The Later French Poems Translated by Neil Baldwin

Rainer Maria Rilke

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A Note on the Poems

These four poems are from a sequence of 59 called Vergers, which Rilke wrote between January 1924 and May 1925, for the most part while he was living at Chateau de Muzot sur Sierre, Switzerland.

As early as 1899 he had been composing sporadic French lyrics; but in Spring 1922, after he had completed The Duino Elegies and The Sonnets to Orpheus, his native language resources were depleted. Exhausted, Rilke turned to the lighter, brighter strains of his adopted land in hopes of raising himself up out of malaise.

The French verses—he wrote more than 400 altogether—do seem at first glance to lack the density and force of the earlier and better-known work. They reflect back to the Erste Gedichte in their simplicity and innerness. But Rilke was dealing with different concerns here; we must realize that these are the poems of a dying man looking urgently to the pastoral landscape that surrounded him for surcease.

N. B.
Paume, doux lit froissé
où les étoiles dormantes
avaient laissé des plis
en se levant vers le ciel.

Est-ce que ce lit était tel
qu’elles se trouvent reposées,
claires et incandescentes,
parmi les astres amis
en leur élan éternel?

O les deux lits de mes mains,
abandonnés et froids,
légers d’un absent poids
de ces astres d’airain.

Comme un verre de Venise
saît en naissant ce gris
et la clarté indécise
dont il sera épris,

ainsi tes tendres mains
avaint rêvé d’avance
d’être la lente balance
de nos moments trop pleins.
7 PALM

The soft bed of my palm
is creased and wrinkled;
stars that once slept here
have gone away, gone up.

Will they find
clear and fiery rest
among friendly stars
bursting endless?

O the two beds of my hands
are empty and cold, light
with the brazen weight
of departed stars.

12

As a Venetian vase
newborn knows clouds
and the uncertain light
yet to come for it,

so too your tender hands
have dreamed before
of lightly weighing
our swollen lives.
Dans la multiple rencontre
faisons à tout sa part,
afin que l'ordre se montre
parmi les propos du hasard.

Tout autour veut qu'on l'écoute—,
écoutons jusqu'au bout;
car le verger et la route
c'est toujours nous!

LA DEESSE

Au midi vide qui dort
combien de fois elle passe,
sans laisser à la terrasse
le moindre soupçon d'un corps.

Mais si la nature la sent,
l'habitude de l'invisible
rend une clarté terrible
à son doux contour apparent.
In meeting many others
let each play his part
so that order may arise
among these chance words.

All around need hearing—
let us listen to the end
for the orchard and the road
are always our selves!

28 THE GODDESS

In sleeping empty noon
she will pass through the terrace
and leave no trace
of body, no presence.

But if nature senses her
so long invisible
her soft shape
becomes clear and terrible.