the cult name of Orphism, and the corresponding Orphic rites. Those initiated into its mysteries underwent ritual purification, and relived the suffering and death of the god. Thereafter, they were granted an eternal life, while the uninitiated were subject to repeated reincarnation, as in

the Hindu and Buddhist concept of samsara. The Orphic mysteries were a forerunner of the later Pythagorean cult involving the migration of souls into other forms of being (metempsychosis). Adherents of Orphism, like the Pythagoreans, refrained from eating meat, and lived an ascetic life.

Clearly the cults of Orpheus, Dionysus, and the related cult of Demeter the corn goddess and her daughter Persephone (presiding goddesses of the Eleusinian mysteries, in which Persephone was titled ‘the Maiden’) both derive from the ancient worship of a vegetation god who is a consort of the great goddess; he, ritually dismembered each year in the form of vegetation and the harvest (‘heads’ of corn); she, retiring beneath the ground to reappear again as the spring season. Thus, the cults reinforced the supreme value of life and transient living things, and the sanctity of the nurturing Earth, while at the same time recognising the realm of death. (For all of this see Frazer’s ‘The Golden Bough’, Campbell’s *The Masks of God*, and many other texts). Rilke had here, personified by Orpheus-Dionysus, and by Persephone, the girl or maiden, the rich themes of the divine breathing spirit and life into the world, our human experience of death and the loss involved, as well as the resurrection and recurrence of life in the cycle of seasons, the sanctity of Nature, and the sources of both anxiety and inspiration that death and revival represent.

These elements individually are not, of course, unique to Orphism, but they do reinforce the structure and content of the sonnets, and allow, for the informed reader, mythological resonances and echoes to arise from Rilke’s work. For example, Zagreus, an incarnation of Dionysus, is, in myth, tricked by the Titans by means of a mirror prior to his dismemberment, and Rilke utilises the mirror theme in various poems. Again, Zagreus’ remains were gathered and interred by Apollo, God of the lyre, and healer, who in, later manifestations of the Orphic cult facilitated the resurrection of Dionysus, therefore restoring order after chaos, life after death, and joy after torment. The apparent conflict, which Nietzsche highlighted, between Apollo and Dionysus, chaos and order, can therefore be otherwise understood as a relationship, whereby the raw energy of Dionysus and the energy, captured in material forms, of Apollo, are complementary aspects of the creative whole. In one version of the rites, Apollo impregnates Semele, the mother of Dionysus, in order to achieve the latter’s rebirth and forge a unity, so that fertility and pregnancy can be incorporated into the thematic material of the sonnets.

Sonnets to Orpheus

It perhaps should be noted that Rilke turned to an ancient 'dead' religion, two 'dead' classical languages, and many a 'dead' poet, before invoking the living spirit, living language, and the living, perpetually-resurrected, art of poetry. From these mythical threads, and from much else, Rilke wove the tapestry of the sonnets. In the commentary that follows, the lines, in order, of the translated poems are shown in italics



Eurydice Bitten by a Serpent

Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones (English, 1833 – 1898)

Artvee

PART I

I, 1 (DA STIEG EIN BAUM. O REINE ÜBERSTIEGUNG!)

A tree climbed there. O pure uprising!

Oh, Orpheus sang! O towering tree of hearing!

And all was still. Yet even in that bush

A new beginning, hint, and change, was there.

Rilke opens the sonnet sequence with a metaphor, a tree of hearing. Orpheus, master of the lyre, sang mythically; the poet Rilke sings in the present, pursuing the long tradition, and poetry (like all the arts) now offers an opportunity for one to settle and grant attention, to begin again, to transform oneself through inner awareness, a transformation of life Rilke advocated in the last line of an earlier poem 'Archaic Torso of Apollo'. The beginning is an uprising, an upward and outward flow of song, the call to the perpetual novice to commence the process of initiation, which only the individual can pass through.

Creatures of silence pressed from the bright

Freed forest, out of nest and lair:

And they so yielded themselves, that not by a ruse,

And not out of fear, were they so quiet in themselves,

But simply through listening. Bellow, shriek, roar

Seemed small in their hearts.

Elements of the myth now come into play. Orpheus' singing has the power to draw birds and wild creatures from their external silence and opaqueness, and that audience is 'tamed' and quietened not by means of trickery or through fear, but by yielding to the power of art, simply attending with full awareness to the external stimulus of song, until the harsher noises of the world, its cacophony of bellows, shrieks, and roars, seems less important than the silence of inner attention.

And where there was

Just barely a hut to receive it,

A refuge out of their darkest yearning,

With an entrance whose gate-posts trembled –

There you crafted a temple for their hearing.

Art, Rilke claims, has the power to provide not merely a simple and fragile (a trembling treescape) refuge for the mind and its emotions, a refuge, that is, for our longings, our yearning for permanence and not transience, for life and not death, for joy and not suffering, for peace and not violence, but also a temple of art and the spirit. The temple, which cannot be bought (See Pound's Cantos: "The temple is not for sale"), and is a sanctuary for the spirit, a place for contemplation, regeneration, transformation, and celebration, is both 'crafted' in a creative act, and made more permanent through the artistic tradition; poetry and music originating here with the mythical Orpheus.

Rilke has therefore introduced a key theme, the power of the spirit, and in his case the artistic spirit, to enliven the world, and to praise it. At a deeper level he suggests that the transformation induced also comes from outside us, from the power of the divine or Nature's power, from Orpheus their representative, and not simply from within the individual.

I, 2 (UND FAST EIN MÄDCHEN WARS UND GING HERVOR)

*And it was almost a girl, and she came out of
That single blessedness of song and lyre,
And shone clear through her springtime-veil
And made herself a bed inside my hearing.*

Following on from the first sonnet, ‘it’ is the temple of art, which is ‘almost’ solid but not quite; ‘almost’ beyond the mind in its manifestations, Orpheus’ singing, Wera’s dancing or Paula’s paintings, yet only meaningful because of the mind. Or ‘it’ might also be construed as the flow of spiritual energy released by creative acts or external forces. Or as poetry, the performance that arises from the unified combination of song and lyre, of lyric and instrument, content and form. Like Persephone, the Maiden of the Eleusinian Mysteries, who returns to the surface of the Earth in springtime, the poetic sensibility as well as the renewal and revivification it brings, shines through its gleaming veil of form, and beds itself within the poet’s inner mind, their inner ear, and slumbers there as a constant presence.

*And slept within me. And her sleep was all:
The trees, each that I admired, those
Perceptible distances, the meadows I felt,
And every wonder that concerned myself.*

Rather than merely poetic sensibility or inner meaning we can read this invigorating spirit as energising the whole life of the mind and body, where mind is the singer and body the instrument. Orpheus then may be understood here as a personification of the power of an assumed universal spirit, of whom Persephone or Nature is a manifestation. And Orpheus’ power is also the potential, the reflective mind possesses, to embrace everything around it with wonder.

*She slept the world. Singing god, how have you
So perfected her that she made no demand
To first be awake? See, she emerged and slept.*

These manifestations of the spirit, our participation in Nature and our realisation of art, are potentials within us, slumbering powers, whom the girl, the maiden, Persephone, represents. She may also be interpreted in a traditional religious manner as the soul, the divine presence-within, the Shekinah of the Kabbalah who is the female aspect of the divine on earth. Rilke does not force a religious interpretation of the sonnets, but the spiritual power he indicates throughout certainly seems to have an external aspect within his world-view. In other words, the spirit is not merely an aspect of mind, of the workings of the brain created through evolution, but flows into the mind and the world from outside, in the manner in which traditional religion views the soul as awakened within the body by the divine. And the soul requires to be awakened, perfect though it may be at its inception, to fully live, since it does not demand to be awake, but merely ‘emerges’ and ‘sleeps’ until some moment of awakening.

*Where is her death? O, will you still discover
This theme, before your song consumes itself? –
Where is she falling to, from me?... a girl, almost ...*

How does or can the soul, then, die? This theme, of death joined with life, will this too be a theme of the sonnets, which will then not be merely a celebration of life, but an exploration of death also? The poet, Rilke, falters a moment. Expecting to use the sonnets, on the completion of the immense labour of creating the Duino Elegies, as a means for celebration, both of that poetic effort and life itself, must he now also take up again the theme incorporated in the Elegies, of the double realm of life and death? And if his poetic inspiration, which is consumed by the act of creation, is ebbing, is

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falling away from him, then Persephone is also Eurydice, inspiration, the wife of art, whom the viper (exhaustion, the mundane, the act of completion or consummation itself) bites and slays. Eurydice is she whom the poet must enter the underworld (the unconscious) once more, to find, in order that inspiration (literally 'a breathing-in') may reinvigorate him. The lost Eurydice may therefore personify not only Nature (with which we have almost lost, as contemporary human beings, a direct relationship), and artistic performance which has to be endlessly retrieved and recreated, but the soul and the spirit also, which can only be kept alive through endless effort and whose powers frequently sink exhausted, and require to be forever revived.

I, 3 (EIN GOTT VERMAGS. WIE ABER, SAG MIR, SOLL)

*A god can do so. But tell me how a man
Is supposed to follow, through the slender lyre?
His mind is riven. No temple of Apollo
Stands at the dual crossing of heart-roads.*

The divine, as traditionally envisaged, can operate in both realms, that of the living and the dead. But how can a mere mortal by pursuing the vulnerable art of poetry (slender, slight, because it ultimately depends on inspiration and the mind alone, whether the mind of creator or reader) enter into the subject of death? The human mind is split, between the need to live fully, and the need to face death and suffering. And there is no temple of Apollo, no genuine external sanctuary for hearing (I think Rilke defies any formally religious interpretation of the sonnets here), for the human spirit, which always stands at the crossroads between the two worlds of the heart, between the living moment and the dead past, the pressing need to sing and the transient nature of the song, the urgency of the here and now and the silent ‘sleep’ of those no longer amongst us, the ‘greater majority’ of the Romans whom we must, in time, join.

*Song, as you have taught it, is not desire,
Not a proclamation of final achievement:
Song is being. A simple thing for a god.
But when are we in being? And when does he

Turn the earth and stars towards us?*

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For the true poet, the 'song' of poetry, like the arts in general, is not finally about the longing to create, nor about our proclamation of having created the work, nor the achievement and perhaps fame that accompanies it, but about life itself, about engagement with the life of the universe, and with the inner mind; about, in a Taoist or Zen manner, simply living and being. Art is not merely a witness to life, but the cogent expression of it. Not a simple thing for a human being to achieve, though Orpheus the god might. And when do we achieve that state of authentic being, when does the god reveal the inner depths of the world to us, and our own inner depths? Is it when we are in love, in its broadest sense, when we are inspired by our wonder and respect and longing for the Other?

Young man, this is not your having loved, even if

Your voice forced open your mouth, then – learn

To forget that you sang out. It fades away.

To sing, in truth, is a different breath.

A breath of nothing. A gust within the god. A wind.

Rilke demurs somewhat. Having loved is not sufficient to join us to the universe, and even if we felt the compelling demand for utterance, love, creation, even if our own inner longing forced us to bear witness, to sing, we must accept that it fades away, that we are transient as the song is transient. That, in the end, we are as the song is, a breath of nothing, a disturbance of the air, that vanishes again. Ourselves the breeze and its passing.

I, 4 (O IHR ZÄRTLICHEN, TRETET ZUWEILEN)

*O you tender ones, sometimes progress
Deep inside the breath not meant for you,
Let it part before your face and, behind you,
Tremble, once more, as it flows together.*

Rilke makes a plea to the sensitive, the spiritually aware mind. He asks it to enter the flow of the universe, the stream of Orphic singing, which is not intended for us. Scientifically, the universe is without intent, and we and the other sentient creatures are the only vehicles for purpose and intent, while, in a traditional religious reading, the divine intent is not directed specifically to the individual but has a greater existence beyond any one person.

*O you blessed ones, O you healers,
Who seem to be, where the heart begins,
Arrows fired from the bow, and the target,
You whose smile ever shines through tears,

Don't be afraid to suffer the heaviness,
Return its weight once more to the Earth;
Mountains are heavy, the seas are heavy.*

By entering that flow, those who are blessed with sensitivity and Apollo's power to heal the world (through art, performance, praise, courage, or in some other way), those who seem to be both the arrows of intense awareness fired from Apollo's bow, and the target of them (the 'heart-felt'

arrows that cause heightened perception or empathy, especially of both the need for celebration and the awareness of suffering), can, through taking upon themselves the burden of creation or healing, return significance and meaning, and purpose to mortal life, to the Earth itself, the heaviness of reality, its intellectual and emotional gravity. In the same way Zen points to the three modes of awareness of a mountain (or sea), firstly our everyday perception of it, secondly a deeper perception that understands its composition (to the atomic level), use as a symbol, geographic place, intellectual presence and more, until its covert meaning to us is exhausted, and thirdly the enlightened return to seeing and feeling all that, but expressed as awareness of its shimmering presence, its tangible and intangible reality, where it is once more simply a mountain, and yet not the same mountain in the mind. Such is the enlightenment true poetry can bring, the deeper resonance of being.

Even the trees you planted as children

Soon became too heavy. You cannot bear them,

But the air... but the space ...

Even trees, other creatures, the things around us, soon become too heavy to those sensitive to the world and its suffering, as they mature. But the air and space into which we can project our spirits, the mental and spiritual existence we possess, that can liberate us, and that flow from Orpheus, from the spirit, can allow us to bear what may seem unbearable, and even sing of it (as Anna Akhmatova assured another patient sufferer she could do, even while standing in the queue before the prison gates, even in the depths of a hell created by human beings, see her poem sequence 'Requiem').

I, 5 (ERRICHTET KEINEN DENKSTEIN. LAßT DIE ROSE)

Raise no gravestone. Only let the rose

Bloom every year to favour him.

Since it is Orpheus. His metamorphosis

Into this and that. We need not strive

For other names. Once and for all

It is Orpheus, when he sings. He comes and goes.

Is it not much already that he, sometimes,

Stays, for a while, in the petal of the rose?

Though Orpheus was torn to pieces by the Maenads, though order is destroyed and we return to chaos, he is also a god of transformation, so we need not raise a gravestone for him, or mourn to excess. This transformation within, which Rilke stressed in the Duino Elegies, the need to take the things, the objects of this world, into ourselves, transform them and make them our own, is his care. Orpheus metamorphoses, into the form of the rose (which is also Persephone, or her manifestations in other modes of thought and religions, though ‘*we need not strive for other names*’ for the spirit, for life), the rose that flowers again, in the cycle of the seasons, and into many another living form. ‘*Once and for all*’, Orpheus represents life, and the life of the spirit, and Orpheus singing is a metaphor for the flow of life and spirit, which is transient. Life is transient. Artistic performance passes. But is it not already a great thing to receive and accept life, to feel life in the petal of the rose, or the human mind, or the poem as it is read, or the piece of music as it is performed, the dance as it is danced, the painting as it is created, all human achievement as it is played and replayed through our being in the world?

Sonnets to Orpheus

Oh, he must vanish, for you to understand!

And though he himself feared his vanishing,

Even as his word surpasses the being-here,

He is already there, where you cannot go.

The lyre-strings fail to constrain his hands.

And he responds, by his passing-beyond.

It is only by being aware of life's transience (which creates the particular and peculiar weight that life possesses, its deep beauty, and the beauty of great art) that we can understand life, Rilke claims. Orpheus himself, the greatest of spirits, must also fear the spirit's transience, must be aware of its repeated death and passing (transience is the death of every moment, and its rebirth in the next, not merely our termination in bodily death). But, despite that fear, Orpheus' singing, the greater life of the spirit, transcends our mortal singing and existence (in the life of the species, or in religious interpretation as some other life of the spirit), and he has already passed to the realm of the dead where the living cannot go. He is not constrained by his role as singer and poet on Earth, he also passes beyond into the underworld (also therefore into the subconscious, the realm of remembrance, where the shades of the dead linger). He has the power of return, and must continually seek out Persephone in the depths, seek to rescue her, Eurydice, who is also Nature, and a reflection of his own soul and spirit, though he must continually fail in the attempt, as the poet must in the attempt to create the poem, through an excess of longing, and an incomplete awareness and retrieval of order, for which his 'punishment' is to die at the hands of Maenads, yet sing on prophetically as a disembodied mind, parted from non-sentient Nature (Eurydice is only partly-aware of what passes. Rilke portrays her here as slumbering initially, and likewise she is only half-aware of what passes in his earlier poem 'Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes.')

I, 6 (IST ER EIN HIESIGER? NEIN, AUS BEIDEN)

*Does he hail from here? No, from both
The realms his expansive nature grew.
Knower, bend the branches of willow
So, you may understand the willow roots.*

Does Orpheus hail from this realm of the living? Rilke asks. And answers that the god is a dweller in both realms, of life and death. We must seek the roots of the willow, a tree associated with death and grief, especially in its weeping form, in order to understand the roots of life.

*When you go to bed, leave on the table
Neither bread nor milk; they bring the dead;
But he, who is the Summoner, mingles
There, under the mild gentleness of eyelids,

Their apparitions with everything seen,
While the magic of rue and fumitory,
Is as true to him as the clearest relation.*

Rilke enjoins against leaving the remnants of food and drink on the table because (so superstition claims) such things bring the ghosts of the dead; rather allow Orpheus, who is a Summoner (one who ‘endeavours to call up the spirits of the deceased’) to bring the apparitions of the dead to the sleeping mind, where they will be mingled with living memories of them. Orpheus is aware of the traditionally ‘magical’ value of mourning, as an agent of emotional healing. The role of grief (symbolised by rue) and tears

Sonnets to Orpheus

(symbolized by fumitory, whose juice Pliny said caused weeping) is clear to him.

Nothing lessens a valid form for him.

Whether it be in the room, or the grave,

He praises the jug, the bracelet, the ring.

Every form of life is sacred to the god, and therefore every object which is associated with the living and which may subsequently adorn the grave, for example those found in ancient tombs, vessels and jewellery, is valid to him (the spirit of life) and not lessened by its use in either realm.

I, 7 (RÜHMEN, DAS ISTS! EIN ZUM RÜHMEN BESTELLTER)

*Praising, that's it! One appointed to praise,
He emerged like ore from the silent stone.
His heart, oh, the transient wine-press, among
Humankind, of an inexhaustible wine.*

Rilke here speaks of Orpheus, but as a representative of poets in general, whose task in Rilke's view is to praise (see his poem elsewhere entitled simply 'Praise'). The living word emerges from the verbal silence of the inanimate world, like ore, perhaps the ore of gold, the raw material for transformation into usable metal, in this case into praise itself. The poet's capability for feeling is like a wine-press extracting the juice of the grape harvest, from which an inexhaustible wine, language and poetic form, is produced.

*When the divine mode grips him
The voice from his mouth never fails.
All becomes vineyard, all becomes grape,
Matured in his sentient south.*

An inexhaustible wine because when seized by inspiration (in the mode of those who uttered the oracles of Apollo in ancient times) the poet continues the poetic tradition, the never-failing mouth, whereby the word is enlivened. For Rilke, Orpheus represents an even wider personification of the energised and energising spirit itself, which is immune to the reality of transience and death.

Sonnets to Orpheus

Neither the must in the tombs of the kings

Nor from the gods that a shadow falls,

Detracts at all from his praising.

That spirit perpetually praises life, despite the passing away of power, as evidenced by the tombs of dead rulers, and despite the presence of illness, poverty, plague, war, suffering, and death in the world, which things are collectively the shadow that the gods, according to Rilke here, allow to darken human existence.

He's a messenger, who always remains,

Still holding, far through the doors of the dead,

A dish with fruit they can praise.

And so, the positive-minded poets fulfil the role, with Orpheus as their representative, of messengers who present in their work aspects of the world and of human life that are deserving of praise, including those memories and achievements of the dead that are deserving of respect and celebration.

I, 8 (NUR IM RAUM DER RÜHMUNG DARF DIE KLAGE)

*In the region of praise alone may Lament walk,
That Nymph of the weeping fountain,
Watching over what flows about us,
So, it may fall here, bright, on the stone*

That supports the gates and the altar.

Using personification again as his literary method, Rilke posits that we only have the right to lament death where we also praise life as a whole, and that in that case lament (the utterance of true grief and mourning) is valid, and ensures that life incorporates praise of the dead, and purifies our attitude towards death as a natural and inevitable end to existence, or alternatively, as perhaps Rilke believed, a gateway to an afterlife of the spirit.

*See, round her motionless shoulders,
Dawns the feeling that she is the youngest
Among her siblings here in the mind.*

*Jubilation knows, Longing confessed,
Only Lament's still in the process of learning,
With childish hands counting her ancient woes.*

Lament, personified, is motionless in the attitude of one with head lifted upwards, or bowed downwards in grief, absorbed in mind and memory rather than action. Jubilation is a mature celebration of life, Longing is a mode of

thought we are accustomed to, but Lament, sorrow, true grief when encountered and experienced is always as if wholly new to us, an intense bolt of lightning that forces us to learn, or learn again, the painful pathways of loss. The experience then brings understanding of the ancient nature of loss, as undergone in the past, and by others, since time immemorial.

Then, suddenly, in the sky, awkward, unpractised,

She holds up our voices, a starry constellation,

A concatenation their breath yet fails to cloud.

In that process of mourning, that expression of grief, the personification of Lament may be seen as representing our individual sorrowing voices. Awkward and unpractised, because death and grief are always sudden and new when experienced, she offers up our acts of mourning, our cries of pain, to the heavens, as if they were a starry constellation whose chance concatenation of stars is not clouded by the breath of sorrow, but remains bright and alive in the face of transience and death.

I, 9 (NUR WER DIE LEIER SCHON HOB)

Only one who has raised the lyre,

Already, among the shades,

May sense how to return

The unending praise.

Rilke emphasises, once more, the nature of the double-realm of life and death. Only the person who has experienced the impact of a death, who has lived for a while among the memories, the shades of the departed, can sense the endless need for praise of life itself. An unending praise, repeated by many voices within the species, in the effort to assert the supreme value of being alive.

Only one who ate, with the dead,

Of the poppy, that is their own,

Will not lose the slightest

Note ever again.

Only those who have entered far enough into this understanding of the dual nature of human existence, where life and death are intertwined through memory, tradition, and history (or religiously, and superstitiously, in the presence of the spirits of the dead amongst the living) can hear the full music of being, and so will not fail to hear every note of that music, and recreate it in their work.

The poppy in Greek myth is associated with the goddess Demeter who ate poppies to help her sleep and forget her grief, after the abduction of her daughter Persephone. Poppies sprang from her footsteps, and Mecon her lover was transformed into the flower. The juice (ancient Greek, *opós*) of the

opium poppy (*papaver somniferum*) was the source of the narcotic drug. According to Ovid, Demeter supplied Triptolemus with poppies in order to induce sleep. The poppy was adopted as one of the symbols of the goddess, and on a carved basket at Eleusis is portrayed in combination with ears of corn. As a symbol it is seen in the hands of statues of the divinities of the underworld, and because of the multiplicity of its seeds, was considered to be a symbol also of abundance and fertility.

Wish even the image in the pond

That blurs for us, often:

Know the reflection.

We should seek to perpetuate the memory of the dead, and review the images of them, though often elusive, which are reflections of our own image in the pool of the mind.

Only within the double sphere

Will the voices become

Kind, and eternal.

Because only by perceiving and appreciating the double-realm of life and death, will we experience the voices of the dead, for example through our memories or dreams, or the art of past, as positive, life-giving, and enduring.

I, 10 (EUCH, DIE IHR NIE MEIN GEFÜHL VERLIEBT)

*To you, never lost from my feelings,
You ancient Sarcophagi, my greetings,
That the glittering water of Roman times
Flows through like a verse while walking,*

*Or that open wide, like the charmed eyes
Of some awakening shepherd in August –
Full of silence, and honeysuckle –
Out of which joyous butterflies go soaring.*

Rilke turns to such examples of past art, the ancient sarcophagi (caved stone tombs, displayed above ground) which are now often deployed as stone basins for fountains (as, for instance, in Antonio Sarti's 1842 fountain in the Via de Bocca Leone in Rome, where a Roman sarcophagus was redeployed) through which water now flows, like the verses of a poem created while walking (like Dante's 'Commedia' for example as he trod the pathways of Italy, in exile), or from whose empty, silent depths, now filled with honeysuckle, butterflies (traditional symbols of the soul) rise.

*All those who are snatched from limbo,
I greet, all the newly-reopened mouths,
Who know now what true silence means.*

Having used the analogy, for the wide-open tombs, of an awakening shepherd's now-open eyes, Rilke expands on the analogy by greeting all those whose mouths were closed in sleep and which now open as they awake.

Sonnets to Orpheus

Having been lost in the mute limbo of sleep, they now know what true silence means, the silence which surrounds the dead.

Are we certain, friends, or uncertain?

The juncture of both brings that doubt

Shown by the eyes in a human face.

Are we certain, asks Rilke of being awake, much like the Taoist Zhouang Zhou in Chinese legend who dreamt he was a butterfly, and subsequently was unsure whether he was Zhouang Zhou dreaming he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhouang Zhou; are we certain, if religious, of there being an afterlife of the spirit? Rilke suggest that the expression of uncertainty on a waking face, or otherwise, results from our uncertainties concerning dream and reality, life and death.

I, 11 (STEH DEN HIMMEL. HEIBT KEIN STERNBILD 'REITER'?)

*Halt the stars. Is there not one called the 'Rider'?
That which is strangely imprinted within us,
The pride of the Earth? And then a second,
That he urges on and restrains, that bears him?*

Rilke would like to explore that uncertainty. He notes the existence of a star called the 'Rider' (a word resonant for us, since we think, in our pride, that we are the summit of natural life, and by analogy the rider astride the Earth, the steed that bears us) and a second star that represents their mount. There are in fact two stars Mizar and Alcor its binary companion, in the constellation of the Plough (Ursa Major) situated in its 'handle', which in Arabic are also dubbed 'the Rider, and the Horse'. A mutual urging-on and restraint is a good description of the motion of binary stars gravitationally bound to each other, and of the rider and their steed.

*Is not the sinewy nature of Being pursued so,
And tamed? Turned to this side and that,
By merely the lightest of pressures,
Into a fresh tract of space. And the two are one.*

Is not our pursuit of the nature of Being, and our effort to tame it, Rilke asks, like the rider directing their mount by the slight pressure of their body and limbs, guiding the mind into new regions of thought and analysis? So that Mind and Existence-in-the-world are one entity, a unity of spirit and matter, of internal and external reality.

Sonnets to Orpheus

*Or are they? Do not either mean the path
That the two of them both travel together,
Still nameless, between 'Table' and 'Field'.*

Or should we rather regard the path of the rider and mount, mind and matter, as the combined and nameless Way (like the Tao) which the two separate entities travel (if mind can be considered an entity, rather than a complex process of the brain which is truly the entity here), in the region between the table (does Rilke intend other parts of the constellation Ursa Major here?) which holds the food that nurtures the human rider, and the field which the horse grazes, in other words between the pasture of the mind and that of the body.

*Though a concatenation of stars deceives,
Yet we are happy to believe awhile
In its configuration. And that is enough.*

Though a constellation, like Ursa Major, is merely a chance combination of visible stars, viewed by us as a unity, though those stars are in fact significantly distant from one another in space-time (though that is less true of the Mizar-Alcor binary) as long as we are prepared to believe even if only for a while in that illusory unity, that should be sufficient for us to dispel, for a while, our uncertainty about mind-body duality, and about the dual-realm.

I, 12 (HEIL DEM GEIST, DER UNS VERBINDEN MAG)

*Hail to the spirit, that holds us together,
Since we only exist by shape and form.
And in miniscule steps the clock ticks,
Set beside our actual day.*

Having raised the question as to the unity of mind and matter, Rilke goes on to praise the mental reality (“spirit”) by which both operate together to create our living selves, and the inner forces or powers which hold us together in a unique combined form. His approach is from the spiritual rather scientific direction, and in that he is a poet of his times, but the point is valid as a celebration and acknowledgement of the ‘miracle’ of Nature which is sentient being. Not only do we exist in measurable space, but in time (our measure of change) which ticks by at a different pace (an objectively steady pace to all strictly local clocks) to that of our subjective impressions, where moments or whole tracts of time may extend and contract, be recalled or forgotten, according to our mental state.

*Without knowing our own true place,
We achieve real relationship;
The antennae feel the antennae,
And suffer the distance between...*

Seemingly miraculously, we possess empathy, such that without fully understanding what we are and how we function in space and time, we can still achieve real relationship with each other through the antennae of emotion, through language, and in other ways, not excluding the purely physical, and with the world, through experience, knowledge and even emotionally through the pathetic fallacy, where we feel the presence of

identity, personality etc. in other creatures, and in non-conscious, non-sentient things.

Pure tension! O music of forces!

Is it not through a venial struggle,

That disaster's deflected from you?

Through, and not despite, the tension between horse and rider, mind and matter, internal and external reality, we achieve a unity, a musical harmony, of Being. The struggle, between these poles of the mental and the physical, is venial, an understandable and justifiable tension, through which we are able to unify ourselves (sufficiently) to avert the disaster which a sudden separation or rupture of mind and body, of horse and rider, of the internal and external, would represent.

Though the anxious farmer labours

So that the seed becomes harvest,

It is never enough. Earth must bear.

The anxious and uncertain individual, attempting to reconcile those tensions, is forced to struggle and labour like the farmer ploughing the ground, and sowing the seed, in order to achieve their spiritual harvest. Individual must transform themselves, become themselves, through significant effort, in order to achieve a high degree of unity and awareness. Nonetheless all that is not quite enough, we always need external help from Nature, from others, from the living and the dead.

I, 13 (VOLLER APFEL, BIRNE UND BANANE)

Fullness of apple, pear, blackcurrant,

Gooseberry...it all speaks life and death

In the mouth...I anticipate...

Go read it in some child's face

As they taste it; it comes from afar. Are you

Slowly becoming nameless in your own mouth?

Rilke turns to an example of our awareness of the double realm. In the act of eating the fruits named (the translation substitutes blackcurrant here for the poetically unfortunate ‘banana’) the child tastes both ripeness and destruction, arrival and vanishing. The experience is deep, ‘from afar’, because it arises from the roots of our physical being, from the most ancient and primitive layers of sensation and consciousness. As adults, we eventually become fully aware of our own transience, of the process of losing identity in death, ‘becoming nameless’, and here in consuming the fruit we seem for an instant to meet with a lesser loss of identity in pure sensory perception, in the ecstatic process of tasting, as we may within the flow of any physical act, and therefore for a moment we become the species, its history, and its mortal reality.

Where there were words, find a flow,

Strangely surprised from the flesh.

That moment of pure sensation, beyond language, that flow, may feel strange as we allow language and reasoning to lapse for a time and the ‘flesh’, the body, to dictate our awareness.

Sonnets to Orpheus

Dare to say what an 'apple' is called,

This sweetness that deepens within,

Gently ripening in taste,

To become, clear, alive and transparent,

Ambiguous, sun-kissed, earthy, and here:

Oh, experience feeling. Infinite joy!

In the physical act we may re-establish the primitive meaning of the word 'apple', reconnect to its taste and form, in a sensory experience that almost seems a 'thing', and we feel joy in our own living presence, in the inwardness of the feeling, which also connects us more deeply to the outer world, though we remain 'ambiguous', creatures of body and mind, of the physical and the spiritual realms.

I, 14 (WIR GEHEN UM MIT BLUME, WEINBLATT, FRUCHT)

We're involved with flower, vine-leaf and fruit.

They don't only speak the language of seasons,

A vision of colour that rises from darkness,

Betraying perhaps the jealous glances

Of the dead themselves, who enrich the Earth.

We are involved with the whole life of the living vine (sacred to Dionysus-Bacchus) of Nature, from flower to fruit, and the vine does not merely reveal the passage of the seasons in its transformations, but it provides the wine that is laid down for many a year, the dark red vintage wine perhaps, the ultimate product of the dark soil, that rises from the wine-cellar, glimmers in the light, and Rilke suggests (half-seriously?) betrays in that perhaps the jealous glances of the dead, who are beneath the soil, enriching the Earth.

What do we know of her part in this?

It has long been her art to brand the clay

Freely, with her distinguishing mark.

Deep into his personification of the Earth, and thereby Nature, Rilke strays into imagining Earth herself setting her own distinguishing mark on the clay, which is the ancient clay of the wine-bottle's seal, and the 'clay' of our own bodies. Her distinguishing mark is that of the dark Earth, the soil, whose part in the history of our species, and our continuing nurture, we ignore at our peril.

The question is: does it bring them pleasure?

Urging the fruit forth; labouring enslaved,

To enclose and offer it, to us their masters?

Are they the powers that sleep in the roots,

And indulge us simply out of abundance,

Something between mute effort and kisses?

Rilke then asks whether the buried dead derive some pleasure, in the vague afterlife he credits them with here, from their urging growth, stimulating the roots, and offering us the overflow of their abundance. Are they slumbering powers, forces, that bear fruit for us, the living? To apply the metaphor directly, and perhaps less fancifully, do the dead, as embodied in art and civilisation (in poetry for example) in the form of their surviving works and their place in our history, nourish the living arts, the present and future of our civilisation? Their abundance of spirit expressed itself in leaving behind something beyond themselves, for later generations to savour and take inspiration from. And those powers, that abundance, involved both the effort, now past and mute, expended in creating their still-living works, and the works themselves which are a loving embrace of life (the 'kisses') shared with the living, so that those works lie somewhere between the past silence and their present utterance. Equally our memories of the dead which lie 'buried' in our minds can invigorate and inspire us.

Note that the difference between assumed belief and metaphor in Rilke is often a deterrent to accepting his world-view, so it is always worth re-reading as metaphor what may be antipathetic when read as a direct statement concerning reality and belief. Are the Angels of the Elegies, for example, thought, by Rilke, to be real external entities, or are they an imaginative intellectual construct that helps to redefine the nature and situation of humankind? If the former deters the reader, the latter, the metaphor, may be more conducive.

I, 15 (WARTET..., DAS SCHMECKT... SCHON ISTS AUF DER FLUCHT)

Wait...that taste...It's already in flood...

A slight music only, a throbbing, a murmur.

You girls, you warm, you silent ones, dance

The dance of the fruit that's tasted and known.

Rilke links the taste of the mature fruit to female ripeness (in a time when women were so often treated merely as vessels for sex and childbirth, a latent or active misogyny of the time that Rilke fails to fully escape, though he himself appreciated the artistic abilities of Wera and, especially, Paula). He exhorts young girls to the sexual 'dance' that results in pregnancy and childbirth.

Dance the orange; how could one forget

How, drowned in itself, it defends

Itself against its own sweetness; the fruit,

You possess, has been sweetly changed into you.

The pregnant woman, with her swollen belly, must to some extent defend herself from the demands of the foetus, from her own ripeness, until that fruit of coition becomes, within, a genetic image of the woman (and the man, therefore not identical to either but partaking of both). What is involved is a transformation, a process which Rilke sees as essential to all creatures that would fully participate in life.

*Dance the orange. The warmer landscape,
Fling it from you, so that ripeness may glow
In your native air! Shining, unveiled.*

Thus, the dance he advocates is that of the orange, which ‘defends’ its sweetness with its rind, as the pregnant woman also defends her foetus from damage by external forces, with her own swollen flesh. The unveiling that he suggests arises from, and prompts thoughts of, the Expressionist art of Paula Modersohn-Becker, one of the living though departed, shades in Rilke’s own life, whose ground-breaking portraits of herself nakedly pregnant were probably the first such in the pictorial art of her day.

*Scent after scent. Create the connection
With the pure, the resisting rind,
With the juice that fills the fortunate mouth!*

Create the connection, Rilke exhorts, between the form and the content, the rind and the juice in the mouth (‘fortunate’ because it carries the potential for connection), between the pregnant womb and the foetus within it, and between the body and the mind. Do so in poetry, scent by scent, line by line. In that art-form, create a connection between the tenuous creative inspiration, the ‘scent’ of the trail that leads to the finished poem, and the completed work. The association of pregnancy with creativity is hardly new; authors see their works as their progeny. Both the labour of childbirth and the labour of artistic production are seen as in some way akin. There is also implicit sexual imagery here. Nietzsche, Rilke’s contemporary, and a significant influence on his thought, claimed that our sexuality ‘reaches up into the ultimate pinnacle of the spirit’.

I, 16 (DU, MEIN FREUND, BIST EINSAM, WEIL....)

You, my friend, are lonely, because...

With our words, with our gestures,

We gradually make this world our own,

Our weakest, most perilous, perhaps.

After Paula, Rilke now thinks of a second friend of his, Franz Xaver Kappus, with whom he had corresponded (see ‘Letters to a Young Poet’). Kappus had sought advice and guidance, and Rilke had responded with his thoughts on poetic and personal development. Here he summarises. If one feels loneliness then that is because we have to gradually interpret the world to ourselves, in order to create ourselves and come to terms with reality, and so possess it. And often it is the words and gestures of ours that seem weakest and most dangerous that we must employ.

Who can gesture towards a scent?

And, of the many forces that threaten,

You feel a multitude. You know the dead,

And shudder at the spell that is cast.

Who, indeed, can easily invoke inspiration, the scent of creativity, that often seems to come to us from without, and not within? And his friend is sensitive to the multitude of inner and outer forces that threaten the mind, and self. The young poet, Kappus, is alive to the tradition, to that ‘communication of the dead’ which Eliot said ‘is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living’, and it can cause the heart to shudder at the message and the power with which it is delivered.

Sonnets to Orpheus

*See, now is a time to endure the mass
Of bits and pieces as if they were whole.
To help would be hard. Do not, above all,*

Plant me in your heart, I'm growing too swiftly.

As in the letters to Kappus, Rilke recommends that one suffers the fragmentation of life, as if one were whole, in the hopes of achieving true wholeness later. For someone outside the self to assist in the process of development is difficult, and Rilke advised Kappus, as here he advises his readers, not to follow his own path of development too closely, because he is developing in his own way too swiftly for that to be meaningful.

*Yet I will guide my master's hand to say,
Here, now. Here is Esau in his own pelt.*

Nonetheless he will guide Orpheus' hand, through his own, to write that here and now, that is in every moment of existence, one is born or reborn in one's own skin, as Rilke himself can be seen to be still developing his thought within the text of the Sonnets. According to the Christian Bible Esau, son of Isaac, was born with hair on his body like a full-grown man. He can therefore stand for the physical, the body, though later Hebrew texts also associate him with spiritual power.

I, 17 (ZU UNTERST DER ALTE, VERWORN)

*In the depths, ancient tangle,
The mass of old roots,
The hidden source,
That is never seen.*

In the depths of the poetic tradition, in our history as a species, that ‘tangle’ of events, inventions, and intellectual and ethical advances, lies the invisible source of our creativity, the spiritual power that is symbolised in the mythical person of Orpheus.

*Spiked helms and hunting horns,
Speaking of greyness,
Men in fraternal rage,
Women like lutes...*

Contemplating the roots of a tree (the willow of sonnet I.6?) Rilke sees, fancifully, the shapes of ancient helmets, and hunting horns, the ‘grey’ forms, that are banal and dark, forms of male aggression, and also the lute shapes of pregnant women, both sexes being assigned their traditional social roles.

*Branch thrusting at branches
None of them free... one there!
Oh climb... Oh climb...*

Sonnets to Orpheus

He views society and history, as one well might, as an endless realm of conflict, none of its participants free to develop and become themselves, except perhaps for the odd one here or there, poets in particular, since poetry is one of the most ancient of the arts. He breathlessly exhorts those individuals to climb.

Though they are broken still,

Yet the one there, on high,

Bends to a lyre.

Though as individuals they and we may perish, yet a few achieve, and behold, there is always Orpheus, on high, bringing music out of the strings of the lyre.

I, 18 (HÖRST DU DAS NEUE, HERR)

Do you hear the new, Master,

Roaring and trembling?

The harbingers, heralds, come

That proclaim it.

Developing his critique of a social world that constrains and imprisons the individual, Rilke turns his attention to the contemporary age of the machine, which is filled with the roar and trembling of engines. Though he saw the twentieth century technological revolution in its early days, those machines already present were, he felt, the ‘shapes of things to come’, their harbingers and heralds.

True no hearing is whole

Amidst this raging,

But the machine demands

That its role be praised.

Indulging in pathetic fallacy, Rilke seemingly endows inanimate machines with will and intent. As a literary trope it is traditional to ascribe sentience to non-sentient things, but may well be a weakness here. Despite the noise machines make, says the poet, the machine still ‘demands’ that its role be praised and thereby its ‘voice’ heard.

See, how the machine heaves

And takes its revenge,

Distorting and weakening us.

Gaining its strength from us,

He asks us to observe how the machine, seemingly imbued with 'life', moves energetically, and takes its revenge on us (though it is not clear why there is a need or motive for revenge here, other than perhaps the revenge of the servant on the oppressive master). Rilke sees the machine age as distorting and weakening human nature, without his specifying in what manner it does so.

Let it, without passion,

Urge us onward, and serve.

Finally, he wishes the machine to be set in its place, as an emotionless servant, and a means of supporting us, which also 'urges' us onward as a species.

I, 19 (WANDELN SICH RASCH AUCH DIE WELT)

Though the world alters swiftly

Like patterns of cloud,

All that's perfected

Returns to its ancient place.,

After his brief (and poetically and intellectually not wholly successful) skirmish with technological advance in sonnet I.18, Rilke returns to his main theme, and asserts that despite the pace of change, perfected things remain or return to their proper place. He is presumably thinking here of enduring artistic works, including architecture; of ethical and other values, for example the rule of law; besides like expressions of lasting human achievement.

Beyond the change and departure,

Further away, and freer,

Your prelude still endures

God of the lyre.

Accordingly, he asserts that Orpheus, as the elevated human spirit, exists in a realm beyond superficial change, and less constrained by the path of the species. Orpheus' music, of the spirit, permanently endures.

Suffering is not grasped,

Love is not learned,

Nor is that which takes us far-off

Sonnets to Orpheus

In death ever unveiled.

Unlike Orpheus, human beings forever fail to comprehend loss and suffering, or learn from their experience of love, or gain any communicable view of the reality of death and the existence, or not, of an afterlife.

The song alone, over the earth,

Celebrates, sanctifies.

The song of the spirit, of Orpheus, alone celebrates, sanctifies and praises.

I, 20 (DIR ABER, HERR, O WAS WEIH ICH DIR, SAG)

But to you, Master, what shall I dedicate

To you, who taught creatures to listen? –

A memory of a spring day,

Its evening, in Russia – a horse,

From the village, a white horse came,

Alone, a rope at his forefoot,

To be fettered alone in the meadow,

All night – how his full mane shook

Over his neck, in tune with his spirits.

Having dwelt on the need to praise and celebrate, Rilke searches for something that inspires both, some offering that he can dedicate to the god. He settles on a memory from his time in Russia. He was there, and in the Ukraine, in 1899 and again in 1900, accompanied by his wife Lou Andreas-Salomé. He called his presence there the ‘decisive event’ of his life, and considered Russia his ‘homeland’, meeting Tolstoy, Leonid Pasternak, Diaghilev and many others, and absorbing the experience of high culture. For his offering, he recalls the image of a white horse released to pasture for the night, and its spirited showing.

In his roughly-bindered gallop,

How the fount of the species rose!

Sonnets to Orpheus

In the horse's gallop, hindered only by the rope by which he will subsequently be tethered for the night, may be read the journey of the human spirit, hindered only by its being rooted in the body. In that show of spirit, the nature of the horse becomes apparent, and reveals the common nature of its species.

He felt the vastness – deep down!

He sang, and he heard – your legendary

Cycle enclosed within.

Rilke envisages the horse 'hearing' the call of its own genetic depths, and in its movements and attitude responding to the larger flow of spirit, that Orpheus represents. We should remember however that 'the legendary cycle' involves the death and transience of the individual, as well as semi-permanence through the persistence of the wider species. Anticipating the unravelling of the genetic code, Rilke asserts that the cycle of reproduction, birth, life, and death, is 'enclosed within' the individual, and by extension the species.

His image, I dedicate.

Rilke then adds a line to the traditional fourteen lines of the sonnet form, formally dedicating that image of the legendary cycle of the spirit, to the god, who embodies that cycle in his divine form.

I, 21 (FRÜHLING IST WIEDERGEKOMMEN. DIE ERDE)

*Spring has returned, once more. The Earth
Is like a child that knows many a poem,
Many, oh many...for her long labour
Of learning she's granted this prize.*

Rilke now celebrates the legendary Orphic cycle, as evoked by the course of the terrestrial seasons, and the return of Spring, which is like a prize granted to the Earth (by whom? – again anthropomorphism dominates the poetic style and thought), in the same manner that we give a reward to a child who can learn and recite poetry, except that the Earth knows many poems, many variants on the theme of renewal and regeneration.

*Her teacher was strict. We admired
The white of the old-man's-beard,
What, we ask, should the green, the blue,
Be called: she knows, she knows!*

Rilke extends his analogy of the child learning and reciting poetry (though again we must ask who the 'teacher' might be in the context of Earth).

*Earth, in your freedom, lightly you play
With the children. We'd love to catch you,
Joyful Earth. For the joyful succeed.*

The poet celebrates the freedom, the lightness of Nature. This is not Nature 'red in tooth and claw' but the kindlier side of existence, the kind that a sheltered childhood enjoys. The joyful succeed, both in their inward development, and the sense of becoming a successor in the line of generations.

Oh, all that the teacher has taught her,

The many things printed on roots

And tall intricate stems: she sings, she sings!

Rilke would seem to suggest that the teacher is Orpheus, the singer, the spirit of life. Again, is not clear in such passages if Rilke envisages the life and spirit of the world as deriving from a real external spiritual force, or whether we are simply dealing here with metaphor, and the poet's projection of his own spiritual elation onto the external world. Rilke in his letters rejected a conventional religious interpretation of his later work. He might therefore be embracing a pantheistic view of a divinity concealed within the fabric of existence, or identical with it; or positing a spiritual force not of divine origin that 'inspires' living forms; or he is simply personifying, in the figure of the 'teacher', life itself in its natural manifestations, which infuse Nature with living energy, and consciousness in the form of her creatures, without being the whole of Nature herself.

I, 22 (WIR SIND DIE TREIBENDEN)

*We are the shoots,
But the pace of time
Treats us as slight
In the ever-enduring.*

We are the bearers of life (certainly the life of the intellect), its shoots which are perpetually renewed in the cycle of seasons, in the cycle of life and death and rebirth of the species, though we are slight in our transient and brief lives, compared with the enduring universe.

*Everything urgent
Will swiftly be gone,
Initiate first, in us
The lingering.*

Since the transient passes swiftly, Rilke appeals to the god to initiate us in the process of simply lingering here, being aware, in the Taoist sense, perhaps, of immersion in Nature's flow, or the Zen Buddhist sense of enlightenment and the achievement of the mental state of Nirvana ('the going-out of the flame'). This 'lingering' might be viewed as contemplation only, or focused action (the 'hew wood, carry water' of Zen).

*Youth, don't brave mere speed,
Or throw yourself into
Every attempt to fly,*

All things here are at rest:

The dark and the light,

The flower and the book.

The poet thinking of the contemporary development of powered flight, and also perhaps of the Greek myths of Icarus, who flew too near the sun, and Phaethon who failed to control the sun-god's chariot, advises the young to restrain themselves, and consider the Things, the objects and forms within the world, which are in themselves unmoving and at rest, for example a single flower (as in Zen meditative practice), or a book which when closed is still and silent, and which must be read and interpreted in order to acquire 'motion' within the processes of mind.

I, 23 (O ERST DANN, WENN DER FLUG)

*Oh, only then, when the flight,
No longer for its sake alone,
Soars into the heavenly
Stillness, enough in itself*

*To sail out, lightly, in space
With a skill that succeeded,
In play, the wind's darling,
Rocking there, slender and sure –*

Only when the attempt at flight, or by analogy the soaring nature of creativity (or personal development), rises into that stillness of the material atmosphere about us, into engagement that is with form and content, and becomes enough of a force purely in-itself to begin to create (or develop), summoning its skills in lifting from the ground of the prosaic, in creative play, confidently and in balance, will that attempt be truly effective.

*Only when a pure 'where to'
Prevails against youthful pride
In the dynamic ascent,*

*Will it, hastened by victory,
Close to the far-off distance,
Be, that which it alone reaches.*

Sonnets to Orpheus

Only when we are absorbed in the task, in the flow, and forget pride, fame and the other distractions which hinder our efforts to create or develop, can the mind achieve what it aims at in its highest flights, and be both the arrow and the target. Only then can we be near to the god, to Orpheus, to the deeper life, which creativity or self-development alone allow us to reach.

I, 24 (SOLLEN WIR UNSERE URALTE FREUNDSCHAFT, DIE GROßEN)

*Will we retain our old friendship with the great gods,
That fail to woo us, our harsh steel raised so sternly,
Knowing them not, rejecting them now, or suddenly
Being forced to search them out on our ancient maps?*

Given that only the creative effort (say for example the art of poetry, or the process of self-development) will allow us to reach our true potential, Rilke asks whether the modern world can provide an environment where we can exercise our creative powers fully. Are the traditional paths to creativity and self-development waning in power, faced with a world of machines, of steel, that is indifferent to religion and the deeply human art and architecture of the past? Will we inherit only the traces of past effort, which we have to search out, as we search for the faces of gods in the corners of antique maps?

*Those formidable friends, who bear the dead from us,
Without touching our turning wheels, at any point?
Our banquets are distanced from them, our bathing
Removed, and their messengers now far too slow,

Whom we always overtake.*

Will we be separated from the spiritual forces that left us in touch with the dead, those spiritual forces that have nothing to do with our mechanised world, or the aspects of modernity that divorce our routine everyday lives from the natural world in which we originated?

Sonnets to Orpheus

Alone now, wholly

Dependent upon, yet not knowing each other,

We no longer treat the paths as lovely meanders,

But like flights of steps.

In a complex modern world of specialisation where we are dependent on each other but often strangers to one another, we no longer have time to wander creatively or contemplate the world and develop ourselves internally, Rilke claims, but rather we treat every moment as a material ascent, as 'progress' towards some unspecified goal that requires an expenditure of intense effort, an ascent, when we might achieve more by lingering in the maze of wandering paths.

In the furnace the old fire burns,

There alone, while the hammers are raised in the steam,

Ever larger. While we, like swimmers, lose strength.

The ancient paths to the spirit are still alive, the ancient creative fire still burns in the mind, that furnace of creativity and inspiration, but in a new solitude, a disconnectedness from the increasingly material world around it, whose power over us grows ever greater, while we, like exhausted swimmers wane in strength.

I, 25 (DICH ABER WILL ICH NUN, DICH, DIE ICH KANNT)

*But you now, you whom I knew like a flower
Whose name I did not understand,
Once more I'll remember, and show them you, stolen one,
Beautiful player of the unsuppressible cry.*

Rilke searches for some way to display, in contrast to this, the creative life-giving power of Orpheus, whom he had previously failed to comprehend, though being aware of the mythical name. He wishes to recall some image from his life that embodies creative performance, that reveals the presence of the life-force itself which Orpheus represents, a life-force that is beautiful in its manifestations and which cannot be suppressed or repressed but insists on outward expression. At the same time, he wishes to emphasise the double-realm, the transience of the artist, and the way in which death impinges on, and is interwoven with, our lives.

*A dancer first, sudden one, body filled with hesitation,
Pausing, as if one had cast your young being in bronze:
Grieving, listening – Then, from the riches on high,
Music fell through your altered heart.*

*Illness was close to you. Already seized by the shadows,
Your blood ran darkly, yet, though suspicious of flight,
It still drove outwards into your natural springtime.*

Sonnets to Orpheus

*Again and again, broken by darkness and fall,
Earthbound, it gleamed. Until after that dreadful pounding,
It passed through the inconsolable open door.*

He chooses his memory of Wera Knoop, who died young, of leukaemia, in 1919, and whom he had seen dance in Munich in 1914, she being then thirteen or fourteen years old. His mention of a bronze cast, immediately conjures up an image of Degas' dancer, a recreation in bronze (c.1880, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York) of the fourteen-year-old Belgian ballet dancer Marie von Goethem. The memory of Wera had stayed with Rilke, and here represents an assertion of life in the face of tragic fate.

I, 26 (DU ABER, GÖTTLICHER, DU, BIS ZULETZT NOCH ERTÖNER)

*But you, divine one, sounding out till the end,
Surrounded by the swarm of rejected maenads,
Have drowned their shrieks with order, lovely one;
Out of the chaos, your music rose in reply.*

After this recognition of creative performance overshadowed by incipient death, Rilke re-asserts the claims of life represented by the Orpheus myth which involves both realms. Orpheus again represents creative order, traditionally associated with Apollo, and that propensity to order which sees art arise from chaos, and arouses a music that drowns the howls and screams of the followers of Dionysus, the god who represents disorder.

*None could destroy your head, or your lyre,
How they rushed to attack you, how the sharp
Stones they hurled at your heart, were melted
In you, and endowed, there, with hearing.*

Creativity endures as a force in the world, as artistic endeavour, represented by the creative mind and by the creative individual's artistic means, mythically the oracular head of Orpheus and his instrument, the lyre. The sharp stones flung at Orpheus were endowed with hearing, according to the legend, and melted at the sound of his music. Likewise, the poet seeks to transform what is harsh, formless and unpoetic in human life into a work displaying beauty and form.

Sonnets to Orpheus

*Finally, urged by revenge, they shattered you,
While your sounds still lingered in lions, in stones,
And in birds, and trees. You're still singing there!*

Though Orpheus was torn apart by the Maenads, his art still lingered on, his sounds echoing in living things (we must allow even stones to be 'living rock' here). And (pantheistically?) his creative spirit is still present in the living world.

*O lost god! O everlasting sign of the way!
Only through enmity that tore you to shreds,
Are we, the bearers, a mouth for Nature.*

Orpheus is a lost god, in the sense of being both assassinated in the myth, and a neglected personification of poetry, life and the spirit, in the modern world. Yet he represents a signpost to artists, and more widely to all who wish to develop and express themselves, pointing to the creative mode of living. Only through absorbing the lesson of the two realms, the cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth, which in one sense is inimical to transient and mortal beings, and in another sense a friend of the species guaranteeing life and continuance to later generations, only through listening, hearing that music, can we be a mouthpiece for celebration, and praise of this world.

It is at this point that Rilke concludes his first group or cycle of interlinked sonnets. The second cycle which follows, taking new life from the 'death' of the first, seeks to deepen the experience, exploring human life, modernity, and creativity in detail. Again, Rilke asserts his primary values, and exhorts his audience to seek transformation, and reconcile within the dual realms of life and death. The effort to do so will lead to a single integrated view of the world, through the creative transformation of external 'things', the external world, into 'things' within us, our inner world, and through the discovery and transformation of ourselves in the process of intellectual and artistic self-development.

PART II

II, 1 (ATMEN, DU UNSICHTBARES GEDICHT!)

Breath, you, invisible poem!

Always about individual

Being, pure exchange of space. Counterweight,

Through which I rhythmically exist.

Single wave who's

Eventual sea I am,

You, the sparest of possible seas,

Gainer of space.

Rilke commences the second cycle with a seemingly slight and fanciful poem about breath and breathing. However, we should treat breath, the forerunner of voice, and therefore poetry and song, as a manifestation, here, of Orpheus, the voice of the creative spirit. Orpheus, the breath of life, is always concerned with the individual. The species breathes and lives only through the individual life. Breath is an exchange of one volume of air for another, and the counterweight to breathing out is breathing in, the pair combining to form the rhythmic expression of verse and song, and sustain the life of the body and therefore the mind.

Each breath is a single action, a single wave of the sea, the succession of which supports the ongoing life of the individual, the entire ocean of a life. Each wave is therefore the smallest expression of the whole sea, as the word is the smallest expression of the poem, while the succession of waves, breaths, words, creates the life, and the entire poem.

Sonnets to Orpheus

How many of these, spaces, were places already

Within me? Many a breeze

Is like some child of mine.

How many of these poems, these spaces within, exchanged for spaces without, were already latent within him, Rilke asks? Many a breeze, many a succession of breaths of wind, is like a poem, a 'child' of the poet, built of many individual words.

Do you know me, air, filled with my former places?

You once smooth bark,

Bole, and leaf of my words.

Does the world he asks, now recognise him as an individual, now that his poems have exchanged inwardness of thought for external audience, poems that represent the living tree of oratory, the tree of life that is Orpheus, the mind and spirit, with which the sonnets began?

II, 2 (SO WIE DEM MEISTER MANCHMAL DAS EILIG)

*Just as the master, sometimes, in haste,
Strikes a true line from the paper drawn near,
So, a mirror will often draw the divinely
Unique smile of some girl, deeper within,*

*As she faces the morning, alone –
Or in the gleam of the evening lights;
And, upon the breath of the real face,
Later, descends the merest reflection.*

Having announced Orpheus and himself, the poet now turns to his theme of loss and death, introduced through the picture here of a girl looking into a mirror. There is a pencil sketch of a girl looking into a hand-held mirror, drawn by Paula Modersohn-Becher, dated to 1906, which is relevant, while a number of her self-portraits were actually created in front of the mirror. The very act of self-portraiture is an act of self-discovery and self-presentation.

We recall that one of the implements of the Orphic rites was the mirror, in which the self can view and discover the self, as one does discover oneself through reflection, creative effort, and enlightenment. The mirror captures the momentary glance, as the paper captures, in the act of writing, the momentary thought. Rilke imagines the girl, in the morning or evening light, and alone, as the act of self-discovery or poetic creation is a solitary act, performed within, though its product may be a ‘mere reflection’ of the complete individual, of the poet.

Sonnets to Orpheus

What did her eyes discern in the ashes

Long smouldering there in the hearth;

Glimpses of life, vanished forever?

Oh, who can know of our losses on Earth?

Rilke sings his theme, the transience of life, which forever involves loss, and part of our self-discovery, and self-creation is the challenge of coping with loss, whether through suffering, death, violence, impairment, or failure of memory – loss of the lover, loss of the child, loss of life itself. And who can know the sum of the species' losses on earth, he asks, which also involve the vanishing of cultures, of artefacts, of texts. In every moment, in the world around us, and often within ourselves, there is a continual series of losses.

Only those whose voices, nonetheless, praise,

Who sing of the heart, born to wholeness.

Only those, Rilke claims, who also appreciate the value of life, art, and the spirit, and who praise and celebrate life and its manifestations; only those who are born to embrace life and death as one complete whole, and sing of and from the heart, that aspect of mind which represents the emotional and spiritual truth of life.

II, 3 (SPIEGEL NOCH NIE HAT MAN WISSEND BESCHRIEBEN)

*Mirror, none have ever truly described
What you are in your being,
You, like a sieve full of nothing but holes,
Filled with intervals of time.*

*You who squander the empty hallway,
When evening falls, as in some far forest,
And the chandelier, a sixteen-point stag,
Vanishes into your inaccessibility.*

*Sometimes you are full of paintings.
Some seem to have settled within you.
Others you've shyly sent on their way.*

*But the loveliest will remain – until
Into those frames, contained within,
Bright Narcissus, dissolving, enters.*

This third sonnet is a rounded conceit, a consideration of the mirror, which like a sieve is only full for a moment when it captures someone's living reflection, or the reflection of something in motion, a reflection which vanishes the next moment as they pass by, or the motion ceases, leaving only an empty scene which is still and unmoving for periods of time. As darkness falls at evening the scene itself vanishes, the chandelier for example disappearing into its dark interior like a stag vanishing into the forest.

Paintings hung in a hallway, appear reflected within, and come and go as they are moved from one place in a room to another, or forgotten, much like memories which are rearranged in the mind or which lapse from it, memories of the dead perhaps, perhaps here of Paula, one of the fairest and loveliest sets of Rilke's memories being of her and her works. The deep memories remain, especially of the dead, and it is into those memories and our other memories of loss, as into the frames of the pictures reflected within the mirror's glass, that we ourselves sink, and dissolve, like Narcissus in the Greek myth, who discovered and fell in love with his own face, in the pool (see Ovid's 'Metamorphoses', Book III). So, we discover ourselves, as members of the species, in the voices and images, and works of the dead, and self dissolves into the wider human experience which acts as a mirror to the individual.

II, 4 (O DIESES IST DAS TIER, DAS ES NICHT GIEBT)

O this is the creature that has never been.

They never knew it and yet none the less

Its movements, aspects, slender neck,

Up to the still bright gaze, were loved.

Now Rilke conjures up a unicorn, at first seemingly irrelevant to his theme, until we realise that the creature is an imagined creature, and stands for the life of the imagination. Each unicorn, each imagined creation, for example this sonnet, each thing we come to love in our lives, was previously unknown (as this sonnet was until we chose to read it) but nonetheless we recognise its lineaments, its beauty, and that moment of recognition is the moment of connection between the reader and the poem, the lover and the beloved.

True it never was, yet, it was, through their love,

A pure creature. They left it room enough.

And in that space, clear and un-peopled,

It raised its head lightly and scarcely needed

Being. It was never nourished with food,

But only the possibility of being.

And every creation of the imagination which is loved is seen as pure, through its never having been in the world before, and because of our love for it. We leave (or should leave) room for imagination, for beauty, even in the most confined of lives, and even in our most utilitarian public spaces and

processes. Wherever human life has not already penetrated and reduced our world to everyday forms, processes and habits, the imagination can activate the imaginative process, and, even in the slightest space of being, can exist and create, nourished not even by visible or tangible products, but only the mere possibility of them being produced. That is our inner freedom as minds, to escape from or embellish the real, to conceive various alternative futures, and to imaginatively reconstruct the past.

And that gave the creature such power

That a horn grew from its brow. One horn.

In its whiteness it drew near a virgin girl –

And was in the silvered mirror, and in her.

Thus, imagination here, can add a single horn to a white horse and achieve a unicorn. Rilke's words suggest that a painting (a reproduction) is reflected in the mirror, and one thinks of Raphael's 'Young Woman with a Unicorn' of 1505/6 in the Galleria Borghese in Rome, or of the series of 'Unicorn Tapestries' in the Musée de Cluny, in Paris, both of which works of art Rilke would likely have known; the first from his visit to Rome in 1903, and at other times (see 'Letters to a Young Poet'), the second from his time in Paris as secretary to Rodin, and at other times from 1902 to 1914 (see his 'New Poems'). There are no doubt many other unicorn images that might be relevant here.

There may well be a sexual connotation to these last lines, and a reference to Paula's pregnancy, the foetus a unicorn, something rare, and loved, being within her, but the key point is that imagination lives within, and the virgin girl conjures the unicorn from her own imagination.

The next three poems, employing flower analogies as a framework, are further explorations of the theme of self-development, and the flowering of the spirit. Again, there may be a resonance from Paula's pregnancy and flowering, derived from II.4 above.

II, 5 (BLUMENMUSKEL, DER DER ANEMONE)

*Flowery unfolding, that of the windflower,
Gradually opening in the meadow,
Until the polyphonic light pours
Into its lap from the sonorous sky,*

*Into the silent starry flower,
Unfolding in endless reception,
Sometimes so overwhelmed by abundance
That the lulling sense of falling*

*Is scarcely capable of returning
Those far-flung borders of leaf to you,
Enduring strength of how many worlds!*

Rilke presents the image of the windflower (the wood anemone, *anemone nemorosa*) with its starry flowers and distinctive lobed leaves. The light fills it. The use of ‘polyphonic’ and ‘sonorous’ conjures up the music of Orpheus the singer, who is, I think, the ‘you’ mentioned. Orpheus here is the light of enlightenment, intellect, creativity, and poetic inspiration, pouring into the mind, and therefore the power of many human ‘worlds’ of activity. Orpheus, is the ‘light’ (the full spectrum) of energy generated by the distant stars also.

*We, the violent ones, last longer,
But when, and in which of all our lives,
Are we, finally, open receptors?*

Sonnets to Orpheus

We, who are the violent inhabitants of the planet, in contrast to the silent and peaceful wildflowers, last longer as individuals than they, but when in our many manifestations do we seem as receptive to the inflow of light, Rilke asks. When are we as full of the light of the stars, and fully aware of the universe?

II, 6 (ROSE, DU THRONENDE, DENEN IM ALTERTUME)

*Rose, you enthroned one, to those in ancient times
You were a single-rimmed chalice,
But to us you are the full, countless flower,
The inexhaustible object.*

*In your richness, you seem like fold on fold,
Clothing a body of nothing but splendour,
Yet at the same time your single leaf,
Is refusal, avoidance of every garment.*

Rilke's next flower poem is addressed to the rose (and here the traditional reference to the Virgin Mary as the rose may also be in play, enriching Rilke's subtle references to pregnancy and childbirth). He compares the ancient wild rose with the multi-petalled tea-roses of later times, whose petals can seem inexhaustible. Even though the rose can be a thing of splendour, yet each leaf is a simple form, without excessive adornment.

*For centuries your scent has called out
To us – its sweetest name.
Suddenly it's like fame, here in the air.*

The scent of the rose is familiar, and has been for centuries, hence its cultivation for beauty and odour, but the word 'scent' seems slight beside the suddenly-experienced physical reality. The scent is also, as before, a metaphor for poetic inspiration, something familiar to us as being the force behind past

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works, but which is suddenly embodied in a contemporary poem, as here in this sonnet. As someone or something's fame becomes apparent by it being spoken of, by it being on people's lips, the scent of inspiration appears in the air, as in the rhythmic inspired breath of the poet.

Still, we don't know what to call it, we...

Guess, and the memory we summon

Goes to meet it, from sweet hours recalled.

Nonetheless, Rilke claims, we have no word for the specific scent of the rose, or the living force that lies behind inspiration and creativity. We guess at the presence of Orpheus, breathing life into the flower and the creative act, while our memory of both serves to invoke them, from our past pleasurable experience.

II, 7 (BLUMEN, IHR SCHLIEßLICH DEN ORDNENDEN HÄNDEN VERWANDTE)

*Flowers, at the end, you find hands arranging you,
(The hands of young girls, now, as long ago)
You who lie, end to end, on the table,
Wearied, and tenderly hurting,*

*Waiting for water, so you might revive,
In the death that's already begun – then be,
Suddenly, raised between moistened tips
Of sensitive fingers that soothe you far more*

*Than you thought them able to, delicate ones,
On finding yourselves again, in some vase
Slowly cooling; warmth, like a girlish confession*

*Of dull wearisome sins, flowing from you,
Who celebrate being culled; warmth like a bond
With them, who thrive in communion with you.*

Rilke's third flower sonnet employs an anthropomorphism which imbues flowers with feelings, and imagines the fate of cut blooms, in danger of imminent death, but revived by girls' sensitive fingers which place them in a vase of water. Warmth flows from the cut flowers, like a girlish confession of sins, trivial and wearisome. The flowers 'celebrate' being culled, and the warmth creates a bond with the girls, who thrive amongst flowers.

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The word 'culled' coupled with 'sins' has unfortunate sexual overtones, relating, I would suggest, to the misogynistic view of young girls, and indeed women, present in Rilke's times, but I think Rilke here was rather reflecting on the deaths of Wera and Paula, cut down in their flowering. Many of Paula's paintings show flowers, held in the hand, or set in vases. His underlying theme of the two realms is therefore active in the poem, as it will be in the one which follows.

II, 8 (WENIGE IHR, DER EINSTIGEN KINDHEIT GESPIELEN)

(In memoriam Egon von Rilke)

Egon von Rilke was the poet's young cousin, the son of Rilke's uncle Jaroslav von Rilke, his father's elder brother. Egon, a year or so older than the poet, died at the age of six or seven. Rilke dedicates this sonnet to his memory, in tribute to the dead.

*You few, childhood playmates long ago,
In gardens scattered throughout the city,
How we found, and hesitantly liked, each other,
And, like the Lamb, with the written scroll,

Spoke silently. When we found delight,
No one owned to it. Whose was it then?
How it dissolved among those going by,
And in the anxieties of the endless year.*

Rilke recalls their brief year of childhood companionship. The reference to the Lamb and the Scroll, is to a representation of that era, depicting those symbols, in reference to the Book of Revelations (5: 5-6) where Jesus as the Lamb of God is the only one worthy to break the seven seals, and read the scroll that contains the divine plan for the future of the world. The combination of the lamb of innocence and the imminent workings of fate, encapsulates the child Egon's state, and the atmosphere is heightened by use of the words dissolving, and anxieties.

Sonnets to Orpheus

*Carts passed by us, vanishing strangers,
Houses surrounded us, solid but untrue;
None knew us. What was real in it all?*

Rilke describes the world of childhood, separated from the mysterious adult world, and often oblivious to it, the child's reality being more of the spirit and less of the material world beyond; while childhood inhabits an inner sphere invisible almost to that of adults. What then was the children's reality? Not the passers-by or the traffic or the houses, but only the ball with which they were playing.

*Only the ball flung high. Its glorious arc.
Not even the children...though sometimes one,
Oh, a vanishing one, beneath its fall.*

The glorious arc of the ball was the arc of life, and the children were focussed on that, the immediate soaring reality of the flung ball, and then, sometimes, as Egon sought to catch it, his image, which later vanished with his death, the 'fall' of life itself. The poetic image here is repeated in one of Rilke's finest poems 'The Dove'.

II, 9 (RÜHMT EUCH, IHR RICHTENDEN, NICHT DER ENTBEHRLICHEN FOLTER)

*Judges, don't boast that torture's redundant,
That necks no longer bow beneath chains.
Nothing's enhanced, not one heart...because
A longed-for spasm of tenderness melts you.*

The image of a child at play here is reserved to the last line of this next sonnet. Rilke turns to other themes of modern life in this fresh trio of sonnets, this one, and the two following. The themes are, in order: justice and mercy; the age of the machine; and the killing of other creatures, and Rilke seeks to illustrate his view of the correct attitude to each, that of the spirit, Orpheus, rather than that of the material world and its necessities.

Dealing with mercy first, he shows a degree of scorn for justice tempered with pity, which finds the elimination of physical torture as a punishment, or a means of extracting a confession, something worth boasting about. That is not true mercy, he suggests.

*The scaffold returns what it received through
The ages, like a child re-giving the presents
From its last birthday. Into the high, pure, foolishly
Open heart, the god of true mercy would walk

Otherwise. He would come powerfully,
Seize us more radiantly, as a god will.
More than the breeze round an anchored ship,*

Sonnets to Orpheus

Not less than the secret, quiet awareness

That in silence subdues us within,

Like the gentle play of the child of an infinite pairing.

The cruelty of the scaffold, of extreme judicial punishment, returns upon the perpetrators. Death is not our prerogative. Orpheus, bringing the true mercy of the spirit, would exhibit it more powerfully, impress us with its radiance, in the divine manner, not treat it as some light breeze round an immovable vessel, not, that is, as an occasional flicker of mercy around the immovable stone of the legal system. It would appear as akin to the gentle silence of the child at play, who is a product of the infinite pairing of mind and matter, imagination and reality, as Orpheus was the offspring (in versions of the myth) of Apollo and the Muse Calliope, that is, of artistic order and eloquence, the lyre and the song.

Rilke is no doubt thinking of Portia's speech in Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice' (Act IV, Scene 1) in which she says that 'The quality of mercy is not strained. It falleth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath.' And goes on to say, at the end of her speech, that justice alone will not bring us salvation. The mercy of the spirit, Orpheus' mercy, is the true path forward, not merely justice.

II, 10 (ALLES ERWORBNE BEDROHT DIE MASCHINE, SOLANGE)

The second poem of the triplet, returns to the problems of our technological age.

*The machine would threaten all we have done,
If it dared to exist in spirit, not simply serve us.
Lest the controlling hand show a sweet hesitation,
It cuts the stone more exactly, to build more firmly.*

*It never lingers long enough for us to escape it,
To leave it, oiled, to itself, in the silent factory.
It is life – and thinks it best if the same exact
Intent arranges all, and creates, and destroys.*

Rilke again endows machines, anthropomorphically, with conscious intent. The machine formalises the informal act of creation, the sweet hesitation of the hand, and replaces lingering imagination with precision engineering. Technology takes over our lives, and if it ‘dared’ to acquire spirit (‘artificial’ intelligence) it would threaten our civilisation, in his view. He contrasts again the exactness, the precise intent of the machine with the subtler wanderings of the imagination.

*But for us existence is still enchanted, our origin
In a hundred places, a play of pure forces, no one
Encounters without kneeling in admiration.*

Opposed to technology that fails to serve us in the right way, he views human existence as still a play of pure forces, as being still ‘enchanted’, and presumably mysterious, in many ways, and suggests that we are inclined to kneel or bow in admiration before the manifestations of complex life, and the products of the intellect. This perhaps contrasts with the modern, and scientific view, of the often-subtle interweaving of science and technology with the imaginative arts, and life itself, that human beings are obliged to adjust to.

The reader must decide whether Rilke’s essentially anti-scientific stance, is compatible with the advances in many areas that science and technology have brought, for example in medicine, communication, and human interaction, and in new forms of creativity. The anti-imaginative and un-beautiful, is not wholly an unfortunate result of industrialisation, since how we use technology is a matter for us, and machines are not (yet) anthropomorphic entities. That achieving the peace necessary to high artistic endeavour, and the quietude that full self-discovery and development need, is harder to find in the modern world is undeniable, however. And perhaps Rilke puts forward the extreme view as a challenge to us to disagree.

Words are still sensitive to the unsayable,

And music, ever-renewed, from quivering stone

Still builds its heavenly house in unusable space.

Words, he claims, in particular poetic and literary endeavour, are still products that arise from the unsayable, the deeper feelings and emotions, and the complex interactions of our inner thoughts and moods, while music still occupies the space of our hearing to create its delights. There may be a reference here to the Greek myth in which Amphion built Thebes, moving cut stones by employing the music of his lyre.

II, 11 (MANCHE, DES TODES, ENTSTAND RUHIG GEORDNETE REGEL)

The third poem of the trio, addresses the subject of those aspects of our history and practice involved with hunting and killing other creatures, a subject related to his broader consideration of the involvement with death we experience in our lives.

*Many calmly-ordered norms for death have arisen,
Since ever-conquering man insisted on hunting,
More than the snare and the net, I know you,
You, strips of canvas, hanging in caves of karst.*

*You were set there quietly, as though as a signal
To celebrate peace. But then a lad shook the edge,
And, from some cavern, the night threw a handful
Of pale fluttering doves to the light...yet that too is lawful.*

Rilke points to a hunting method of the karst regions (landscapes and topographies created by the natural dissolving of rocks such as limestone, dolomite and gypsum, found in Germany, the Czech Republic and other countries) involving not nets and snares, but the hanging of canvas strips over the entrance to caves where doves and rock-pigeons roost. Our modes of hunting were established in prehistoric times, and the right to hunt later became enshrined in law. Such laws though are ever under review, as we develop our views on the ethics of such activities.

*May the hunter not experience regret,
Nor the onlooker either, for such an act,
Though it be vigilant, prompt in its action.*

Rilke admonishes such destruction of life, even though it provides a quick death for the victim.

*Killing's a grievous form of our straying...
While what happens within ourselves
Is pure, to the calm and serene spirit.*

From an objective point of view killing has been, and often is seen as, a sad but inevitable consequence of our urge to survive, just as mourning and grief must often accompany us on our progress through life. It is a melancholy form of activity, to Rilke, in contrast to the purity that accompanies our internal life of the mind and the spirit, from the viewpoint of the calm and serene spirit.

He might be suggesting, indeed, that a god, such as Orpheus, might view such deaths as simply a part of life, from his serene, otherworldly, divine perspective, that is from the viewpoint of the double-realm. Such a view however would evade the crucial theological issue of the purpose served by death, loss, and evil in the world, an issue which must always trouble the religious who believe in an all-powerful deity, especially those who adhere to the conventional religions of the West and the Middle-East. It is not at all the case that in our day and age, killing other creatures is a necessity, though weaning the world from that abuse and misuse of other creatures' lives, may prove a long and difficult process.

I leave the reader to consider Rilke's views here, and to question the acceptability of killing in any context, which is raised by his touching on the subject. I should add that my translation here interprets the text, as above, that is as a partial critique of hunting and the killing involved, although the German text and its grammatical construction, could be interpreted

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differently: as an endorsement of killing through hunting, something which I hope, and believe, Rilke did not intend.)

With the completion of this trio of sonnets, Rilke returns to the major theme of transformation.

II, 12 (WOLLE DIE WANDLUNG. O SEI FÜR DIE FLAMME BEGEISTERT)

*Will transformation. O long for the flame,
Where a Thing escapes you, splendid in change:
That designing spirit, master of what is earth,
Loves only the turning-point in the form's curve,*

Rilke here echoes Goethe's poem 'Blissful Yearning' from the West-Eastern Divan (see my 'Selected Poems of Goethe'), the second couplet of which reads: 'The living thing I praise, that longs for death by fire,' and whose last verse exhorts us to 'Die and become!' Rilke tells us that a designing spirit (though scientifically the living world is not designed, but comes to be through natural processes such as evolution), whether that be Orpheus or some greater spirit, is the 'master' (though one might ask why not mistress?) of the earth, and that it loves the turning-point in the curve; loves, that is, shape and contour, or in other words continual change and transformation.

In the Duino Elegies, and in his letters, the transformation Rilke urges us to is a transformation of the outer things of the world into inner things, through our own self-development, so that we make the external, through our intellectual activity, creative endeavour, and emotional and ethical growth, a part of ourselves, and absorb and re-order it imaginatively within us, as our deepest internal representation of reality, of life itself. Self-development cannot be achieved without the breaking-down of what we feel and think, as if in the flames, and its replacement by fresh feeling and thought.

*What closes itself, to endure, already freezes:
Does it feel safe in the refuge of drabest grey?
Wait: the hard's warned, by the hardest – from far away,
A blow – the absent hammer is drawing back!*

Whoever closes themselves to fresh experience, in order to survive and endure, is already in danger of rendering their mind lifeless. Is the greyness of safety and security sufficient for us? We should beware; since illness, death, suffering, the blows of the hammer, are always a part of the species' fate.

*Who pours out like a spring, knowing knows him:
And leads him delighted through the bright creation,
That often ends with the start, and begins with the end.*

Rilke encourages us to believe that only engagement with life and the world allows us to know and be known, to become our true self. We are then delighted at the universe around us (even if it is not a creation of the divine, but a consequence of the play of energy, which led ultimately to life, sieved though evolution's sieve), a place where things must often end by immediately entering into the process of change, by beginning again, before they can become; and where, having become something, and reached an end, they must enter the process of change once again, in an endless path or cycle of transformation.

*Every fortunate space is a child or grandchild of parting,
Whose passing-through amazes. And Daphne, altered,
Since she became laurel, wants you to alter to breeze.*

Every fortunate state of being, is achieved through loss, through change, through parting, he claims, and every transformation of ourselves amazes us, and must be adapted to if we are to survive and flourish. In the Greek myth, Daphne the naiad (associated with water, and the flow therefore of change) was pursued by the infatuated Apollo, but rescued by her father, a River-God (of the river Peneus, or of the river Ladon) through his changing her into a wild laurel.

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Rilke suggests, in the last line of the sonnet, that Daphne, representing change and transformation wishes the reader, or Orpheus, or both to become the changing breeze, so that she may experience continuous change of shape and form in her altered state. Daphne represents the wild, the forces of nature, while Apollo represents order, temporarily overthrown, before the realisation of a new order. Apollo the god of the lyre, adopted the laurel as his emblem, as a result of his loss of Daphne, according to the myth, hence laurel was used to form the wreath with which poet-laureates were traditionally crowned.

II, 13 (SEI ALLEM ABSCHIED VORAN, ALS WÄRE ER HINTER)

Be in front of all parting, as though it were now

Behind you, like the winter gone by.

Because among winters is one so endlessly winter

Only by over-wintering does your heart still survive.

Pursuing the theme of parting, and loss, Rilke advises that we learn to anticipate, and process the thought of, loss before we experience it, so that we are ready for the deepest grief, or the deepest change which challenges our very survival.

Be always dead in Eurydice – climb, with more singing,

Climb with praising, back to the pure relation.

Here, in the failing place, the exhausted realm,

Be a sounding glass that rang as it shattered.

We should learn, he suggests, to retain the memory of that state of loss within, personified here as Eurydice, she who was lost to Orpheus as he looked back towards her. And yet, like Orpheus, we must climb back again to the world above, and once more praise its and our existence, despite the pain of change and loss, and so retrieve our relationship with external reality. Here, in the realm of the shades, the exhausted realm, we need to sing the world, its reality, its beauty, sing life itself, even though loss seems to shatter and destroy us, like some drinking glass that the singing voice may shatter, if the pitch of the note is in tune with the natural resonance of that object.

Sonnets to Orpheus

Be – and know, at that time, the state of non-being,

The infinite ground of our deepest vibration,

So that you may wholly complete it this one time.

Rilke exhorts us, to 'be'; and to comprehend if only then, and only for a while, the state of death, of non-being, which can only be understood through our loss, our memories of the dead; death which is one end of the vibration of our transient lives, while our birth, which we cannot consciously remember, is the other. We should do this, so that we may be whole, even if only for a moment; whole in the sense of grasping the complete arc of life and death. Like Orpheus we must still sing our song of praise for life, which grants us the world and each other, even if only for a little while.

In both the used-up, and the hollow and dumb

Recourse of all nature, the un-tellable sum,

Joyfully count yourself one, and destroy the number.

We should count ourselves part of the greater universe, the greater existence (always an enigma and a mystery to us by its very presence around and in us) whether it be through memory of the used-up and exhausted, that which is lost from our lives, or through awareness of the mute non-living totality of everything that is not yet lost, the uncountable and unfathomable whole, in which we merge, and forego for a moment our individuality, absorbed into the species, and into the vastness of the cosmos, where number is lost in the apparently infinite.

II, 14 (SIEHE DIE BLUMEN, DIESE DEM IRDISCHEN TREUEN)

Rilke returns to the flowers, the voiceless flowers, representatives of the universe in their beauty and innocence, and pursues the theme of the previous sonnet, identification and merging with this universe beyond us.

*See the flowers, those, so true to the Earth,
To whom we lend fate from the margin of fate –
But who knows! If they regret withering,
It is for us to be their regret.*

The flowers are ‘true’ to the Earth, part of it, loyally reviving and returning, for example with the Spring. They are an image of our own fate, our transient lives, we who wither and die, in the end. In contemplating the flowers, we therefore treat them as if they might perceive their own fate, even though they are beyond such perception, we ‘lend’ them a marginal portion of our own perception of transience.

*All would soar. Only we walk round complaining,
Laying down Self from it all, delighted with weight:
Oh, to Things what wearisome teachers we are,
While endless childhood succeeds in them.*

Everything else seeks to rise and soar towards the light. Only we human beings try to make ourselves more weighty, more permanent, complaining instead of praising, and constructing a self instead of accepting the flow of our being. The external world is eternally itself, innocent as an innocent child, while we weary ourselves, and become wearisome like a teacher whom we think has nothing to teach us.

Sonnets to Orpheus

Rilke's employment of anthropomorphism can equally become wearisome, so the reader is asked to temporarily suspend disbelief in 'conscious' Things, and focus on Rilke's underlying message.

*Let someone fall into profound slumber, and sleep
Deeply with Things – O how easily they'd come
Differently to a different day, from the mutual deep,*

He wishes us to identify so deeply with Things (external entities, and presumably also processes) that we would then approach life differently, and merge more easily with the universe.

*Or perhaps remain: and flowers would bloom, and praise
Their convert, one now like them
All those mute brothers and sisters, in the winds of the fields.*

Or perhaps, he suggests, we might even remain there, among the Things, in the external world, and then the flowers (still conscious, we note) would praise the new convert to their numbers, one who had become like them, silent and innocent, and simply one more among their countless multitude.

II, 15 (O BRUNNEN-MUND, DU GEBENDER, DU MUND)

*O fountain-mouth, you Giver, you Mouth,
Inexhaustible speaker of one pure thing –
You, marble mask in the flowing face
Of water. And, in the land behind,*

*The aqueducts' sources. From further,
Past graves, from Apennine slopes,
They bring you your speech, that then,
Past the darkened age of your chin,*

Falls, down to the basin below.

Rilke here addresses a flowing fountain, its water pouring from a marble mask. The whole is a metaphor for Orpheus, the singer, out of whose lips flows a stream of song, and for the poet, out of whose mind flows the poem. The sources of the water and the song lie beyond the grave (beyond the Roman tombs and catacombs, and Orpheus' underworld) and bring their outpouring to the basin of life, to the living.

*This is the sleeping recumbent ear,
The marble ear you always speak to.*

Sonnets to Orpheus

An ear of the Earth. She only talks

To herself like this. Place a jug there,

It seems to her that you've interrupted.

The marble basin, shaped almost like an ear, then receives the flow, as if it were the Earth itself listening, Nature speaking to itself. If we try to catch that flow, in a jug, in a poem, it is always an interruption, an attempt to solidify what is in constant movement, to contain the ever-moving reality in words.

II, 16 (IMMER WIEDER VON UNS AUFGERISSEN)

Torn open by us, again and again,

The god is the place that heals.

We are the eager ones, seeking to know,

While he is joyously scattered.

Those interruptions to the flow, those attempts by us to capture life in art or otherwise, are like the tearing apart of Orpheus by the Maenads. Nonetheless the stream of water repairs itself, as reality flows past the poem and carries it along, so that the work of art become a part of human culture. The god heals himself and heals us, by reasserting the values of life, of movement, external to ourselves. We seek to know, to fix in place, to achieve certainty, while Orpheus, the spirit and the song, like the water of the fountain simply scatters itself about, joyously.

Even the pure, the sacred offering,

He receives in no other way into his world

Than by being himself the free pole,

Both counterpoised, and unmoving.

The god, the spirit of life, is free, and accepts even a sacred offering freely, like a counterpoise to the weight of life we often seem to bear, the god who, while himself unmoving, attends on the movements of life.

Only the dead drink

From the source we but heard here,

When the god silently beckons them, the dead.

Sonnets to Orpheus

Only the dead, when summoned to die, drink from the source of life (and from Lethe, in the Greek underworld, the stream which erases memory), a source which is far off, which we only hear the sound of in this world.

We are offered only its sound. While the lamb,

With its greater feeling for silence,

Seeks out the bell.

The sound, a rumour of the source of life, and perhaps of a life beyond this life, is all that is offered to us, not the opportunity of drinking at its source, Rilke claims. Unlike the lamb which in a sense takes up the offer, because, detecting the silence around it, it seeks out the sound of its mother's bell which brings nurture and security. (The purpose of the bell is rather to alert the shepherd to the sheep's location, so there may be a hint here of the believer seeking out the divine, imagined as the Christian shepherd, Jesus, who is also paradoxically termed the Lamb of God)

II, 17 (WO, IN WELCHEN IMMER SELIG BEWÄSSERTEN GARTEN, AN WELCHEN)

*Where, in what blissfully watered garden,
On what leafless trees, from what tender blossom,
Do the strange fruits of consolation ripen?
Those delicacies found in the trampled meadow,*

*Perhaps, of your need. Do you sometimes wonder
At the size of the fruit, at its wholeness,
It's softness of rind, how some careless bird
Failed to be there before you, or a jealous worm*

*From beneath. Are there trees where angels perch,
Slowly, strangely, tended by hidden gardeners,
So, they sustain us without them being ours?*

Rilke asks in this sonnet where consolation lies for our strange human condition, so little attuned to the sound that the stream of life makes, and therefore to life itself. Is there some garden of consolation (a paradise garden?) where the fruit of consolation grows on the leafless tree of death, or in the blossoming of birth. When we find consolation for loss, or our inability to connect to life and nature, are we not often amazed to find it at all, considering the ‘trampled’ state of our needy lives?

Are there such trees that bear the fruit of consolation, where angels perch (the Angels of the Duino Elegies, powers, that is, beyond our comprehension, personified as those imaginary intelligences so superior to our own), trees which are nurtured by hidden gardeners (the dead, as in sonnet I.14 above) and which are not created by us, not ours, and yet sustain us?

Sonnets to Orpheus

*Have we ever been able, we Shades, we Shadows,
With our too-quickly-ripe, swift-decaying actions,
To disturb the summer's serene equanimity?*

Have we ever been able to disturb the life of Nature in any fundamental way, we who are shades and shadows, the dead and the living; we transient creatures, who perceive Nature flowing on regardless of us?

In the next three sonnets, Rilke explores this human condition of ours further, through images of our creativity and artistry despite the shadow of death; our endurance in poverty and suffering, faced with lack of compassion; and our distance from each other as human beings, and from living creatures, a state which language perhaps may overcome. We therefore leave, temporarily, the garden of consolation, to return to that image and metaphor later.

II, 18 (TÄNZERIN: O DU VERLEGUNG)

Dancer, oh movement,

Vanishing in passing, how you performed.

And that whirl at the end, a sapling swaying,

Did it not take possession of this harsh year?

The dancer here is initially a memory of Wera Knoop, but the dance is the dance of all the arts and works of intellect, and the first image will soon merge with the memory of Paula also. We are all dancers (on a tightrope over the void, as Nietzsche imagined, and Klee depicted). Rilke stresses the transience of movement, and our ultimate vanishing as we pass through life to death. The image of trees is retained in Wera's swaying like a tree as she whirled at the end of her dance, and her life in dance which death ultimately overtook.

Did it not bloom, so your earlier motion

Suddenly surrounded its crown of silence?

And, above, wasn't that summer, the sun,

The warmth, the undying warmth in you?

Rilke asks if the tree did not produce blossom in her brief life, so that the memory of her life surrounds the fact of her death, and if her passion for the dance and for life was not crowned with light, like that of a summer sun. Do we not achieve, despite our transience, if we seek to be creative in all the many ways in which human beings can be creative, not merely in the arts?

Sonnets to Orpheus

*It bore fruit too, fruits, your tree of rapture,
Aren't these they: the richly-striped pitcher,
And, there, the more-slowly maturing vase?*

The rapture, the delight of the artist in creation, are fruits of our delight in Nature, the universe around us, life itself. And are they not expressed in Paula's paintings, her still-lives? And did she not bring life into the world through her swollen pregnancy?

*And in the portraits: does not the sketch remain,
That the line of your darkened brow drew
On the whirling-about of its whirling?*

Rilke returns to the image of Wera dancing, and asks if the portraits of her also do not contain a sketch of the lines in the air her form made as she whirled in the dance, as the mind retains the lineaments of the living in our memories of the dead?

II, 19 (IRGENDWO WOHNTE DAS GOLD IN DER VERWÖHNENDEN BANK)

Rilke now conjures up an image of a blind beggar in the streets of the wealthy, a metaphor of our poverty faced with the richness of life, and of our search for compassion and nurture. There is a certain heroism of the everyday in our endurance in the face of what life forces us to bear.

*In the bank somewhere, gold is accommodated.
It lives on close terms with thousands. But here
The blind beggar is like the location of some lost coin,
Is akin to some dusty corner under the cupboard.*

Rilke compares the beggar's situation, our human condition, to that of a lost coin, fallen into some dusty corner behind or beneath the cupboard.

*Money, it would seem, is at home in the stores,
Clothing itself there in silk, furs, carnations,
He, the silent one, stands, here where it pauses
For breath, all that wealth, sleeping or waking.*

The stored wealth is in contrast to the beggar's poverty, and seems to be resting there, while the mendicant stands in his state of indigence.

*Oh, how does it close at night? That ever-open hand?
Pale, and wretched, and wholly destructible
Tomorrow fate overtakes it, extends it to all.*

The beggar's hand is so immobile, is stretched out for such a length of hours, that Rilke asks how it manages to close at night when there is no one about. How do we ever relax from our endless condition of angst? Yet day after day fate forces the beggar to extend his hand, as we are forced to continue our lives, to work and endure.

If but one watcher might comprehend and praise,

In amazement, that endless feat of endurance!

Sayable to those who sing. Audible to the god.

If only someone, some watcher, Orpheus perhaps, were able to understand and to commend our feat of endurance, our living despite our wretched existence, transient, prone to destruction as we are, a condition which we can write about, like the poet Akhmatova, turning the unspeakable into the sayable, while a god could directly 'hear' and comprehend the human condition, without our speaking it.

II, 20 (ZWISCHEN DEN STERNEN, WIE WEIT; UND DOCH, UM)

The stars...how distant, yet how much further

What is found here. One, for example a child...

And, beside that child, a second, another –

Oh, how unbelievably distant.

The distance between stars is great, but even greater, in some sense, is the distance between human beings. Children can play together without entering each other's lives or thoughts in any other way. Adults communicate but are still almost islands, attached to the continent though they may be. (See John Donne's 'Divisions upon Emergent Occasions', Meditation XVII, of 1624). Rilke sees each person as unbelievably distant. Through empathy and language, we establish connection but often fail to be fully aligned with one another. (This view of Rilke's may perhaps be a mark of his own need for solitude, and perhaps an awkwardness in relationships that he encountered)

Fate measures us with Being's measure,

Perhaps; such that, to us, it seems strange.

Think of the distance between woman and man,

Whenever she moves apart, and considers, him.

Fate measures us against the vast distances of Being perhaps, the distances in the immense universe; the distance between mind, a process, and matter, an existent; the distance between ourselves and Nature. The difference in response to life between men and women is an example. Gender itself may create a gulf in understanding, which requires to be bridged.

Sonnets to Orpheus

All's distance – nowhere the circle closes.

Look at the bowl on the neatly-laid table,

At the peculiar face of the fish.

The circle never closes, our empathy and understanding are never complete. Look at the spiritual distance Rilke says between a bowl, a thing, and ourselves, or a creature, a peculiar-looking fish, and ourselves (there is a notable still-life of a fish lying on a piece of newspaper, by Paula, from 1906 in the Hanover Landesmuseum, and many still-lives of hers show a variety of bowls).

Fish are dumb, people say...but who knows?

Is there not, in the end, a place where one might

Speak the language of fish, without speaking it?

Perhaps, Rilke muses, there might be a fish-language that we fail to understand, and could there be a place where all languages are understood without speech (as the spirits communicate with each other wordlessly in Dante's 'Paradiso')?

II, 21 (SINGE DIE GÄRTEN, MEIN HERZ, DIE DU NICHT KENNST; WIE IN GLAS)

*Sing those gardens, my heart, that you know nothing of.
Like gardens enclosed in clear glass, unattainable.
The fountains and roses of Isfahan, Shiraz,
Sing them, as blessed; praise them, incomparable.*

Rilke returns to his garden of consolation, which he finds unattainable. He compares its beauty to the incomparable Persian gardens of Shiraz and Isfahan.

*Show, my heart, that you're never deprived of them,
That their ripening figs are still meant for you,
That with them you frequent, midst blossoming branches,
The swelling breeze that caresses the face.*

He cheers himself with the thought that he is not deprived of their beauty and formal grace, since poetry, creativity, connects him to everything that ripens and blossoms.

*Avoid the mistake of fearing some deprivation
As a result of that decision once made: to be!
Silken thread, you are a part of the weave.*

His decision to choose the path of being and development renders him still part of the flowering tapestry, the result of the warp and weft of the world.

Sonnets to Orpheus

Whatever the image you're joined to, within,

(Be it only for a moment, in a life of pain)

Feel that the whole of the glorious tapestry is meant.

We must realise that our own personal experience, which may seem so specific to ourselves, is only a variant on what others have undergone, or are undergoing, whether that be suffering or delight, and that we though individuals are part of the species.

II, 22 (O TROTZ SCHICKSAL: DIE HERRLICHEN ÜBERFLÜSSE)

*Oh, despite fate, the glorious effervescence
Of our existence, overflowing in parkland,
Or as stone statues, carved beside keystones,
Bearing the arches, treed beneath balconies!*

That external world, that tapestry of existence, which is rich and overflowing, is visible in nature, or in the products of art that adorn the arches, the images, close to the keystones of civilisation, holding it all together, close to its summit.

*Oh, the brass bell that raises its clapper,
Each day against dull everyday life;
Or that pillar in Karnak, that column,
That outlasts the 'eternal' temples.*

And art is that which summons us to reflect on the eternal and infinite, not merely the everyday, as the sound of a bell summons the faithful, or one of the twelve sandstone columns of the ruined temple of Amun-Ra at Karnak, erected by Seti I, that supported the Hypostyle Hall, summons us to consider the past. Those columns are incised, like many of the other pillars of the temple complex, with hieroglyphic writing which recorded over the centuries every aspect of Egyptian life of the Pharaonic period, and which has outlasted many other parts of the temple structure, as art outlasts the tenures of the powerful, who may think their rule eternal.

Sonnets to Orpheus

Today, in the same way, that over-abundance

Soars past, from the horizontal yellow

Of day to the blinding outflow of night.

Today, in contrast, it is powered flight rather than temple columns, that soars upward from the desert sands, and elsewhere soars into the light of the galaxy.

Though the tumult fades, leaves no trace behind,

The arcs of airy flight, those that create them,

Are, perhaps, not nothing, but those once merely imagined.

Though the display of power and flight leaves no trace, it is significant as an expression of human ingenuity and design, and perhaps equates to the art of past ages in delivering or performing something that they could only imagine.

II, 23 (RUFEN MICH ZU JENER DEINER STUNDEN)

*Summon me to that hour, among those
Of yours, that, endlessly, resists you,
Close and imploring like a dog's face,
But turning away, as you think, at last,

You might finally comprehend it.*

Seeking to go deeper into the nature of human existence, Rilke asks, the reader to summon him to that hour which resists simple interpretation, which almost resembles a dog's imploring face thrust towards us but turning away from us whenever we think to grasp its nature and being, and close the gap between the human and the non-human creature.

*What is elusive is yours most of all.
We are free. We're released from that
Which we thought had made us welcome.*

That which seems most elusive to us, the essence of life itself, is ours already, since we are free, not slaves to a fixed human nature, however welcoming fixity might seem.

*Anxious, we long for something to hold,
Often too young for what is ancient,
Too old for what never existed.*

Sonnets to Orpheus

It is a feature of our existential angst, that we long for such fixity and permanence, something to take hold of in the flow of being and living, we, who are often too naïve to understand the achievements and hard-won wisdom of the past, and yet at the same time too experienced, and habituated to modern life, to fully appropriate the flights of the imagination that a child indulges in, or the more imaginative products of past art.

We, truly here, only when we praise,

We, that, alas, are the branch and the axe,

And the sweetness of ripening danger.

Yet we are truly present, truly alive and aware, not when we are anxious, and yearning, but when we are filled with life enough to praise our being here, wherever here is, and whatever it signifies. We are both a branch of the tree of life, and the axe that attacks and questions it. We are both the sweetness of the achieved life, and the risk-takers perpetually seeking that which destabilises it, through intellectual analysis, technology, and social change.

II, 24 (O DIESE LUST, IMMER NEU, AUS GELOCKERTEM LEHM!)

Oh, the delight, ever new, of loosened soil!

There was scant help for the earliest venturers.

Yet cities rose beside fortunate bays.

Water and oil, nonetheless, filled the jars.

That desire for progress, implying change in its many forms, is a delight to the species. Because of our adventurousness, our innate curiosity, our willingness to explore, unassisted by anything but our own efforts as human beings, we produced much that nurtures us, cities that house us.

Gods, in bold strokes we define them,

Which fate morosely erases, again and again.

And yet they are the immortals. Behold,

We may in the end obey those who listen.

We invented deities boldly, while, morosely dissatisfied with them, we have erased them again, religions rising then fading again, despite our continual desire to comprehend what may lie beyond us, and may be eternal and infinite. Some individuals may, in the end, says Rilke, decide to obey such deities as are most meaningful to them, of all those we have created, and which they believe in, those which seem in sympathy with them, and appear to listen to them.

We, one species, through the millennia,

Parents filled evermore with the child we bear,

That will, one day, shake, then transcend, us,

Sonnets to Orpheus

We, endlessly daring, what time we yet have!

And only death, silently, knows what we are,

And what's gained from what's lent to us.

We, the single species possessing the highest levels of consciousness known, consisting of a series of generations, each destined to bear offspring, and leave behind future generations that will transcend them in their technology, knowledge, and perhaps much else, have a long future ahead of us, we trust. Death enshrines what we are, and only the dead of each age, know what they were, and therefore what humankind was, in their day, and what they gained from the life that is 'lent' to us, beyond our possession, and finally lost.

II, 25 (SCHON, HORCH, HÖRST DU DER ERSTEN HARKEN)

*Listen, can you hear the first plough
Already labouring? The human rhythm
Once more, in the subdued silence,
Of early spring's winter-hardened soil.*

As a species our potential is as great as ever, as is our desire for change that might lead to improvement, even to ultimate perfection. Rilke asks if we can hear the first plough labouring that, as Blake exhorted, we must drive 'over the bones of the dead'. Can we hear the human rhythm of our efforts to consolidate and endure, to survive, yet also to enhance, develop and create?

*It never seems banal, what is to come.
What came to you so many times before
Seems now to reappear as if it were new.
Ever longed-for, you never seized it, it seized you.*

*Even the leaves of once-wintery oak-trees,
Shine in the evening with colour to come.
Sometimes the breezes exchange a sign.*

Spring is an emblem of renewal, and fresh creation. The habitual seems to offer fresh avenues for exploration, since it is not habit that we long-for most deeply, rather that we are seized by habit.

Sonnets to Orpheus

The bushes are black. Yet the heaps of dung

Are an even deeper black in the fields.

Every hour that goes by seems younger.

The bushes are leafless and seem dead, but the heaps of dung in the fields which will nurture new life, are blacker still. Every hour seems younger as spring burgeons, as fresh creative activity takes place.

II, 26 (WIE ERGREIFT UNS DER VOGELSCHREI...)

How we are moved by the bird's call...

Some single screech uniquely created.

Yet the children scream, as they play

Outdoors, beyond the need for screaming.

We are moved, and stirred, by the springtime call of the birds, which arises out of their deep instinct. Yet we have a fuller language, a language that allows utterance far beyond the need for utterance, and indeed we scream beyond the need for screaming, like children in wild play, rather than employing that language in the deepest ways possible, as the poet attempts to do.

Screaming at random. Into this world-space,

Of cosmic space (into which the whole

Bird-call enters as people enter our dreams)

They drive their screams like wedges.

Children scream for the sake of screaming, to express their being, their identity, their excitement. Rilke asks for more than this, however,

Oh, where are we? Ever more freely,

Like the loose dragon-kites we chase

At half-height, brimming with laughter,

Sonnets to Orpheus

Torn by the wind. God of song, so order

The screaming throng that, in rushing, they waken

A flowing current bearing the head and the lyre.

We are driven and torn by the wind, like kites from the hand, that we chase, and ever more freely so. Rilke's plea to Apollo the god of order, of whom Orpheus is a disciple (or an embodiment, a representation, a mask of the god) is that we might renew the flowing current of poetic utterance, of song, which emanated from the dead Orpheus' living head and lyre.

II, 27 (GIEBT ES WIRKLICH DIE ZEIT, DIE ZERSTÖRENDE?)

And we have the strength, the power to do so. Rilke re-asserts our ability to create.

Does it truly exist, Time, the destroyer?

On the silent hill, will it raze the castle?

Will the Demiurge, then, violate you,

Heart, that forever belongs to the gods?

Is it Time we have to fear, or perhaps the Demiurge (the supreme being of the Gnostic philosophy, creator of the material world, and antagonistic to all that is purely spiritual)? Can Time affect that which is silently, tranquilly secure in itself, or the Demiurge touch the heart tuned to the spirit?

Are we really so dreadfully fragile

As fate would have us believe?

Is the promise, deep at the roots

Of childhood, afterwards stilled?

Are we as fragile as our fate suggests? Is the promise of childhood, where imagination, and spirit, rules the day, wholly lost, merely because we develop and become adults?

Oh, the ghost of the transient,

Through receptive innocence

Passes, like smoke.

Sonnets to Orpheus

In the state of childhood innocence, our transience barely registers. A child's sense of time is not that of an adult. As children at play we simply exist, and the passage of time is often a surprise to us.

As that which we are, the doers,

We apply to that which remains,

The godlike strength of the known.

As adults, fully aware of transience and death, we yet have the power to apply to the time that remains our full strength, informed by our knowledge.

II, 28 (O KOMM UND GEH. DU, FAST NOCH KIND, ERGÄNZE)

As an example, Rilke summons up, once more, the shade of Wera Knoop, the young adolescent dancer, and her ability for artistic expression.

Oh, come and go. You, almost a child still, add,

For a moment, your dance-move

Into the pure constellation of dances

In which dull orderly Nature's

Transiently overcome, for she was stirred

To total hearing only when Orpheus sang.

He invokes the image of her adding her dance-move, her final pirouette, to the dance of art in which Nature is temporarily transcended by the spirit, just as Nature was fully stirred by the music of the spirit when Orpheus sang.

You were still moved by those things

And easily surprised if any tree took time

To follow after you into the listening.

You still knew the place where the lyre

Was lifted, in sound – the un-heard centre.

Rilke saw that Wera, even though on the brink of adulthood, was still moved by childish enthusiasm and total absorption in the task, and easily

surprised if the world around was interested in following her artistic performance, unlike the consummate professional dancer perhaps, who with knowledge of the art tailors their intent to the audience. Wera, Rilke felt, was still attuned, like a child, to that total self-absorption which is the true core of creative effort, the depth of spirit which expresses the whole of life and our being through the creative task at hand. When we hear or see such a performance, from a singer, a dancer, or any artist, we can immediately tell whether the performance comes from the depths, without artifice or pretence. That possession by, or expression of spirit when perceived in an adult performance, is Lorca's 'duende' (literally a spirit, demon, phantom etc in Spanish).

For it, you tried out your lovely steps,

In hope; to turn, one day, your friend's face,

And course, towards healing celebration.

He felt that Wera's dance was directed to that spiritual core, an expression of life and hope, the image of which was destined to turn Rilke himself towards the path of healing and celebration expressed by the writing of these sonnets.

II, 29 (STILLER FREUND DER VIELEN FERNEN, FÜHLE)

In the last of these sonnets, Rilke addresses himself explicitly, as a friend, both of Wera and the shades of the dead, and of the many readers, the many individuals, distanced from himself, and exhorts himself to continue his poetic journey. Implicitly, he is also addressing all creative individuals, in whatever sphere of endeavour.

*Quiet friend of the many distances, feel
How your breath still enlarges space.
Let yourself ring out, a dark cradled bell
In the timbering. That, which erodes you,

Gains a strength from your sustenance.
Go out and in, through transformation.
What do you know of the greatest loss?
Is drinking bitter? Then, become wine.*

He likens the creative voice to a bell in a timbered steeple. The creative work, the effort of creating which erodes the artist's strength, gains power from the artist's sustenance of it. Artists must explore loss and the greatest loss, death; and, if that causes a feeling of bitterness, then they must turn their bitterness to wine, much as Baudelaire said that life had given him mud, and he had turned it to gold (see his 'Draft Epilogue for the Second Edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*').

Sonnets to Orpheus

*Be, in this night made of excess,
The magic art at the crossroads of senses,
The feel of their strange encounter.*

Rilke exhorts himself to be fully aware of all his senses, and then work creative magic at their intersection, that crossroads where we encounter external reality, and internalise and transform it.

*And, if the earthbound forget you,
Say to the silent Earth: I flow.
To the rushing water: I am.*

And if that process results in a degree of isolation, if the act of creating poetry requires solitude and silence, such that absorbed in the poet's art, the world forgets the creator, then so be it. The poet, the creator, all of us, when engaged in internal self-development, or intense intellectual effort, or some primary activity that requires all our attention and awareness, must console ourselves with a simple declaration of our being, realised through that effort; a declaration both to ourselves and to the non-sentient world, of our existence and process of internal change, our reality and transience, our being and flowing.

TRANSLATOR'S CONCLUDING REMARKS

Despite the traits that may sometimes seem to weaken Rilke's poetry, and these sonnets specifically: firstly a certain deliberate vagueness as to who or what is being addressed, or conjured, or presented to us; secondly, the excessive use of anthropomorphism, and to a lesser extent the sympathetic fallacy and personification; and thirdly, the lack of a clear distinction between what he views as real and what is purely metaphor; despite all that; he is a thought-provoking and challenging poet.

His eloquence and poetic skills are fully evident, as well as the frequent beauties of his verse. But he was and is a poet whose content goes beyond his creation of poetically fine works, to explore the metaphysical and the physical in new and interesting ways. And he should be discussed and treated as such.

Where he appears to predicate the existence of the divine, and treats the spirit as a force or process generated externally, or where he treats the dead as occupying an alternative state of being, rather than simply as an influence on the minds of the living, then many readers may be deterred by his thought, while others whose beliefs embrace such thinking may simply question the orthodoxy or not of his means of expressing them. But, like Dante, regardless of our belief in his view of the human condition or not, Rilke is a poet not to be ignored for those who love not only poetry, but intellectual analysis, and the spheres of ethics and psychology.

These Sonnets to Orpheus, written following his in-depth presentation of the human condition, or at least his view of it, in the Duino Elegies, to which they are a fitting counterpart, allowed him to further explore the main themes of his whole poetic effort, namely his perception of the realms of life and death as a unified whole; his desire to transform the external world through internalising it, in order to comprehend and embrace, and ultimately praise it; and his desire for personal self-development through creative effort. Even if the first of these themes presents difficulties for the reader, the latter two are common goals that all of us surely embrace if we seek to understand our world, and the universe; that we inhabit, if only for a time

Sonnets to Orpheus



Orpheus and Eurydice Reunited

Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones (English, 1833 - 1898)

Artvee

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RAINER MARIA RILKE

Rainer Maria Rilke, was born in Prague, the capital of Bohemia, then part of Austria-Hungary now the Czech Republic, in 1875. He studied in Prague and Munich, later travelling to Italy, Russia (where he became acquainted with Boris Pasternak's family) and Germany where he met and married Clara Westhoff. Their daughter Ruth was born in 1901. In 1902 he travelled to Paris, where he subsequently became Rodin's secretary, and where under Rodin's influence he developed the more objective style of his collection *New Poems* (*Neue Gedichte*, 1907).

Rilke also spent time in Spain, at Ronda. In 1911 and 1912 he was at Duino, near Trieste, where he began the *Duino Elegies*, but spent the years of the First World War in Munich, before moving to Switzerland in 1919. He finally settled at Muzot, near Sierre in the Valais, where in a burst of inspiration, in 1921 and 1922, he completed the *Duino Elegies* and wrote the *Sonnets to Orpheus*. He produced a substantial number of further individual poems, which expressed his mature thought. After long periods of illness, he died at a sanatorium near Montreux in December 1926.

The *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus* deploy and extend both his early lyrical gifts and subsequently more objective formal style in a poetry of philosophical and spiritual depth, centred around a view of life and death as forming a complete whole, and demanding a full human response to both the positive and negative aspects of both these 'realms'. In that sense he is a poet of both darkness and light, of the bleak and sparse but also the spiritual and consolatory. Ideas from late nineteenth century existentialist philosophy, the influence of artists like Rodin and Picasso, and a subtle awareness of Psychology as a developing area of intellectual exploration, can all be found in his work, while his spiritual and poetic world is revealed as both highly individualistic and profoundly modernistic, despite its Romantic lyrical heritage.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR & COMMENTATOR

Anthony Kline lives in England. He graduated in Mathematics from the University of Manchester, and was Chief Information Officer (Systems Director) of a large UK Company, before dedicating himself to his literary work and interests. He was born in 1947. His work consists of translations of poetry; critical works, biographical history with poetry as a central theme; and his own original poetry. He has translated into English from Latin, Ancient Greek, Classical Chinese and the European languages. He also maintains a deep interest in developments in Mathematics and the Sciences.

He continues to write predominantly for the Internet, making all works available in download format, with an added focus on the rapidly developing area of electronic books. His most extensive works are complete translations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*.