

Rainer Maria Rilke – Ninth Duino Elegy

This was a very long mailing. That seems to me appropriate, since it is on what I consider to be one of the very greatest of all poems, Rainer Maria Rilke's "Ninth Duino Elegy." The poem itself is two pages. I take it up as I usually do, line by line, stanza by stanza. So just printing the poem twice takes up four pages.

The poem has two, and maybe three, remarkable aspects. The 'maybe' refers to the conditions of its coming-into-being, at the end of a truly extended writer's block. The second is that what it proposes, which is an 'answer' to one of the central questions we as humans face: 'Why do we exist?' The answer is so stunning that I don't know how to deal with it. (In sum, he says we exist because the things in the world need us, need us to turn the object world into consciousness, and more specifically, into words. How's that for an answer? Strange, disquieting, isn't it? We wonder if it can possibly be true.) The third is this: There are rare moments when art rises into something we can only marvel at. Piero della Francesca's "The Story of the True Cross," Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro," Bach's "The Well-Tempered Clavier," Matisse's cut-outs. "Absalom, Absalom" by Faulkner, "Asphodel, that Greeny Flower" by Williams, Whitman's "Song of Myself," Shakespeare's "King Lear."

In that august company, the height of human achievement, I would put this poem. It is one of the most sublime and astonishing of human utterances: beautiful almost beyond belief, rich with thought and perception, perpetually challenging, an acme of human accomplishment. Forgive the length of this commentary. The poem is, I promise you, worth the length of what follows.

Note: This mailing has ten footnotes – not scholarly appendages, but rather a way of incorporating poems and conversations which enrich what is being said, but which might not be essential to what is said. To read a footnote, just let your cursor hover over the footnote number....

The story is one of the most famous in modern literature. In 1912, on a stormy evening on a cliff above the Adriatic Sea, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke went for a walk, trying to compose an answer to a business letter he had received. Suddenly, several lines of poetry flashed into his consciousness, lines which summarized his sense of loneliness and alienation. He returned to the Duino Castle he had been staying in – Rilke was a remarkable freeloader, very adept at

getting wealthy women to let him stay in their fancy lodgings – and wrote the business letter. Then he wrote two elegies and half of a third, which he completed the next year. He began two more, just a few lines. He began another and worked on it the following year. He wrote one more two years later. Then a curtain descended, and he was done writing – even though he knew more elegies were to come.

The First World War intervened, and all sorts of uncertainties and depressions. His huge writing block continued even after the war.

And here is the remarkable part of the story. In early 1922, living in a small tower in Switzerland, suddenly the elegies began again. So did an astonishing sequence of sonnets, fifty-five of them. The sonnets, published as *Sonnets to Orpheus* and the remaining elegies, making ten in all and published as the *Duino Elegies*, came to him in a whirlwind: something like five days for the elegies, preceded by three days for the first series of sonnets and two weeks for the second series. Perhaps never in the history of poetry had so much of such quality been written in so short a span.

I've been astonished by this, and puzzled by it. For both the *Duino Elegies* and the *Sonnets to Orpheus* are – there seems no argument to this assertion – masterpieces of the first order. How can the culmination of a life's work come in such a storm of invention, so quickly? All I can come up with is what we know, that sometimes when the conscious mind is busy with all sorts of things, the unconscious mind keeps working. We have all experienced this in small: we go to bed with a problem that seems complex or insoluble, and wake up in the morning with an 'answer.' So perhaps for ten years, ten years that were largely fallow for Rilke, something was going on beneath the surface of consciousness, and when it was time for that 'something' to emerge, it came forward like lava bursting through the earth's crust. A towering volcano was the result.

There is so much that I dislike about Rilke: he was a world-class sponger, as I said; he and his wife abandoned their child to be brought up by relatives because they didn't want a distraction to their pursuit of being artists; he was an esthete of the first order; he wrote long letters to rich women about art and consciousness. Aieeee. Every misconception (at least as I see it) that people have about good-for-nothing and out-of-touch poetic types was embodied in Rilke. And yet for all the failings or deficiencies I see: for all that, he wrote extraordinary poems.

I want us to consider what I think is the greatest of the *Duino Elegies*, the "Ninth Elegy". The poem is long, and it is difficult, and it brings forward ideas I

am not sure I agree with. It is, nonetheless, one of the most powerful poems I have ever encountered. And so I propose that we encounter it together.

Here is the poem. There is much argument about which translation is the best. The one which follows, by Stephen Mitchell¹, has its critics. But Mitchell was the first translator who enabled me to see the greatness of Rilke: not by putting him on a pedestal (although Rilke would have appreciated a pedestal) but by allowing me to see how heart-felt his cries are, how deep the human problems he addressed.

The Ninth Duino Elegy [Stephen Mitchell translation]

Why, if this interval of being can be spent serenely
in the form of a laurel, slightly darker than all
other green, with tiny waves on the edges
of every leaf (like the smile of a breeze)—: why then
have to be human—and, escaping from fate,
keep longing for fate? . . .

Oh *not* because happiness *exists*,
that too-hasty profit snatched from approaching loss.
Not out of curiosity, not as practice for the heart, which
would exist in the laurel too. . . .

But because *truly* being here is so much; because everything here
apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some strange way
keeps calling to us. Us, the most fleeting of all.
Once for each thing. Just once; no more. And we too,
just once. And never again. But to have been
this once, completely, even if only once:
to have been one with the earth, seems beyond undoing.

And so we keep pressing on, trying to achieve it,
trying to hold it firmly in our simple hands,
in our overcrowded gaze, in our speechless heart.
Trying to become it.—Whom can we give it to? We would
hold on to it all, forever . . . Ah, but what can we take along
into that other realm? Not the art of looking,

¹ The best translation, I think, is by Edgar Snow. I use William H. Gass's translation when I teach Rilke in a seminar on modernism, since it is part of his remarkably fecund study *Reading Rilke*, which I assign to my students. But I love the Mitchell version, its lines ring in my ears, but because it is in this version that I first was able to see just how great Rilke was.

which is learned so slowly, and nothing that happened here. Nothing.
The sufferings, then. And above all, the heaviness,
and the long experience of love,— just what is wholly
unsayable. But later, among the stars,
what good is it—*they* are *better* as they are: unsayable.
For when the traveler returns from the mountain-slopes into the
valley,
he brings, not a handful of earth, unsayable to others, but instead
some word he has gained, some pure word, the yellow and blue
gentian. Perhaps we are *here* in order to say: house,
bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window—
at most: column, tower. . . . But to *say* them, you must understand,
oh to say them *more* intensely than the Things themselves
ever dreamed of existing. Isn't the secret intent
of this taciturn earth, when it forces lovers together,
that inside their boundless emotion all things may shudder with joy?
Threshold: what it means for two lovers
to be wearing down, imperceptibly, the ancient threshold of their
door—
they too, after the many who came before them
and before those to come. . . ., lightly.

Here is the time for the *sayable*, *here* is its homeland.
Speak and bear witness. More than ever
the Things that we might experience are vanishing, for
what crowds them out and replaces them is an imageless act.
An act under a shell, which easily cracks open as soon as
the business inside outgrows it and seeks new limits.
Between the hammers our heart
endures, just as the tongue does
between the teeth and, despite that,
still is able to praise.

Praise this world to the angel, not the unsayable one,
you can't impress *him* with glorious emotion; in the universe
where he feels more powerfully, you are a novice. So show him
something simple which, formed over generations,
lives as our own, near our hand and within our gaze.
Tell him of Things. He will stand astonished; as *you* stood
by the ropemaker in Rome or the potter along the Nile.
Show him how happy a Thing can be, how innocent and ours,

how even lamenting grief purely decides to take form,
serves as a Thing, or dies into a Thing—, and blissfully
escapes far beyond the violin.—And these Things,
which live by perishing, know you are praising them; transient,
they look to us for deliverance: us, the most transient of all.
They want us to change them, utterly, in our invisible heart,
within—oh endlessly—within us! Whoever we may be at last.

Earth, isn't this what you want: to arise within us,
invisible? Isn't it your dream
to be wholly invisible someday?—O Earth: invisible!
What, if not transformation, is your urgent command?
Earth, my dearest, I will. Oh believe me, you no longer
need your springtimes to win me over—one of them,
ah, even one, is already too much for my blood.
Unspeakably I have belonged to you, from the first.
You were always right, and your holiest inspiration
is our intimate companion, Death.

Look, I am living. On what? Neither childhood nor future
grows any smaller Superabundant being
wells up in my heart.

Let's begin with the opening of the "Ninth Elegy:"

Why, if this interval of being can be spent serenely
in the form of a laurel, slightly darker than all
other green, with tiny waves on the edges
of every leaf (like the smile of a breeze)—: why then
have to be human—and, escaping from fate,
keep longing for fate? . . .

This opening poses a remarkable question: if being is enough, why not just
be a leaf, instead of a human being, possessed of consciousness and thus an
awareness of suffering and death? I think there is an even deeper question than
this: why do we suffer, why do we have a consciousness? (The previous "Eighth
Elegy" is about animals, who look straight at existence without the consciousness
that so often afflicts us.)

The first of the *Duino Elegies*, and the line that inspired Rilke when he walked on the cliff that stormy night above the Adriatic Sea, began with a question and a cry: “Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels' hierarchies?” Forget the angels. (They make me uptight, although Rilke can't forget them.) I don't quite know what or who those angels are. Certainly not white-robed figures flying while strumming small harps. But the question the first poem poses is one we have each asked, at some juncture of our lives: ‘If I cry out in pain, in suffering, in loneliness, who is there to hear me?’ Thus, the opening of the *Elegies* asks a question very similar to the one with which the “Ninth Elegy” begins. Why suffer? Why be human? Who cares about our sufferings and the difficult trek we make as humans in the journey from birth to death? What does life mean if “death comes at the end to arrest it, as Whitman noted.

My sense is that when we are young we ask these questions. Children ask them innocently and are comforted by stories that seem to make sense of the world. Teenagers, on the cusp of adulthood, ask them of themselves and sometimes share those questions with their closest friends, and eventually answer the questions with a vague, ‘Well, sometime soon I will be grown up and things will be clear to me.’ Adults ask those questions, but only rarely (unless, as happens, they are depressed or suicidal) and almost never out loud, unless they have a psychoanalyst or are close to a minister. The psychoanalyst has no answers, but only throws the question back at the questioner; the minister either can't answer, or quotes from the Bible, as if that settles the matter.

Who am I? Why am I here in the world? What does being ‘here’ mean? Is there any reason why I should live a life in which I get depressed, or am uncertain, or feel pain, or move through dense confusion? Albert Camus famously wrote, “The only real philosophical question is suicide.” Does life have any meaning, or should we end suffering by ending our life?

This, I think, is where the “Ninth Elegy” begins: If I could be as serene and unthinking and as unpaired as a green leaf (specifically, the laurel leaf that Rilke notes is a bit darker green than other leaves and that has a serrated edge), why should my being somehow be cast into human form?

It is, I think, a very deep and very serious question. The remainder of the elegy will attempt to answer that question.

Rilke, through a series of three negations, does away with ‘easy’ answers:

Oh *not* because happiness *exists*,
that too-hasty profit snatched from approaching loss.
Not out of curiosity, not as practice for the heart, which
would exist in the laurel too.

We aren't here to be happy, because happiness is something seemingly arithmetical, as if it is a bottom line in a business, the residue of what is left over after loss: we snatch on to happiness too easily and too quickly, as if it somehow justifies all the loss. Nor should we exist just to find out what being us is ("curiosity"), nor should we endure the suffering and hardness of life just so we can exist as a 'better' person, since a leaf exists and does not need to be 'better.'

Be prepared to be blown away.

Emily Dickinson knew poems can do that, for she once wrote in a letter, "If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?" The following lines take the top of my head off, and there will be other lines just as powerful before we get through this poem. This is why we have to be human, and not a leaf, Rilke says:

But because *truly* being here is so much; because everything here apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some strange way keeps calling to us. Us, the most fleeting of all.
Once for each thing. Just once; no more. And we too,
just once. And never again. But to have been
this once, completely, even if only once:
to have been one with the earth, seems beyond undoing.

We are, near the beginning, already at the heart of this poem. All else it tells us will be an elaboration of this stanza. Notice how remarkable Rilke is in describing us – humans – as "the most fleeting of all." He elaborates, addressing time. (Time is the source of the difficulties of being human: the difference between you and I, and that laurel leaf, is that we are conscious, and our consciousness consists of understanding time, which means loss and endings, which means death. Death will enter near the very end of the poem). We think back to the opening of this elegy,

why then
have to be human—and, escaping from fate,
keep longing for fate? . . .

Knowing that we live in time, that death comes to end life, differentiates the human from the ‘merely’ biological, like that laurel leaf.

So the poem poses a second question: why should we humans, in our mortality, with our awareness of mortality, exist? Everything in this stanza is “fleeting:” the “fleeting world” in which we are “the most fleeting of all.” Everything in the world exists in time: time goes ceaselessly onward.

Once for each thing. Just once; no more. And we too,
just once. And never again.

I can ask questions, too, not as well as Rilke but useful nonetheless. Has anyone ever given such a rich sense of temporality, of beginnings and endings and the finality of endings, as Rilke does in these lines? Let me repeat the stanza again. I marvel at it:

But because *truly* being here is so much; because everything here apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some strange way keeps calling to us. Us, the most fleeting of all.
Once for each thing. Just once; no more. And we too,
just once. And never again. But to have been
this once, completely, even if only once:
to have been one with the earth, seems beyond undoing.

We see, of course, that the “Once for each thing. Just once; no more. And we too,
just once. And never again,” is followed by a qualifier: “But.” Rilke insists that having been, once, having been “completely,” (I should note that Rilke not only asks tough questions, and tries to answer them, but that he is devoted to living fully and completely, whatever that means), is enough: it “seems beyond undoing.”

Why?

To answer that question, we will have to read through the entire elegy.

But before we do that, let me refer to a previous poem in the series, the “Seventh Elegy.” In that elegy Rilke asserts that the world is ours, that we have made it ours by bringing what is outer, within. (He will assert the same thing in

this elegy). In the course of doing that, he praises what we might call ‘pure Being,’ something that he recognizes occurs remarkably rarely. When a century before Rilke Wordsworth wrote, “The world is too much with us, late and soon/Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers,” he was voicing a critique of life, and modern life in particular, that Rilke would very much agree too.

Here is a remarkable passage from the “Seventh Elegy.” In it, Rilke speaks of prostitutes on the streets of a city, prostitutes of the most destitute and desperate sort. Yet even they, who seem from outside to be human detritus, cast aside by society and history, had a moment of pure being. A time, however short (and likely it was short) “when you were granted a sense/ of being. Everything. Your veins flowed with being.”

Truly being here is glorious. Even *you* knew it,
you girls who seemed to be lost, to go under –, in the filthiest
streets of the city, festering there, or wide open
for garbage. For each of you had an hour, or perhaps
not even an hour, a barely measurable time
between two moments –, when you were granted a sense
of being. Everything. Your veins flowed with being.

There are times when what Rilke writes seems revelatory. This passage is one of those times. That life can be full of being! That full being is the peak of existence, not the moment of transcendent imagining, not the sexual climax, not the achievement of a long-sought desire. When I read these lines I think of a poet I have never seen linked with Rilke, Wallace Stevens² In “Of Bright & Blue Birds&

² His poem, “Of Bright & Blue Birds & the Gala Sun,” at moments evades my understanding. But when he says,

For a moment they are gay and are a part/
Of an element, the exactest element for us,
In which we pronounce joy like a word of our own./

It is there, being imperfect, and with these things/
And erudite in happiness, with nothing learned,
That we are joyously ourselves and we think/

Without the labor of thought, in that element,
And we feel, in a way apart, for a moment, as if/
There was a bright *scienza* outside of ourselves,
A gaiety that is being, not merely knowing/

I think he is very close to Rilke.

the Gala Sun,” Stevens is ‘longing,’ something Rilke does at the start of the “Duino Elegies.” But Rilke leaves this longing behind in the final lines of the “Seventh Elegy” when he insists,

Don’t think I’m wooing,
Angel, and even if I were – you wouldn’t come. For my
Appeal is always full of ‘Away’!

Stevens wants – oh, so poignantly, and this in a poet that many readers regard as distant and philosophical -- “to pronounce joy as a word of our own,” he wants to be “joyously ourselves” and “think without the labor of thought.” What he wants to do is to *be*, to be fully and beyond – or beneath – thought. He wants, in Rilke’s words, to be in that place where “your veins flowed with being.”

The “Ninth Elegy” is about Rilke’s discovery that this place is in our physical world, our world of time and mortality. It may seem surprising to those of you reading this that Rilke needed to ‘discover’ that existence is wonderful, for (I sense myself sounding like a Rilke acolyte here) don’t we know this already?

I think we don’t. We too often elide an awareness of being. We think ‘well, we exist, so there is nothing further to think about.’ “To be in any form, what is that?”³ Walt Whitman asks with great insistence in “Song of Myself.” Rilke is prepared to answer Whitman’s question, one we so often take for granted as answered. So let’s return to the passage we were considering before I branched off into the “Seventh Elegy,” Wallace Stevens, and Walt Whitman. It is so remarkable, such a high point in the writing by human beings, that it bears repeating a third time:

But because *truly* being here is so much; because everything here
apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some strange way
keeps calling to us. Us, the most fleeting of all.
Once for each thing. Just once; no more. And we too,
just once. And never again. But to have been

³ To be in any form, what is that?/
If nothing lay more developed the quahaug and its callous shell were enough./
Mine is no callous shell,/

I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,/

They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me./

I merely stir, press, feel with my fingers, and am happy,/

To touch my person to some one else's is about as much as I can stand./

this once, completely, even if only once:
to have been one with the earth, seems beyond undoing.

What we cannot fail but notice is how temporal the world is: everything in the world is fleeting, and “us, most fleeting of all.” What is repeated is that we live, and all life forms live, singularly; that our living is just “once” is repeated five times. There is no return: this ‘once’ is final, something twice insisted upon (“no more...never again.”) Perhaps at no place in the history of literature has our existence as transitory been emphasized as insistently.

The whole of the “Ninth Elegy” is here, but it slips by so quickly, so almost without our awareness, that we can be pardoned for not noticing. The stanza starts with “*truly* being here” and rushes forward towards that fleetingness, that sense that everything *is* just once, that we likely ignore what will be highlighted later: “because everything here apparently needs us.” Oh, we do see that, but it is overwhelmed by the oddity of the transitory world needing that which is most transitory, human beings. It does not help that the remarkable stanza ends where it began, with “truly being here is so much:”

But to have been
this once, completely, even if only once:
to have been one with the earth, seems beyond undoing.

There is in this celebration of being the strange contradiction that being here only “once...seems beyond undoing.” How can Rilke proclaim the transitory as permanent, even if he qualifies that it is only ‘seeming’ to be so?

We are at the heart of the poem, although the illumination that this is the case will come later. So let us bear in mind that in this early stanza, the things of the world apparently need us, and that our transitory being “seems beyond undoing.”

Before we leave this stanza, let me ask you to do something I believe I have never asked before in these emails. Read the stanza out loud, wherever you are sitting. The repetitions, the insistence on being and its singularity, are stunning: there is an almost perfect consonance between what the stanza tells us, and the way it insists upon itself in the telling. Yes, it is there in the German. It even comes through in this excellent translation. The lines, the words, the stresses, insist upon both being and singularity.

The elegy proceeds. It has a long way to go even though, as I have just claimed, it has already told us what it has to say.

We desire being, as Stevens does in “Of Bright & Blue Birds,” and we try to achieve it, contain it, become it. To hold on to it, that which he has already declared in the “Seventh Elegy” cannot be done, is impossible both because full consciousness is rare and because we live in time, which rushes onward:

And so we keep pressing on, trying to achieve it,
trying to hold it firmly in our simple hands,
in our overcrowded gaze, in our speechless heart.
Trying to become it.

It seems there is not much to gloss on, here. We want being. We want to hold it.

We are in a lyric poem, one about ‘being,’ and yet that does not, for Rilke, leave the social world we inhabit out of bounds: no, nor social criticism. I am often astonished at how poets, in this case a poet ninety years ago, prefigured the world of the internet we live in. Not its electronic connections, but the plethora of images it bombards us with: the web, and television, and the apps on our smartphones. All is image, and that renders us, according to Rilke, without adequate speech, cut off from ‘being’ – whatever that is. These words go by so fast we hardly notice. Still, we should notice them: “in our overcrowded gaze, in our speechless heart.”

Should we achieve being, we can’t hold it, as the lines above tell us – nor can we share it with another. All we can take from life is a “heaviness.”

–Whom can we give it to? We would
hold on to it all, forever . . . Ah, but what can we take along
into that other realm? Not the art of looking,
which is learned so slowly, and nothing that happened here. Nothing.
The sufferings, then. And above all, the heaviness,
and the long experience of love,– just what is wholly
unsayable. But later, among the stars,
what good is it–*they* are *better* as they are: unsayable..

I think it is not hard to imagine what the ‘heaviness’ is – the accumulation of lived experience we all have. Not, sayable, “unsayable,” yet always there. Our experience of suffering, maybe our experience of love. We can feel what life has been, and what remains of our moments of being, but we cannot say anything about it. Even after we die, when we enter the realm of the universe, what we have experienced of being is “unsayable.” (Yes, he repeats that word, “unsayable.”)

Now Rilke will tell us a small story, a story that illustrates the truth he is ferreting out, the truth that it will turn out is the truth of both poetry and existence. The story works as a metaphor: it recounts something small that is illustrative of a larger truth about life, about experience, about being – and about language.

For when the traveler returns from the mountain-slopes into the valley,
he brings, not a handful of earth, unsayable to others, but instead
some word he has gained, some pure word, the yellow and blue
gentian. Perhaps we are *here* in order to say: house,
bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window–
at most: column, tower. . . . But to *say* them, you must understand,
oh to say them *more* intensely than the Things themselves
ever dreamed of existing.

He uses the word “‘unsayable’ and then goes on to insist that we say things. (Note: the word “unsayable will recur in this poem.) Isn’t this a contradiction⁴? Well, not really. Being is “unsayable,” Rilke has told us, but things are not. So we must say words about things⁵. When we climb a mountain and return from the heights to the valley, what do we bring back? Not a “handful of earth” from an alpine meadow, for that would be “unsayable,” (yes, he uses the word the third time) but the name of a flower: “the yellow and blue/ gentian.”

4 Not that it would matter if it were: one of the places where Whitman’s “Song of Myself” soars is near its end, when the speaker of the poem realizes he is saying something completely opposite to what he has said before.

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

Words to live by.

⁵ In *New Poems*, published in 1907 and in a second volume in 1908, Rilke wrote what he famously called *Dinggedichte*, Thing-Poems. He looked with great focus and intensity at things – at a caged panther in a zoo, at a photograph of his father, at a swan, at himself reflected in the mirror. The two volumes were the result, in part, of his long ‘apprenticeship’ to the sculptor Auguste Rodin, whom he served as a personal secretary. What he learned from Rodin was the need for work: beauty and creativity is something we must labor at, even though he would discover years later that the *Duino Elegies* and the *Sonnets to Orpheus* came to him in storms of creativity. Still, what preceded them was years of thinking, reflecting, saving up his sense of ‘being.’ And, just as important, he learned from Rodin that sculptures were things – so were poems – and that just as sculpture were the result of looking hard at the things of this world, so poems must be. It seems to me intensely ironic that the insight in the poem we are reading is the return of something he discovered and knew years before. But the return is marked by a new intensity, a new understanding. So although the profound insight is of something he knew earlier, it is also something entirely different. (See, in writing about Rilke one begins to sound like him, too. ‘The same, but different: a deepening that makes everything entirely new.’

Back to beginnings, to language as naming. What Adam did in the garden. Rilke tells us that what we retain of being, what we convey of being, is nouns. The very *thinginess* of things. “House,/ bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window–/ at most: column, tower.” Rilke is at once profound and simple. We can name things. That is what remains of being, and that is what we can convey to one another. That there are things in our world. And that we can name them

It sounds simple but it isn’t. Rilke says that such saying is not a simple act, but one of great intensity. We don’t just say “house” or “fruit-tree” or “gentian.” We say these things, name these things, with an intensity that is beyond the everyday.

. . . . But to *say* them, you must understand,
oh to say them *more* intensely than the Things themselves
ever dreamed of existing.

Let’s not move along too fast: we have here is a second repetition of one of the central visions of the poem. The first time it slid by, when that all-so-powerful third stanza insisted we are here in the world just “once.” You probably remember I wrote that we had a tendency to slip by the phrase “everything here/ apparently needs us, this fleeing world, which keeps calling to us.” Now we have the theme again in the statement the speaker makes that things need to be said “*more* intensely than the Things themselves/ ever dreamed of existing.”⁶

This point is hammered home:

Isn’t the secret intent
of this taciturn earth, when it forces lovers together,
that inside their boundless emotion all things may shudder with joy?
Threshold: what it means for two lovers
to be wearing down, imperceptibly, the ancient threshold of their
door–

⁶ I’ve just finished reading a long biography of Brahms. He understood, as Beethoven did before him, that the repetition of motifs can be the basis of structure in music. Such repetitions create a form that impresses us more deeply than any other. Repetition gives structure, it creates form. In this poem, both in narrower passages and in the larger domain, repetitions don’t just tie things together, they provide the astonishing sense of ‘form’ we get as we read this poem. Gertrude Stein famously said to Hemingway, “Ernest, remarks are not literature.” I think the repetitions in this poem elevate it from what we might otherwise take it to be, a series of remarks. It is not the development of an argument in the “Ninth Elegy,” that finally convinces us, but the formal coherence, that what the poet is saying is far, far different than what we hear in ordinary conversation.

they too, after the many who came before them
and before those to come. . . . , lightly.

Hard lines. I have read them many, many times, and mostly they remain beyond my comprehension. Not the first sentence, which I think I understand. As lovers come together, when they shudder as they ‘connect’ in sexual intercourse, it may be that all things ‘shudder with joy’ because connectedness is possible. Making connections – lovers with one another, human consciousness with this world of things it exists in – is what existence promises.

But then, there is the business of thresholds. What can these four lines mean?

Too often readers of poems search for ‘meanings,’ something I have all too often found unproductive. ‘What do poems say?’ I ask myself: not, ‘What do poems mean?’ And yet here, confronted by these lines, I want to know what they mean.

So let me back up – I am not being rhetorical here, I am advising myself as I write – to see what these four lines ‘say.’ That there are thresholds⁷, that thresholds wear down from use (as the threshold of a house wears down after years of people entering over it). The “door” between individuated selves, the boundary which separates me from you, my self from your self, is overstepped physically as two bodies become one in the physical act of ‘making love.’ Perhaps all boundaries can be worn down as the overstepping of boundaries takes place, again and again? Maybe making love, in the past, and in the present, and as the possibility of the future, means that not only lovers for one another, but things “imperceptibly...lightly” are less separate from consciousness?

I am not sure that this makes sense – but then, if we look to what Rilke is ‘saying’ and not what the lines ‘mean,’ perhaps he does not have to make sense in some rational and explanatory fashion. Maybe that boundaries can be overstepped, that each overstepping makes boundaries a little less distinct: maybe this is what we need to take away from these admittedly difficult lines.

*Here is the time for the sayable, here is its homeland.
Speak and bear witness.*

These two lines are the center of the poem. Here, in this world, this place where we have bodies and are surrounded by objects, where consciousness resides

⁷ What is a threshold? A strip of stone or wood that serves as the base or bottom of a doorway. Something that needs to be crossed over as one enters a room or a house.

even though consciousness is neither a body nor an object, where every thing is profoundly temporal, maybe in this world what counts is that consciousness can be made manifest. Consciousness takes form as it is enunciated: we live in a place where – quite literally, according to what Rilke is telling us – things can be said. Let me repeat, for this is not just a vague abstraction but for the poet who is writing a great truth: things can be said. As in, ‘things.’ That is why the first line of this stanza is followed by an imperative. A command: “Speak and bear witness.”

More than ever
the Things that we might experience are vanishing, for
what crowds them out and replaces them is an imageless act.
An act under a shell, which easily cracks open as soon as
the business inside outgrows it and seeks new limits.

Whew. We are in a realm where the poetic language of the “Ninth Elegy” seems to give way to prose, and kind of difficult prose at that: “more than ever the Things that we might experience are vanishing, for what crowds them out and replaces them is an imageless act.” This could be a poorly written sociological article. We fail to recognize the world we live in because we are consumed by acting, not observing: We do not see (“imageless”) because we are so constantly doing. Remember, long back, in the third stanza Rilke had spoken about “our overcrowded gaze, our speechless heart?” It has returned here, prosaically, in a criticism of marketplace capitalism: consumed with product-things, we do not see the wonders which surround us⁸. Our obsession with actions, with relating to objects in our ‘modern’ fashion, grows ever larger, leaving us and our deepest needs behind: “An act under a shell, which easily cracks open as soon as/the business inside outgrows it and seeks new limits.”

Enough of prose. Rilke soars in the ensuing four lines.

Between the hammers our heart
endures, just as the tongue does
between the teeth and, despite that,
still is able to praise.

Our selves, our elemental selves (our hearts, as well as our need to “Speak and bear witness”), endure, even in the modern world of buying and selling, of the marketplace, of objectifying (which is vastly different from encountering physical objects). The heart and the tongue endure, even as the modern world batters us.

⁸ Remember: “house,/ bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window”? Remember, too, Wordsworth’s “The world is too much with us; late and soon/Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;-- / Little we see in Nature that is ours.”

There is a wonderful doubleness in these lines, for the heart itself “hammers” and yet the heart endures between the hammers; just as the tongue in one’s mouth endures between the devouring teeth. Even as we are assaulted by modernity, by a world in which everything is increasingly objectified, we are “still able to praise.”

This dual image, of the heart and the tongue enduring between the assaulting hammers and the devouring teeth, sets up the next lengthy stanza. For the heart and tongue are still, Rilke claims, “able to praise.” But praise what? He is about to tell us.

Praise this world to the angel, not the unsayable one,
you can’t impress *him* with glorious emotion; in the universe
where he feels more powerfully, you are a novice.

Praise our world, the world we live in, the world of houses and bridges and fountains and gates and pitchers and fruit trees and windows. The angels of the “First Elegy,” who would likely not hear Rilke if he cried out in anguish, return here. For angels cannot hear our cries of pain – they exist so far above our world of suffering that they are uninterested. And angels know so much about perfection and beauty – that is the sphere in which they exist – that we have nothing to teach them.

But what angels do not know is the world of objects in which we live, the physical world⁹. It is not emotion that the angels lack, but things. So, as Rilke counsels, “Praise this world to the angels.”

⁹ Let us again turn to Wallace Stevens. Stevens understood what Rilke is saying, here, with a depth of understanding unmatched by any other modern poet. “The greatest poverty is not to live/ in a physical world,” he proclaimed in “Esthetique du Mal.” In “Large Red Man Reading” Stevens wrote his own poem of the ‘disembodied,’ calling them ghosts and not angels. In Stevens’ poem the “ghosts” of the departed return to the world from the perfections of the afterlife so they can re-encounter the physical world:

There were those that returned to hear him read from the poem of life/
Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips among them./
They were those that would have wept to step barefoot into reality,/

That would have wept and been happy, have shivered in the frost/
And cried out to feel it again.../

It is significant that in this poem the way the “ghosts” can encounter physical reality, the objects of our world, be they pans or pots or tulips or the ground beneath our feet, is through speech, through the poem

He goes on, and here I think it is significant that Rilke refers to made things, things that are created through the elementary yet paradigmatic arts of making pots and making rope. Crafts. As, he will contend, the height of saying (poetry) is a craft.

So show him
something simple which, formed over generations,
lives as our own, near our hand and within our gaze.
Tell him of Things. He will stand astonished; as *you* stood
by the ropemaker in Rome or the potter along the Nile.

I am not sure these lines need any gloss, any explanation, any preparation so that we may approach them. What defines human beings? The things we make in this world, of this world. Things made of mud and fiber. And, by extension, things made of words.

Show him how happy a Thing can be, how innocent and ours,
how even lamenting grief purely decides to take form,
serves as a Thing, or dies into a Thing–, and blissfully
escapes far beyond the violin.–

No sentimentality here, to begin with the last phrase. No violins calling on us with romantic slush. “How innocent and ours:” just the thing itself, ours because we have made it, innocent because it has no ‘higher purpose.’ The sentence rolls on: even grief becomes a thing, a made thing, as it is given shape¹⁰ – one thinks back two lines, to the potter molding clay, the roper plaiting rope.

The lines turn back to what had been proclaimed before, although he says what he has to say with more authority now. Pardon me for repeating lines we encountered in stanza three:

that the ‘large red man reading’ recites in this lyric by Stevens: they “returned to hear him read from the poem of life.”

I should note that, contrary to Rilke, Stevens proposes that ghosts – not angels, I concede – do not feel earthly passions, and so need to hear about earthly things so that they can feel those passions. Rilke explicitly denies the connection to passions...

¹⁰ At times of intense grief – mourning at the time of death comes to mind – we as humans try to give form to what is otherwise both incomprehensible and overwhelming. Wakes, funerals, sitting *shiva*, *homa* fire rituals, bathing a body and wrapping it in a simple white *kaftan*: all give a shape and form to what is beyond comprehension. These rituals are forms, giving shape to our grief.

But because *truly* being here is so much; because everything here apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some strange way keeps calling to us. Us, the most fleeting of all.
Once for each thing. Just once; no more.

Just as, in music, themes return and give coherence and form to what we hear, so in this poem the theme of transience returns in these lines:

And these Things,
which live by perishing, know you are praising them; transient,
they look to us for deliverance: us, the most transient of all.

What the things want is to endure, or be captured in something enduring. What they want is to be changed from the physicality of things into the condition of consciousness. Yes, consciousness is momentary, and dies with the individual. But words, having been uttered, have a permanence neither we nor objects can obtain.

They want us to change them, utterly, in our invisible heart,
within—oh endlessly—within us! Whoever we may be at last.

Again, we return to the beginning of the poem, to the strange line near the start of stanza three: “because everything here/ apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some strange way/ keeps calling to us.” Now, having worked our way forward, having listened to Rilke, we may have a greater understanding of what he is so passionately speaking of.

I find these lines immensely strange and immensely challenging. What ‘things’ want is to be changed into consciousness. This is the desire of the physical world, the world to which we almost never – never? – ascribe an ‘innerness’ or the desire that can reside within innerness. Rilke presents the need of things themselves as a need of secular transubstantiation, which in the Catholic Mass is that moment in which the ordinary objects of bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ. Here, objects, things, the entire physical world, cries out to be changed into consciousness. As he will shortly ask, with great intensity, “What, if not transformation, is your urgent command?”

Why are we here, he opening of the poem asked? Why not just be a leaf, and so escape suffering and the foreknowledge of death? That was a serious question. Here, and to me it is a great surprise, is the answer. We are here to turn the world into spirit, to turn objects into consciousness. We cannot just pick up a

handful of earth: we must say, in words, in speech, “the yellow and blue gentian.” We are here to transform things into consciousness, the physical world into words.

I cannot finally determine whether Rilke is right. I do know that what he tells us is a challenge. We are here, we exist, to be conscious, and to turn what we are conscious of into language. (Or pots, or rope.) We are here, we exist, to “speak and bear witness.” To turn what we encounter into language, and so fulfill the need of “Things” to become consciousness and to be made manifest in language. Even if we, the speakers, are ourselves transient. “Whoever we may be at last.”

Whoever we may be, we are the agents of transformation. His recognition is as remarkable as it is, well, heroic.

The penultimate stanza is an encomium to existence. The poem may start with the question of why we exist: it ends with a recognition that we exist to turn the temporal, “*Here* is the time for the *sayable*, *here* is its homeland,” into language and into consciousness.

Earth, isn't this what you want: to arise within us,
invisible? Isn't it your dream
to be wholly invisible someday?—O Earth: invisible!
What, if not transformation, is your urgent command?

The outer world wants to be transformed into the inner world, object into consciousness, physical world into language. It is a strange and remarkable approach to existence. Rilke embraces it with a sense of discovery and finally affirmation. To the great question he began with, ‘Why be me and not merely an object,’ Rilke finds an answer, and is deeply grateful.

Is his answer right? Maybe the answer is not as important as the effort. If one of the objects of poems is to enlarge us, to break the barriers which limit our understanding, then this poem stands almost supreme.

Finally, then, he affirms that he understands why he exists, why he is a being with consciousness and not just a laurel leaf.

The following lines are a love poem to the world in which we live. They begin with an invocation to his “dearest.” “Earth, my dearest.” Filled with joy, he proclaims he does not need the reawakenings and beauties of spring to set his blood racing, his heart to affirming. So often tormented in this life (and in the elegies which precede this one) by pain and doubt, he now accepts and celebrates

his existence. More passionately uplifting lines than these which follow have, perhaps, never been written:

Earth, my dearest, I will. Oh believe me, you no longer
need your springtimes to win me over—one of them,
ah, even one, is already too much for my blood.
Unspeakably I have belonged to you, from the first.
You were always right, and your holiest inspiration
is our intimate companion, Death.

That reference to death? It is the ultimate sign of our transience, and so – having accepted transience as the place where object can become consciousness and the flesh can be made word (oppositely to the great Christian parable of the word made flesh) – it confirms Rilke’s existence as meaningful. Only in a place of transience can transient things be turned into language.

Death for Rilke has no terrors.

All that remains is for him to return to the existence he questioned in the opening lines of the “Ninth Elegy.”

Look, I am living. On what? Neither childhood nor future
grows any smaller Superabundant being
wells up in my heart.

He is living.

There is something enormously personal, entirely human, in his realization: “Look, I am living.” He is filled with being, with an overabundance of being, with “superabundant being.” He rushes to assure himself, and us, that to be does not diminish the past nor close off the future. To be, to live, is and can be sufficient.

That ‘heart-welling’ at the end of the elegy is, I think, not just celebration, not just the love song he has just declaimed to the earth, but something even deeper, if greater depth is possible: It is gratitude. He is thankful to be alive.

This poem, which began in questioning and doubt, ends in celebration, love and gratitude. Rilke would likely not have appreciated my ending with Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead, but here it is anyway: “What a strange long trip it’s been.”