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Rainer Maria Rilke

By LUDWIG LEWISOHN

RUMORS of the poet reached me everywhere. In the Styrian mountains Hofmannsthal, remembering the days of his own youth, spoke of Rilke. The towers and gates of Prague, the river and the Hradschin trembled in the wan sunlight of the poet's vision. Finally he was supposed to be at Foyot's in Paris. Perhaps he was. But I let the days drift by. Why trouble him with the importunity of my admiration? When I inquired he had already slipped away to that lost tower in Switzerland which has been his home since the war estranged him from all the cities of men.

Strangely enough it was Paris that continued to emphasize the most hushed of poets and most withdrawn of men. The *Nouvelles Littéraires* wrote of him at length even before the Franco-German literary relations had been reestablished by the receptions accorded to writers as different as Alfred Kerr and Thomas Mann. It was recalled that Rilke had been Rodin's secretary, that he had lived here and written some of his most important works in an apartment in the Rue de la Campagne Première. The French were pleased. They were more pleased when a volume of French poems, *Vergers*, by Rilke appeared. Next came the news that he was translating the works of Paul Valéry into German. An extremely handsome gesture was made. Among the excellent *Cahiers du Mois* there appeared one the other day called *Reconnaissance À Rilke*. Thirteen French men of letters, including the really eminent Valéry contribute; appreciative voices from all countries save England and America, swell this little chorus of praise and gratitude to the works and personality of a mysterious and difficult poet.

Whence comes this feeling which Francis de Miomandre calls "nostalgie de Rilke"? How many of this group of critics, French or Spanish or Polish, can hear the poet's rich, slow, incomparable music or those words of his which seem not to have been set down through the operations of a willing mind, but to have come like falling dew or drifting leaves? Of all this they hear an echo only. But upon that echo is borne to them the voice of Rilke's inner spirit, of his world-piety, of his grave, deep and mystical denial of all the vain works of man.

His vision was full and perfect long before the world war was dreamed of. But it is since the war that that vision has seemed most pertinent and persuasive to minds wearied and bewildered by the destructive thunder of the wheels of a mechanical civilization. They turn to Rilke; they seek to stand with him at that point of the inner life at which the self and the universe are no longer divided, at that point at which the soul consents to its continuity with an order unmiraculously perceived as divine and receives all phenomena into itself. A great vigilance and a great stillness of spirit have lead Rilke to an attitude unique in the history of either letters or thought. It is in vain that critics speak of Dostoevski, of the undoubtedly decisive effect upon Rilke of his visit to Russia. It would be equally in vain to speak, as I am tempted to do, of Wordsworth and of his "wise passiveness." Experience rather than learning will open that door. But most people, hot of heart, violent of will, are excluded from the moods that are the material of Rilke's poetry. Unlike Wordsworth he does not need the grander aspects of nature; he avoids the complications of the human scene. A face, a street, a remembered legend, a caged animal, an heroic gesture suffice to induce in him that mood of contemplation in which he sees "into the life of things" by being no longer divided from them. In this habitual mood of his the common contradiction between mind and nature, subject and object, is abolished. But there is, be it remarked, no deliquescence of personality, no mystical union of the I with a non-I. There is the profound perception of the identity of God and nature and the self which becomes literally

*the eye with which the universe
Beholds itself and knows itself divine.*

Identity, or, rather, once more—continuity, undividedness. This strictly modern mystic wants no abrogation of the natural order. The natural order is the divine order. "Perform no miracle for my sake," he prays. "Let thy laws prevail which become more visible from generation to gen-

eration." And then in verses probably matchless in our time he celebrates the law of gravitation and achieves a poetic conquest of the special ideas of that time which is far to seek in the writings of those poets who have celebrated the mere mechanical aspects of civilization:

*Wenn etwas mir vom Fenster fällt
[und wenn es auch das Kleinste wäre],
wie stürzt sich das Gesetz der Schwere
gewaltig wie ein Wind vom Meere
auf jeden Ball und jede Beere
und trägt sie in den Kern der Welt.*

To the eternal laws all things yield themselves up with a trust and a humility that are prayer, security, goodness. We only in our arrogance thrust ourselves forth from the unity of things into an empty space of freedom. . . . To paraphrase Rilke thus is, of course, to distort and betray him and that marvellous texture of his work in which form and substance, flesh and spirit, the word and its incarnation are indivisibly one. But an intellectual apprehension of his central attitude is necessary to a right appreciation of all his work and, especially, of *Das Stundenbuch* which is like no other philosophical poem and will, in all likelihood, take its place gradually as one of the very great works of the poetic faculty and imagination. It calls toward flight from "this poor city of time," toward a new sense of that oneness in which there is neither low nor high, neither trivial nor important which but in all things and through all things breathes the ineffable breath of God:

*Es gibt im Grunde nur Gebete,
so sind die Hände uns geweiht,
dass sie nichts schufen was nicht flehte;
ob einer mahlte oder mahlte,
schon aus dem Ringen der Geräte
entfaltete sich Frömmigkeit.*

Significant for Rilke's development are, I suspect, the poems in which he remembers his childhood and adolescence. He retained, long beyond the wont of men, the child's ability to let day and dream be a continuous country. Later day and dream became appearance and reality, became the self and the universe, became the thing and God. This retrospective blending of two worlds carried over into the present of the poet's imagination is well illustrated by the beautiful *Dream of Boyhood*:

*Oh, I should love to be like one of those
Who through the night on tameless horses
ride*

*With torches like dishevelled tresses wide
Which the great wind of gallop streaming
blows.*

*And I would stand as on a shallop's prow,
Slender and tall and like a banner rolled,
Dark but for helmeting of ruddy gold
That glints and gleams. Behind me in a
row*

*Ten men who from the equal darkness
glow*

*With helmets of the changeful gold de-
signed,*

*Now clear as glass, now dark and old and
blind.*

*And one near me blows me a vision of
space*

*Upon a trumpet glittering that cries,
Or makes a solitary blackness rise
Through which as in a rapid dream we
race:*

*The houses slant behind us to their knees,
The crooked streets to meet us bend and
strain,*

*The squares flee from us: but we grapple
these*

The while our horses rustle like the rain.
As the boy stood within his dream the mature poet stood within his world. From the periphery where one observes, his temperament carried him effortlessly to the center where one experiences. Truth comes to him who keeps the vigil of eternity. . . . From these interpretative statements it is easy to derive Rilke's silent opposition to the naturalistic movement in literature; it is equally easy to see why all the expressionistic poets consider him their master. . . .

The three books of *Das Stundenbuch*—Concerning the Monastic Life, Concerning Pilgrimage, Concerning Poverty and Death—are expansions, infinitely rich and profound and often intricate, of the last three verses of the poem I have translated. Implicit in those verses, as well as in the preceding ones, is Rilke's pantheism—a word that omits all the warmth and humility and love of his vision—his quietism, his cultivation, unique and perhaps uniquely needed in our age, of the life of utter contemplativeness. Yet like all major poets, like every spirit who deserves the name of

master, Rilke rises in the book *Concerning Poverty and Death* from the intense hush of his usual verses to the monition and the stronger music of a messianic cry. It is the cities with their false mechanical civilization, with their lie concerning progress that keep man from nature and from God, from divine poverty and from ripening like trees toward the ultimate beauty of their death. Power must be broken:

*The kings of this world are grown old
And leave not any heirs behind them;*

metal, now money and machines, must shrink back into the veins of the hills. Men must become conscious of their slavery. An iron note enters Rilke's description of the false and bitter lives of the slaves of the cities:

*Und ihre Menschen dienen in Kulturen
und fallen tief aus Gleichgewicht und
Mass,*

*und nennen Fortschritt ihre Schnecken Spuren
und fahren rascher, wo sie langsam führen,
und fühlen sich und funkeln wie die Huren
und lärmen lauter mit Metal und Glass.*

But his more habitual note is not one of condemnation. It is that of a compassion at once aloof and tender:

*For, Lord, the crowded cities be
Desolate and divided places.
Flight as from flames upon their ways is,
And comfortless of any graces
Their little time fades utterly.*

*And men who dwell there heavy and hum-
bly move*

*About dark rooms with dread in all their
bearing,*

*Less than the springtime flocks in fire and
daring,*

*And somewhere breathes and watches earth
for faring,*

But they are here and do not know thereof.

*And children grow up where the shadows
falling*

*From wall and window have the light
exiled,*

*And know not that without the flowers are
calling*

*Unto a day of distance, wind and wild—
And every child must be a saddened child.
There blossom virgins to the unknown
turning*

*Who for their childhood's faded rest are
fain,*

*And do not find for what their souls are
burning,*

*And trembling close their timid buds again.
And bear in chambers shadowed and un-
sleeping*

*The days of disappointed motherhood
And the long nights' involuntary weeping
And the cold years devoid of glow or good.
In utter darkness stand their deathbeds
lowly*

*For which through gradual years the grey
heart pants;*

*They die as though in chains, and dying
slowly*

Go forth from life in guise of mendicants.

In the cities the rich are not rich nor the poor poor; all are the prisoners of things dead because torn out of their natural and divine place and order. Men do not lead their own lives nor die their own deaths. In page after page of great and perfect verse Rilke calls for a savior from the disgraces of our lives. The savior will bring life that is vision, death that is ripeness. In verses like the resonance of golden trumpets Rilke prays that that savior be established in the grace and ancient radiance of God and that he himself may be dancer before that new Ark of the Covenant, proclaimer, tongue, and baptist of the Messiah:

*Du aber gründe ihn in deine Gnade,
in deinem alten Glanze pflanz ihn ein;
und mich lass Täufer dieser Bundeslade,
lass mich den Mund der neuen Messiasde,
den Tönenden, den Täufer sein. . . .*

I have spoken of only two of Rilke's volumes, *Das Buch der Bilder* and *Das Stundenbuch* and have omitted both his fitful prose as well as his earlier and later verses. He is so little known among us—more like a legendary name than a living poet—that what is needed is first of all to make him and his work accessible to the lover of poetry. If this is a difficult task in respect of the poet's spiritual character, it is an even harder one in respect of the form in which that spiritual character is so completely incarnated. For that form has, superficially viewed, two marks that seem contradictory. Even from my few quotations and my wholly inadequate versions it will be seen that Rilke uses the entire vocabulary of the language. There are no prosaic words. He writes "Gesetz der Schwere" (law of gravitation); he writes "Fortschritt" (progress); he writes "Gleichgewicht" (equilibrium). In the texture of his verse these words are not only thorough-

(Continued on page 386)

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A New Tolstoy Diary

By ALEXANDER I. NAGAROFF

COUNT LEO TOLSTOY. 1853-1865.
Paris: Trianon Publishing Company.
2 vols. 1926.

LEO TOLSTOY'S hitherto unpublished Diary which covers twelve years of his life and which has now appeared for the first time in French translation (why the Russian editors are so deplorably slow in bringing it out in the original I do not know) is a book of absolutely unique interest and importance. It was begun by Tolstoy in 1853, when he was a twenty-four-year-old officer fighting in the Caucasus, dreaming of military decorations more than of anything on earth, trying his young forces at writing and having no idea of the indiscreet attention with which the world would honor seventy-odd years later the entries in which he confided his most secret thoughts to paper. It discloses the history of his participation in the Crimean Campaign, his first literary victories, his social and worldly experiences and achievements, his trips abroad and Parisian adventures and, finally, his marriage and family life at the Yasnaya Polyana in the years when his creative genius definitely ripened and matured (the Diary is brought down to 1865).

From beginning to end the Diary is essentially introspective and sincere. It is in this that lies its value. The young Tolstoy was just as much of a moralist as was the old Tolstoy. Day after day he scrutinized himself with utmost attention and noted literally every move of his mind and soul. The whole Diary is, so to speak, his dynamic auto-portrait, the photographic mirror in which he looked at himself for twelve years and which has faithfully preserved every expression, every wrinkle, and every smile of his psychological face. Rich, indeed, was this face in expression! Reading the Diary one cannot but remember the words of a Russian critic who said that Tolstoy was not one man, but an infinite variety of human beings, miraculously fused into the soul and body of one man.

Count Leo decided to join the Army fighting in the Caucasus for two reasons. First of all, he wanted "to flee from debts." Still more did he want to flee "from bad habits,"—"dissipation, drinking, gambling, weakness of character, etc." The young man had received from the Creator more than a generous share of passions and desires. This was undoubtedly a heavy load to carry for one who had made up his mind to be "moral," to live "cleanly," and to do nothing but "good deeds." The Diary is a glowing record of the young Tolstoy's desperate and, alas! unsuccessful struggle against the devil, or rather the devils, that lived in him. He decided most categorically to be good to his fellow-officers. Yet we learn from the very first pages of the Diary that he offended one of them, quarreled with another, and decided to challenge a third one to a duel. He would give up gambling,—this was decided too. But no sooner did he arrive in Tiflis than a famous marquis drew him into a billiard contest. They played days and nights, made 1,000 rounds, and it was but a happy chance that saved Leo from losing his entire fortune (just as it was a happy chance that saved him a few years later from gambling away, in the trenches of Sebastopol, the Yasnaya Polyana). And the reader sees how, with grief and astonishment the young man began to realize that to decide "to be good" was much easier than "to be good." It was extremely difficult to change one's character even in little everyday practices and habits. No sooner did he make up his mind to be "simple, dignified, and reserved" than he "lost his temper and thrashed Alexay (the servant)."

Still stronger with Tolstoy was another "bad habit." He could not help courting every good-looking girl he laid his eyes on. "The sting of carnal desire tortures me again," "Again instead of working I was running after girls," "Yesterday I was tempted by a good-looking gypsy girl, but God saved me from sinning"—such notes are scattered all through the book. An attractive chambermaid in a Rumanian hotel or a kiss imparted to him "by a good-looking Ukrainian girl" whom he chanced to meet were sufficient reasons to retain him for several days in a city

or village where he meant to spend a few hours. It was mostly "loves" for a week or two; but there were in the long list of his amourettes also serious, or more or less serious, romances. To enumerate the peasant beauties, wild Cossack women, young society girls and aristocratic ladies who won his attention and the honor of a mention in the diary would be quite a task. Suffice it to say that his heart seems never to have remained vacant. For this he also scolded and rebuked himself. Yet the fountain of his desires could be corked by no abstract moralizing.

What is really touching in the Diary is that, yielding every day in every way to this constant eruption of upsetting passions, the young Tolstoy continued to struggle against them with never-flinching resolution and obstinacy. Following the example of Benjamin Franklin he drew lists of virtues which he wanted to possess and of rules of behavior he should never transgress. And every night he noted: "Five (or seven, or ten) transgressions," adding sometimes with indignation: "Laziness, depravity, disorderliness—such are my chief vices," or "What I need above all is to cure myself of laziness, irascibility, and lack of character." So strong indeed in him was this thirst for "moral life" and improvement that he noted his "transgressions" and "vices" even in the Caucasian mountains when his life was constantly exposed to dangers, even in the trenches of Sebastopol where death was more than a frequent visitor. At first he wanted nothing less than to become "ideal." Later he understood that even slow and gradual approximation to the ideal was extremely difficult. At times he realized that all these "Franklin Tables" and catalogues of transgressions were very naive and comical things; and yet he continued to write and rewrite them still hoping to force his titanic self into the narrow frame of pedantic moralizations.

It will probably be a discovery to many that the main principles of Tolstoy's moral philosophy were definitely shaped when Tolstoy was twenty-six or twenty-seven. The old preacher and teacher added practically nothing to that which had been said by the young sinner.

Wading through the Diary one cannot help ask oneself: Where did Tolstoy find time to work? Dashing from a society-ball to the gambling table, from one love adventure to another, from the battlefields of Sebastopol to the cafés and follies of Paris, from the school he organized at Yasnaya Polyana to the gymnastic-halls or billiard tables, he was drinking with greed and thirst from the cup of life which held for him irresistible temptations and attractions, he was constantly moving, acting, living with all his strength and faculties. Yet he did work, and very much at that. It was in these years that he wrote "Childhood and Youth," "The Cossacks," "The Tales of Sebastopol," "Polikushka," etc., and began "War and Peace." The Diary is full of evidence proving that he was often dissatisfied with his style, that he constantly corrected and rewrote pages and chapters which were not perfect, that he took numberless notes and observations which were to serve him as material for his masterpieces, etc. Tolstoy the writer was just as exacting to himself as was Tolstoy the man. Like his moral philosophy, his literary genius was born in pains.

Perhaps the most interesting pages of the Diary are devoted to Tolstoy to his marriage. The birth of an irresistible passion for the sixteen-year-old Sophie Bers, the fear that she would turn him down should he propose to her, and the agonies through which he passed are reflected in pages which one cannot read without deep emotion. Every night he decided to bare to her his feelings the next day, and every day, paralyzed by uncertainty and fear of refusal, he postponed the decisive moment. To make it easier he drafted written proposals, but he had no courage to send them, either. "I did not know (he wrote) that one can love like that. I am a madman; if this torture continues I will kill myself . . . God alone can help and save me." And yet—how sincere was Tolstoy with himself!—he noted in the course of the very same days: "I went to Sasha (Miss Bers's

brother) to the village where, alas! a coquettish peasant girl attracted my attention." Yet his passion for Sophie culminated and finally we read:

The most powerful weapon for the conquest of happiness in life is to emit from one's self, like a spider, without any restraints, a whole net of love and to catch into it whomsoever one encounters,—a child, a woman, an octogenarian, a policeman.

Have made the proposal. She: "Yes." She—like a wounded bird. Useless to write. Such things can be neither expressed in words nor forgotten.

Equally pathetic are the last chapters of the Diary which cover the first two years of Tolstoy's married life. They literally burst with complete, unspotted happiness, with a plenitude of love and life of which Tolstoy alone was capable. "Too good to be true," such is the *leit-motif* of this part of the book. It is with a strange feeling, indeed, that one reads these pages full of passion for a woman who made their author "the happiest of husbands," who, as Count Sollogub put it, "was the best nurse of his talent," who bore him nine children, whom he made in the decline of his and her days the unhappiest of wives, and who was not even admitted, after fifty years of married life, to the deathbed of her great husband. But during the years reflected in the Diary no tragedy was as yet in sight. Tolstoy was happy without philosophizing. And instead of preaching love he loved and spread happiness around him.

Rainer Maria Rilke

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ly poetical but fresh and magical. It is in harmony with this principle that Rilke has abandoned all licences and verse devices. His syntax is always the syntax of prose. (It is in this respect that the translator is forced to betray the poet most grossly.) Hence his verse has an initial naturalness and fluidity. On the other hand it will be observed that Rilke constantly uses alliteration and internal rhyme and is an incomparable master of the contrasts and harmonies of vowel music. But the use of these methods is never decorative. Language is to Rilke more than a means of expression; it is a material like marble or gold or alabaster which has its own laws and possibilities and methods of treatment. It must be wrought into a beauty proper to it as substance. But the poet never forgets the emotional and conceptual aspects of speech. Hence words must be significantly beautiful; alliteration becomes a symbol of meaning and the orchestration of thought. Thus when, in my last quotation, Rilke prays concerning the Messiah: "Gründe ihn in deine Gnade" (Ground him in thy Grace) the sensitive reader will hear at once but the difficulty of those hard initial gutturals the striving ardor of that deep establishment in the divine. When Rilke writes: "Und allies ist wie ohne Alter," ("And all is ageless that he alters") there streams from that vowel-alliteration on *a* both strange wonder and a breath of eternity. Yet, as in that very line, a scrupulous simplicity and prosaic directness of speech is observed. I am aware of the vanity and incompleteness of all such observations. But they too may not be wholly useless in helping to make accessible one of the few living writers—how few they are!—in whose work the vigilant spirit can hear the pulse-beat of eternity.

The first part of a projected trilogy, Rene Schickel's "Ein Erbe am Rhein" (Munich: Wolff), promises well for the series. The novel, which begins with a conclusion, retrogresses from the point of the death of the hero's wife to his early youth and his experiences in Italy with its idyll of young love. Brilliant descriptions of the life and landscape of the south follow one upon the other, but the triumph of the author is not so much in them as in making plausible despite the charms of Italy the hero's homesickness for his own land.

One of the most admirable biographies which this year of biographies of St. Francis has called forth is by an Italian, Luigi Salvatorelli. His "Vita de San Francisco d'Assisi" (Bari: Laterza) is a book full of atmosphere yet one that so skilfully steers past the shoals of religious opinion and controversy that it can be read with delight by all. It projects St. Francis against the background of his age, shows his influence upon it and his effect upon the period which succeeded it, and at the same time paints a most appealing picture of the man and saint.