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Translations of Rilke: W.D. Jackson

Translator's Note

As a further exhibit, or quotation/translation, to the reconsideration (however incomplete) of Rilke's poetry in the magazine itself, the reader might like to (re)consider the following short series of 'Seven Poems' which Rilke wrote in late 1915 when living in the Keferstrasse near the Englischer Garten in Munich, where his landlady was (as he wrote in a letter) "a blonde and very beautiful and quite special woman who has rented me the 2nd floor while her husband is away". As far as I know, it is not known whether the poems were inspired by Rilke's landlady, or by the twenty-three-year-old painter Lulu Albert-Lasard, with whom he was having an affair at the time, or by no one in particular. At approximately the same time as he was writing the poems, heavy fighting was reported in France, the Balkans, Italy and elsewhere, so that he also found himself (as he also wrote) "a witness to the world's disgrace". The question therefore arises, as so often with Rilke, of whether the poems are a form of withdrawal or of spiritual progress:

Seven Poems (1915)

i

The girl who gathers roses suddenly
Grasps the full bud of his life-giving limb
And, shocked by the difference of him/her, her/him,
Her [fragrant] gardens shrink, or try to flee

ii

The summer which, for me, you suddenly are
Has drawn the seed up into my soaring tree.
(Spacious within, o feel there the arching sky
of Night, in which it stands mature!)
And now it rises into your firmament,
A growing image of real trees.
O fell him, so that (upside down) he sees,
Deep in your lap, the anti-Heaven meant
To make him really rear, really confront
Its dangerous landscape, such as prophetesses
Scan in their globes: that inner space
In which vast star-filled outer spaces hunt.

iii

Our glances close the circle, till a vision
Fuses the random tensions white in both
Of us – while your unknowing, blind decision
Raises a pillar in my undergrowth.

Stirred up by you, the god's tall image stands
At the silent crossroads, covered by my clothing;
My entire body invokes him. We are nothing
But spell-bound creatures in his spell-bound lands.

And yet you must decide, if you're to be
Both grave and Heaven for the Herma. You
Can set the god amid his bee-swarms free
Of shrugged-off broken stone by letting go.

iv

Shy one, who know nothing yet of towers,
All of that's about to change
In the rich and strange
Space within you. Close your eyes, whose powers
Have, together with your face
And your innocent body, raised
One tower, rigid and complete. Amazed,
I inhabit towering space,
Into which I'm forced to cram
While you praise my progress – to the dome
Where across your soft night-sky I ram,
Like resplendent rockets shooting home,
Greater verve and feeling than I am.

v

How too much space dilutes us! till we're thin
As air, remembering superfluities.
And now our silent kisses sieve the lees,
Trickling with bitter wormwood or absinth.

How much we are! Out of my torso juts
A whole new tree, whose overflowing crown
Rises towards you. What would it be but
For the summer in your lap? Now fully grown,
Am I, are you, the one we satisfy?
And *who*'s to say as we both disappear?
A joyous pillar holds up the curved sky
Of our room, perhaps, and lingers longer here.

vi

To what are we closer? Death or the day
Of lives not lived yet? What would clay on clay
Be if the god were *not* to form the figure
Whose limbs now bud between us? But think bigger:
This is my body, which is resurrected.
Help him now quietly out of his hot grave
Into the Heaven which you and then I have,
Until our bold survival is projected
Through him – and you, young grove of deep Ascension.
You air of summer, dark and pollen-filled.
When all its thousand dancing spirits are spilled,
My stiff corpse gently sheds again its tension,

vii

How did I call you? With mute calls,
Which have become as sweet as they were wild.
As I push on inside you step by step,
My seed climbs on up like a happy child:
Ur-Mount of Venus, you, to whom we come, it
Breathlessly springs as I ascend your col.
Give in now – feel us coming – for you fall
The moment that we beckon from your summit.