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RILKE  
ON LOVE AND OTHER DIFFICULTIES

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RAINER MARIA RILKE

In Translations by M. D. Herter Norton

*Letters to a Young Poet*

*Sonnets to Orpheus*

*Wartime Letters to Rainer Maria Rilke*

*Translations from the Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*

*The Lay of the Love and Death of Cornet Christopher Rilke*

*The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*

*Stories of God*

Translated by Jane Bannard Greene and M. D. Herter Norton

*Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke. Volume One, 1892–1910*

*Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke. Volume Two, 1910–1926*

Translated by David Young

*Duino Elegies*

In Various Translations

*Rilke on Love and Other Difficulties. Translations and*

*Considerations of Rainer Maria Rilke*

Compiled by John J. L. Mood

Translated by Edward Snow and Michael Winkler

*Diaries of a Young Poet*

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RILKE  
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Translations and Considerations of  
Rainer Maria Rilke



John J. L. Mood

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To S.R.H. & F.W.P.

For S.L.E.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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All poetic selections included here are my translations from the definitive collection, *Sämtliche Werke* (Insel-Verlag), vol. I (1955), vol. II (1956). In the German text, one will find occasional brackets. These indicate words or lines later canceled by Rilke.

Some of my translations, as well as earlier versions and portions thereof, have appeared in the following journals: *New York Quarterly*, *Philosophy Today*, *Encounter*, *Bucks County Gazette*, and *South*.



*If only we arrange our life according  
to that principle which counsels us  
that we must always hold to the difficult,  
then that which now still seems to us  
the most alien will become what we  
most trust and find most faithful.*

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I. PROLOGUE

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## PROLOGUE

It is my conviction that, by any measure, the two greatest writers of the twentieth century are James Joyce (1882–1941) and Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), neither of whom came close to winning the Nobel Prize for Literature. I mention that last fact because I too find it difficult to say anything appropriate about either of them, though no doubt for different reasons than those of the Nobel Committee. Frequently it takes time to appreciate more fully and appropriately a great writer's work. In fact, the closer I am to a writer's work and the more I love it, just so the more difficult is it for me to speak of it. Because of Rilke's importance to my own biography, I find it most difficult of all to speak of him. But as there is a time to be silent, so there is a time to speak. And I have become increasingly compelled to speak Rilke's work. After a decade and a half of living with it, speaking that work has become an inner necessity for me.

This conflict between the difficulty of speaking and the necessity for doing so only slowly produced words. The first result for me was a selection dealing with love from Rilke's letters. I arranged these selections into what seemed to me some order under the lackadaisical title "Notes on Love," mimeographed it and gave copies to friends, students, loved ones, and others. I

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have no idea how many copies of it I handed out over the period of nearly a decade. But those were Rilke's words, not mine, though my own sense of Rilke and my own sensibility in general surely manifested themselves in the selection and arrangement of the essay.

The second result was occasional reference to Rilke and translation of lines of his poetry in articles of mine on other topics. It was as though I could only speak his work indirectly, in other contexts. This too continued over the years.

Then, some time back, I suddenly found myself feverishly translating some of the last poems of Rilke. I spent nearly a month at that task, which overrode all my other responsibilities at the time. Halfway through that seizure I realized what had precipitated it: I had just finished teaching, for the second or third time, Rilke's profound and beautiful novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. But the seizure soon passed, I put the poems away, and there was another pause, another silence.

Finally, while recently rereading some of Rilke again (an almost constant activity of mine), the necessity became overpowering and I had to speak. This book is the result. It includes all the previously mentioned material, somewhat revised, plus further translations and short essays. I am not satisfied with it. My translations are, of course, inadequate. My own words seem partial. I have not found it possible to speak the deeper dimensions of my sense of Rilke, which is somehow very close to my ownmost biography and being. Here are only fragments, portions—emphasizing elements from my own experience of Rilke which seem to have been neglected by others or which are less private favorite moments of mine.

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However inadequate, these words are offered in love to other Rilke-lovers, who no doubt have their own more private and secret moments, as do I—moments of awesome mystery, impossible to speak. It is for the possibility of further such moments, full of serenity and dread, that this book is presented.

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II. LETTERS ON LOVE



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## INTRODUCTION

I first made the following selection almost ten years ago. Around 1960 I discovered Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and immediately became a militant feminist, as we were called in those days. At the same time, I had been reading Rilke casually for several years. That reading became more serious and comprehensive, and as it did I became increasingly aware that Rilke had not only anticipated Mlle. de Beauvoir by fifty years but had also gone far, far beyond her, and all the other women's liberation advocates, as they are now called, as well. As good as her monumental study was, it stayed finally at the level of a socio-political-physiological analysis of Western woman. And it was finally a masculine book with the masculine goal of freedom and equality as its primary focus. Which is not to gainsay either its contemporary relevance or final importance. But I have an incurably metaphysical mind, and I was not finally satisfied with her book. It unwittingly raised more questions than it answered, and the questions raised seemed somehow the deeper ones: questions of the ontology of the sexes, of what finally and at the deepest level the feminine is, of what being-human is, of what, most importantly, love is.

On the other hand, Rilke, as I discovered more and more,

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immediately went to these deepest levels, especially of the mythic nature of the feminine and of love, while not relinquishing the insights of the feminists themselves (among whom one of the earliest important figures, Ellen Key, was his friend, and among whom one of the greatest and most fantastic and, be it said, most neurotic, exemplars, Lou Andreas-Salomé, was his lover as well as lifelong friend). His working toward love at these depths was poetic, profound, and above all thoroughly radical. One of the amazing things about Rilke is that he started at the place where most of us at best manage finally to end up. An example of the radical nature of his inquiry is his almost by-the-way rejection of all conventionality of any kind, whether moral or "in the ordinary sense immoral." As he softly but strikingly said, "In the depths all becomes law." Other examples are his casual comments on happiness, his sense of the current absence of the gods and their eventual return, and his understanding of solitude and the provisional nature of being human.

This process of exploring love and what was happening with it in our time, and especially as manifested in the feminine, resulted in some surprising things regarding the masculine as well, to say nothing of the relation between art and sex or of the sexual experience of the young. And all of this was done through the most beautiful and provocative metaphors, primarily those of growth and of sex. It should be emphasized that Rilke's language is thoroughly sensual throughout all his writings. There is probably no more sensual poet in any language. All of his metaphors, his "figures," have deliberate sexual undertones (or overtones). The same holds true for his letters. Rilke's justly famed deep spirituality is rooted finally and forever in the earth, in the senses, in sex. In fact, a close reading will manifest a surprising relationship

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toward sex between Rilke and Norman Mailer, whose approach, especially in *The Prisoner of Sex*, is ostensibly so different.

To share my regard for this dimension of Rilke, I prepared, as I have said, the following selection from his voluminous letters. Letter writing was Rilke's mode of exploration during the long periods between his well-known great creative bursts of poetry. And because he was not a systematic thinker (but was a profound one for all that), his writings on love and the feminine were scattered. I have brought them together here and arranged them in what is, I think, a unified essay—suggestive and subtle, but with a definite progression nonetheless. I am convinced that these words of Rilke are of crucial importance for us who have, in the words of someone (I forget who), passed from puritanism to promiscuity without ever having experienced genuine love, *erōs*, deep sensuality, what Suzanne Lilar (an unjustly ignored feminine thinker) called sacral love.

This is not a complete selection of Rilke's writings on the topic by any means, but other passages could not be easily fitted into the unified essay. One such passage might be quoted here because of its importance and by the way of introduction to the essay:

*So I began to read [an essay on love], yesterday, but did not get very far. What is this curious mixture of virtuosity and incapacity they call by that name here (and cannot mention often enough)? On the one hand the most exquisite skill, on the other everlasting frustration. Do you know what I felt like, leafing through Plato's Symposium for the first time in a long while? When I first read it, I dwelt alone in Rome in a tiny house deep in an ancient park (the same house where I began Brigge, as yet unaware of what was to become of it). My friend, I*

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*grasped one thing then, predisposed as I may have been—there is no beauty in Eros; and when Socrates said so and in his cautious way waited for his younger and more volatile conversational antagonist to block all other paths, one by one, leaving but the one way open—that Eros is not beautiful—Socrates himself then walking that path toward his god, serene and pure in heart—how then my innermost nature took fire that Eros could not be fair! I saw him just as Socrates had invoked him, lean and hard and always a little out of breath, sleepless, troubled day and night about the two between whom he trod, to and fro, hither and yon, ceaselessly accosted by both: yes, that was Eros. Truly, how they mistook him who thought he was fair, envied his soft life. Ah, he was slender and tanned and covered with the dust of the road, but there was no peace for him amid the two of them (for when, I say, is there not distance left between them?); and when he came he spoke with fervor of the other's beauty, teasing each heart to grow fairer, goading it on. Surely there is much in the book—we do not grasp it yet: once upon a time it was grasped—who lost it? How do we spend the centuries? Where is he among us who dare speak of love?*

*Verily, nature speaks not of love; nature bears it in her heart and none knows the heart of nature. Verily, God bears love in the world, yet the world overwhelms us. Verily, the mother speaks not of love, for it is borne for her within the child, and the child destroys it. Verily, the spirit speaks not of love, for the spirit thrusts it into the future, and the future is remote. Verily, the lover speaks not of love, for to the lover it comes in sorrow, and sorrow sheds tears.*

Who has yet answered these questions? Who has *thought*, seriously, that there is no beauty in Eros? And especially, who dares speak at all of love? Rilke did—and if he found no final

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answers, he unquestionably gestured toward some hitherto unexplored but increasingly fruitful paths.

A final word: most of the following was written when Rilke was only in his late twenties; and, even more surprising, the first sentence of it was written when Rilke was forty-five.

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## RILKE'S LETTERS ON LOVE

**I**tell you that I have a long way to go before I am—where one begins. . . .

You are so young, so before all beginning, and I want to beg you, as much as I can, to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the *questions themselves* like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

Resolve to be always beginning—to be a beginner!

**H**ere, in the love which, with an intolerable mixture of contempt, desire, and curiosity, they call "sensual," here indeed are to be found the worst results of that vilification of earthly life which Christianity has felt obliged to engage in. Here everything is distorted and disowned, although it is from this deepest of all events that we come forth, and have ourselves the centre of our ecstasies in it. It seems to me, if I may say so, more and more incomprehensible that a doctrine which puts us in the wrong in

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*that* matter, where the whole creation enjoys its most blissful right, should be able, if not anywhere to prove its validity, at least to assert itself over a wide area.

Why, I ask you, when people want to help us, who are so often helpless, why do they leave us in the lurch just there, at the root of all experience? Anyone who would stand by us *there* could rest satisfied that we should ask nothing further from him. For the help which he imparted to us there would grow of itself with our life, becoming, together with it, greater and stronger. And would never fail. Why are we not set in the midst of what is most mysteriously ours? How we have to creep round about it and get into it in the end; like burglars and thieves, we get into our own beautiful sex, in which we lose our way and knock ourselves and stumble and finally rush out of it again, like men caught transgressing, into the twilight of Christianity. Why, if guilt or sin had to be invented because of the inner tension of the spirit, why did they not attach it to some other part of our body, why did they let it fall on that part, waiting till it dissolved in our pure source and poisoned and muddied it? Why have they made our sex homeless, instead of making it the place for the festival of our competency?

Very well, I will allow that it should not belong to us, who are not able to answer for and administer such inexhaustible bliss. But why do we not belong to God from *this* point?

A churchman would point out to me that there is marriage, although he is not unaware of the state of affairs in respect of that institution. It does not help either to put the will to propagation within the sphere of grace—my sex is not directed only toward posterity, it is the secret of my own life—and it is only, it seems, because it may not occupy the central place there, that so many people have thrust it to the edge, and thereby lost their

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balance. What good is it all? The terrible untruthfulness and uncertainty of our age has its roots in the refusal to acknowledge the happiness of sex, in this peculiarly mistaken guilt, which constantly increases, separating us from the rest of nature, even from the child, although his, the child's, innocence does not consist at all in the fact that he does not know sex, so to say—but that incomprehensible happiness, which awakens for us at *one* place deep within the pulp of a close embrace, is still present anonymously in every part of his body. In order to describe the peculiar situation of our sensual appetite we should have to say: Once we were children in every part, now we are that in one part only. But if there were only one among us for whom this was a certainty and who was capable of providing proof of it, why do we allow it to happen that generation after generation awakens to consciousness beneath the rubble of Christian prejudices and moves like the seemingly dead in the darkness, in a most narrow space between sheer abnegations!?

**I** hold this to be the highest task of a bond between two people: that each should stand guard over the solitude of the other. For, if it lies in the nature of indifference and of the crowd to recognize no solitude, then love and friendship are there for the purpose of continually providing the opportunity for solitude. And only those are the true sharings which rhythmically interrupt periods of deep isolation. . . .

**I** am of the opinion that "marriage" as such does not deserve as much emphasis as it has acquired through the conventional



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