

## *The Task of Transformation*

EXTRACT from Rilke's letter of November 13th, 1925, to his Polish translator, Witold von Hulewicz, on the meaning of the *Elegies*.

*Transitoriness is everywhere plunging into a profound Being. And therefore all the forms of the here and now are not merely to be used in a time-limited way, but, so far as we can, instated within those superior significances in which we share. NOT, HOWEVER, IN THE CHRISTIAN SENSE (from which I more and more passionately withdraw), but, in a purely mundane, deeply mundane, blissfully mundane consciousness, to instate what is HERE seen and touched within the wider, within the widest orbit—that is what is required. Not within a Beyond, whose shadow darkens the earth, but within a whole, within THE WHOLE. Nature, the things we move about among and use, are provisional and perishable; but, so long as we are here, they are OUR possession and our friendship, sharers in our trouble and gladness, just as they have been the confidants of our ancestors. Therefore, not only must all that is here not be corrupted or degraded, but, just because of that very provisionality they share with us, all these appearances and things should be comprehended by us in a most fervent understanding, and transformed. Transformed? Yes, for our task is to stamp this provisional, perishing earth into ourselves so deeply, so painfully and passionately, that its being may rise again, "invisibly," in us. WE ARE THE BEES OF THE INVISIBLE. NOUS BUTINONS ÉPERDUMENT LE MIEL DU VISIBLE, POUR L'ACCUMULER DANS LA GRANDE RUCHE D'OR DE L'INVISIBLE. The "Elegies" show us at this work, this work of the continual conversion of the dear visible and tangible into the invisible vibration and agitation of our own nature, which introduces new vibration-numbers into the vibration-spheres of the universe. (For, since the various materials in the cosmos are only the results of different rates of vibration, we are preparing in this way, not only intensities of a spiritual kind, but—who knows?—new substances, metals, nebulae and stars.) And this activity is peculiarly supported and hastened by the ever swifter vanishing of so much that is visible, whose place will not be supplied. Even for our grandparents a "House," a "Well," a familiar tower, their very dress, their cloak, was infinitely more, infinitely more intimate: almost everything a vessel in which they found and stored humanity. Now there come crowding over from*

*America empty, indifferent things, pseudo-things, DUMMY-LIFE . . . A house, in the American understanding, an American apple or vine, has NOTHING in common with the house, the fruit, the grape into which the hope and meditation of our forefathers had entered . . . The animated, experienced things that SHARE OUR LIVES are coming to an end and cannot be replaced. WE ARE PERHAPS THE LAST TO HAVE STILL KNOWN SUCH THINGS. On us rests the responsibility of preserving, not merely their memory (that would be little and unreliable), but their human and laral worth. ("Laral" in the sense of household-gods.) The earth has no other refuge except to become invisible: IN US, who, through one part of our nature, have a share in the Invisible, or, at least, share-certificates, and can increase our holding in invisibility during our being here,—only IN US can this intimate and enduring transformation of the visible into an invisible no longer dependent on visibility and tangibility be accomplished, since our own destiny is continually growing at once MORE ACTUAL AND INVISIBLE within us. The Elegies set up this norm of existence: they attest, they celebrate this consciousness . . . By making the mistake of applying CATHOLIC conceptions of death, of the hereafter, and of eternity to the Elegies or Sonnets, one is withdrawing oneself completely from their point of departure, and preparing for oneself a more and more fundamental misunderstanding. The "Angel" of the Elegies has nothing to do with the angel of the Christian heaven . . . The Angel of the ELEGIES is the creature in whom the transformation of the visible into the invisible we are performing already appears complete . . . The Angel of the Elegies is the being who vouches for the recognition of a higher degree of reality in the invisible.—Therefore "terrible" to us, because we, its lovers and transformers, still depend on the visible.—All the worlds of the universe are plunging into the invisible as into their next-deepest reality; SOME STARS HAVE AN IMMEDIATE WAXING AND WANING IN THE INFINITE CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE ANGEL,—OTHERS ARE DEPENDENT ON BEINGS THAT SLOWLY AND LABORIOUSLY TRANSFORM THEM, IN WHOSE TERRORS AND RAPTURES THEY ATTAIN THEIR NEXT INVISIBLE REALISATION. We, let it be once more insisted, WE, IN THE MEANING OF THE ELEGIES, ARE THESE TRANSFORMERS OF THE EARTH, OUR WHOLE EXISTENCE, THE FLIGHTS AND PLUNGES OF OUR LOVE, ALL FIT US FOR THIS TASK (in comparison with which there is, essentially, no other). (Briefe aus Muzot, 334-38.)*

*Creative Questions to stimulate discussion on The Ninth Elegy*

Q.1 line 7: "happiness" – what light does this comment from Rilke's letter to Ilse Erdmann (31/1/1914) shed on the meaning Rilke attaches to this word:

The reality of any joy in the world is indescribable; only in joy does creation take place (happiness, on the contrary, is only a promising, intelligible constellation of things already there); joy is a marvelous increasing of what exists, a pure addition

out of nothingness. How superficially must happiness engage us, after all, if it can leave us time to think and worry about how long it will last. Joy is a moment, unobligated, timeless from the beginning, not to be held but also not to be truly lost again, since under its impact our being is changed chemically, so to speak, and does not only, as may be the case with happiness, savor and enjoy itself in a new mixture.

Q.2 line 9: Does Rilke's allusion to Ovid's *Metamorphosis* (l,548 ff) enhance or hinder our understanding of the "the heart"?

Hardly had she cried her breathless prayer  
when a numbness seized her body; her soft breasts  
were sealed in bark, her hair turned into leaves,  
her arms into branches; her feet, which had been so quick,  
plunged into earth and rooted her to the spot.  
Only her shining grace was left. Apollo  
still loved her; he reached out his hand to touch  
the laurel trunk, and under the rough bark  
could feel her heart still throbbing . . .

Q.3 "... because all that's here seems to need us..." **Why does it "seem" that we are needed?**

Q.4 "Once... for each thing only" ("Ein Mal") **Why is "Once" ("Ein Mal") repeated 5 times?**

Q.5 "Trying to achieve it... become it. Whom to give it to?... it...it" & Why would we "hold on to it forever"? **What is "it" x 5?**

**Q.6 Rilke then raises the question which appears again at the end of the poem, what place does death have in relation to our life:** Ah, what, alas, do we/ take into that other dimension? Not the gazing which we/ slowly learned here, and nothing that happened.

Nothing./ Suffering then. Above all, then the difficulty,/ the long experience of love, then – what is/ wholly unsayable. But later,/ among the stars, what use is it: it is better unsayable.

How does the following letter inform our understanding of this meditation on the relationship between life and death (To Countess Margot Sizz-Noris-Crouy, 6/1/1923):

We should not be afraid that our strength is insufficient to endure any experience of death, even the closest and most terrifying. Death is not *beyond* our strength; it is the measuring-line at the vessel's brim: we are *full* whenever we reach it—and being full means (for us) being heavy.—I am not saying that we should *love* death; but we should love life so generously, so without calculation and selection, that we involuntarily come to include, and to love, death too (life's averted half); this is in fact what always happens in the great turmoils of love, which cannot be held back or defined. Only because we exclude death, when it suddenly enters our thoughts, has it become more and more of a stranger to us; and because we have kept it a stranger, it has become our enemy. It is conceivable that it is infinitely closer to us than life itself—. What do we know of it?!

Prejudiced as we are against death, we do not manage to release it from all its distorted images. It is a *friend*, our deepest friend, perhaps the only one who can never be misled by our attitudes and vacillations—and this, you must understand, *not* in the sentimental-romantic sense of life's opposite, a denial of life: but our friend precisely when we most passionately, most vehemently, assent to being here, to living and working on earth, to Nature, to love. Life simultaneously says Yes and No. Death (I implore you to believe this!) is the true Yes-sayer. It says *only* Yes. In the presence of eternity.

**Q.7 “Since the traveller (Wanderer) does not bring a handful of earth...” What is it that he/she brings, how does it help us connect with the landscape they have left?**

**Q.8 “Are we perhaps here for saying (*sagen*)...” What is the purpose and power of “saying” (*sagen*)? & in conjunction with this, how does the following comment from Rilke's letter to his Polish publisher Witold Hulewicz (13/11/1925) inform lines 32-35?**

Even for our grandparents a “house,” a “well,” a familiar tower, their very clothes, their coat, was infinitely more, infinitely more intimate; almost everything was a vessel in which they found what is human and added to the supply of what is human.

Q.9 "Threshold: what is it...." **What is this "Threshold", what are its possible symbolic connotations & what role do lovers have in this process?**

Q.10 "Here is the age of the sayable (*Säglichen*)... Praise *the world* to the Angel, not the unsayable (*unsäglich*)" **What is important about the *sayable*? What part do consciousness and language play?**

Q.11 "More than ever/ the things of experience are falling away, since/ what ousts and replaces them is an act with no image. / An act, under a crust that will split, as soon as the business withing outgrows it..... /Between the hammers, our heart/ lives on, as the tongue between the teeth, that/ in spite of them, keeps praising." **What forces in the world might Rilke be referring to and what does the poet bring against these forces?**

Q.12 "Tell him things" – line 59 **Why should we tell the Angel things? How does this letter deepen our understanding of what Rilke means (To Alfred Schaer 26/2/1924):**

I often wonder whether things unemphasized in themselves haven't exerted the most profound influence on my development and my work: the encounter with a dog; the hours I spent in Rome watching a rope-maker, who in his craft repeated one of the oldest gestures in the world—as did the potter in a little village on the Nile; standing beside his wheel was indescribably and in a most mysterious sense fruitful for me. . . .

Q.13 "[things] ...transient/ they look to us for deliverance" **Why do *things* look to us for deliverance?**

Q.14 "Will us to change them completely...." **What process is described in the last 2 lines of the second last stanza?**

Q.15 "Is that not your dream to be invisible, one day?" **Why is this the Earth's dream? How does this description of the Spanish landscape in a letter to Ellen Delp (27/10/1915) assist our understanding?**

The Spanish landscape (the last one that I experienced absolutely), Toledo, pushed this attitude of mine to its extreme limit: because there the external Thing itself—tower, mountain, bridge—already possessed the extraordinary, unsurpassable intensity of those inner equivalents through which one might have wished to represent it. Everywhere appearance and vision merged, as it were, in the object; in each one of them a whole inner world was revealed, as though an angel who encompassed all space were blind and gazing into himself. This, a world seen no longer from the human point of view, but inside the angel, is perhaps my real task—one, at any rate, in which all my previous attempts would converge.

Q.16 "Earth, beloved, I will.../ Namelessley, I have been truly yours, from the first./ You were always right, and your most sacred inspiration/ is that familiar Death." **What is the speaker's determination in the last 9 lines of the poem and how and why is Death the "most sacred inspiration"- consider again the letter quoted in Q.6?**

**Concluding Thoughts:**