THE SECULAR ANGELS: A STUDY OF RILKE

ELIZABETH JENNINGS

AT a superficial glance there seems to be little in common either between Rilke and the Christian mystics or between Rilke and so-called 'religious' poets. The majority of the latter, if they have not been orthodox Christians, have usually employed many of the Christian symbols even though they have sometimes wrenched them into odd and surprising shapes. Such writers have often expressed their personal visions in terms of Christian symbolism and at the same time have formulated or re-interpreted those symbols for their own ends.

Rilke, however, does not fit into this category; indeed, he does not fit into any category at all. He stands quite alone. There are many reasons for this isolation but one overriding one. It is this: Rilke's poetry was for him a way of life. It was visionary, philosophical, emotional, sensuous and abstract, all at the same time. His poetry *was* his life, not simply in the sense that he was a supremely dedicated artist, but also because it was the only medium in which reality, for him, existed. Words did not formulate a previously articulated philosophy or vision of life; on the contrary, the vision, the ideas, only had existence in the medium of words. Desperate and painful as Rilke's poetic struggles often were, he never for a moment doubted the power of poetry. In his view, nothing was inexpressible. If reality was not to be found in words and images, then reality was at fault, not language.

From this august conception of poetry spring all the contradictions in Rilke's life and thought—the struggle for an autonomous existence, the narcissism that sometimes overshadowed his most apparently objective inquiries, the opposition between subject and object, the mutilation of accepted beliefs in order to refashion an entirely personal world-picture. These were the problems which Rilke made for himself by leaning so heavily upon language, not only as a vehicle of truth but also as the only valid *approach* to truth.

Both on the level of day-to-day living, that world of 'anger and telephones' as E. M. Forster has called it, and on the level of

metaphysics and philosophy, Rilke's beliefs are untenable; one could not live by them and remain sane. Yet, within his poetical and, indeed, his prose work, they are not only tenable but acceptable. This is not to say that what is false in human affairs can be true in literature but rather that Rilke's intensity of vision and his power in the manipulation of images has proffered us an aspect of truth, an insight into truth, that we could attain in no other way; for poetry moves by intuition not by dialectic.

Rilke was by no means totally turned inwards upon himself; if he had been, his work would have only a limited, perhaps only a pathological, interest. Poetry that depends solely upon the interior searchings and discoveries of the poet must, of its nature, sooner or later, reach a dead-end. But Rilke's sort of subjectivity led him beyond introspection and self-analysis; he looked at the outer world in ecstasy but felt that he could only comprehend the being and individuality of animate and inanimate things by bringing them under the light of his imagination and by transforming them into shining symbols.

Mr Holthusen, in his valuable little study of Rilke, has pointed out that Rilke, who died in 1927, lived in a society where the traditional Christian beliefs were no longer widely accepted and where doubt and uncertainty were more prevalent than faith. He sees the *Duino Elegies* as attempts to find 'bearings' in such a society. Rilke is not the only major twentieth-century poet to find himself in this predicament. Eliot, before his conversion to the Anglican Church, depicted a world of chaos and openly declared,

'These fragments I have shored against my ruin.'

In other words, he felt the need at least to *attempt* to build some kind of world, to erect a set of provisional beliefs. Yeats, too, while he eschewed all accepted orthodoxy, created by means of his verse a philosophy which for him explained the meaning of human existence. Rilke's world-picture, though entirely different in content, was in purpose more like Yeats's than Eliot's; it was created not so much as a gesture against the uncertainty of an uneasy universe but rather as itself an ordered, autonomous world compared with which the 'real' world seemed to Rilke only a shadow.

Rilke led a sheltered, withdrawn life. His deep affection for his mother was partly responsible for his inability to form equal

or reciprocal relationships with other women. His marriage was an unhappy one and he preferred a distance (that 'distance' which Simone Weil regarded as so essential to true friendship) of respect and admiration to exist between himself and those whom he loved. He formed a number of mother-child, patron-poet relationships with various sympathetic and sensitive aristocratic women such as the endlessly kind Princess Marie Von Thurn Und Taxis, who helped him so much in his last years. He seems to have been one of those men who need to hold things off, to keep at arm's length, their most valued possessions, as if to draw those things nearer would blur their significance or injure their purity. At first sight, this attitude appears to be totally opposed to Rilke's passionate need to draw all things into his own mind before he could affirm their reality. In fact, his relations with women, his fastidious fear of approaching, of getting too involved, were an essential part of his apparently subjective attitude towards all things. It may well be that he was so afraid of being overwhelmed by things and by people, so sensitive to the possibility of being swamped and submerged, that he could only know things by re-imagining them, by bringing them under the power of his imagination. His whole world-scheme was, in a sense, a denial of the reality of things in themselves when not observed by the creative imagination, so that Rilke abstracted (though he would never have used such a word) those qualities and attributes he needed from objects, ideas and people and then re-created them. It is an amazing paradox that a man who loved to be possessed in the poetic sense, feared possession on the ordinary human level. He was extremely active in the construction of his poems yet remarkably passive in his relations with people —in so far as observing and standing aside can be regarded as passive attitudes. No facile doctrine of 'compensation' can, I think, solve this mystery.

The clue, however, to many of the paradoxes in Rilke is the undoubted fact that poetry was to him a religion. Where many great Christian poets have regarded their gifts as God-given, as things to be used rightly and honestly and returned, in humility, to God, Rilke's poetry was itself a religious faith with its own creed, dogmas, demands and hierarchies. It made as great and exhausting demands on him as the life of prayer and discipline makes on the monk. But where the man of prayer trains himself

and prepares himself for union with God in the mystical experience, Rilke laid hands, as it were, on his own visions, proclaimed them in the ecstasies of his poetry and suffered, much as the religious man suffers, when the great moments of vision withdrew and the darkness returned.

Some critics have thought that the 'angels' which appear in, and are indeed the protagonists of, the *Duino Elegies*, are 'pseudonyms' for God and it does seem to me that this is the most profound interpretation of the strange powerful beings whom Rilke invokes. In the *Second Elegy* he writes:

'. . . the gods
may press more strongly upon us. But that is the gods' affair.
If only we too could discover some pure, contained
narrow human, own little strip of orchard
in between river and rock! For our heart transcends us
just as it did those others. And we can no longer
gaze after it into figures that soothe it, or godlike
bodies, wherein it achieves a grander restraint.'

And in the Annunciation poem in *The Life of the Virgin Mary*, he says,

'No, not his entering; but he so inclined,
the angel, a youth's face to hers, that it combined
with the gaze with which she looked up, and the two
struck together, as though all outside suddenly
were empty.'

This description is remarkably like those descriptions which many orthodox Christian mystics have employed to express their sense of union with God. And indeed what on the surface appears, in Rilke, like an extreme form of narcissism is in fact the expression of an intense awareness of God, of a Being who cannot be circumscribed by language but who at least can be hinted at in poetry.

On this matter, Thomas Merton, the Cistercian monk, has, in his journal called *The Sign of Jonas*, made some illuminating remarks:

'I am abashed by the real solitude of Rilke which I admire, knowing however that it is not for me because I am not like that. But his is a solitude I understand objectively, perhaps not by connaturality at all but it moves me tremendously. You see, to begin with, he did not *want* it or go looking for it.

It found him. Tremendous how he finds himself in the solitude of Christ (David) in the psalms, all of a sudden, there on p. 53 of Malte Laurids Brigge. . . .

Anyway, here is something Rilke himself wrote down . . . "For a while yet I can write all this down and express it. But there will come a day when my hand will be far from me and when I bid it write it will write words I do not mean. The time of that other interpretation will dawn when not one word will remain upon another and all meaning will dissolve like clouds and fall down like rain. Despite my fear I am yet like one standing before something great. . . . This time I shall be written. I am the impression that will change." '

As Merton indicates, Rilke longed to be possessed, in the most literal sense. But though he is surely right to point out the discipline and austerity of Rilke's approach to truth, he is wrong, I think, in thinking that he did not sometimes try to seize and possess it, to bring the vision down and to appropriate it for his own ends; there is a very great danger in too closely aligning Rilke's visionary experience with that of the Christian mystic, for where the Christian confronts God in the darkness of faith and accepted dogma, Rilke tried to create his own faith and his own dogmas; what he did share with the true mystic, however, was a fundamental and pervasive humility before the ineffable. Mr Holthusen has said of him, 'Rilke, then, appears . . . as the patron-saint of the loneliness of modern man; not as an advocate of a spurious retreat into other-worldliness, but as the authentic opposite of the mass-mind and of the civilization of machines and ideologies'. And elsewhere he writes, 'He hurls his standard far into the hostile field of the unexpressed—and apparently inexpressible—and safely recaptures it'.

As I have said, one must not try to strain the similarities between Rilke and the orthodox Christian mystics or to twist his personality and genius into a shape that will fit neatly and comfortably into any accepted hagiology. He was not like Simone Weil in that he accepted the beliefs of Christianity yet refused to become a member of the Christian Church. On the contrary, he often denied specific dogmas while still employing Christian symbols; Christianity was a set of images which, like everything he observed and contemplated, might usefully and fruitfully be drawn into his own world-picture. And Rilke's angels, those

potent beings who soar through the *Duino Elegies*, are secular angels not sacred ones. Stephen Spender has written of them, 'The angels are gigantic figures (borrowed perhaps from El Greco) in which outward reality fuses with inward significance. . . . The angel, then, is a projection of the task which began originally with Rilke piecing his soul together out of experiences whose continuity he entered so passionately into. These experiences gradually demanded that he should bring to birth the invisibility of their existences with his own. The angel was the transformation of the task into a faith that there were forces in the world connecting the seen with the unseen, and making of the fusion language.'

That last sentence is a perfect summing-up of Rilke's attitude towards his insights and his poetry. Spender is right to insist on the poet's faith and trust not only in the intangible but also in the power of language to embody the apparently inexpressible. An examination of the activities of the angels in the *Elegies* will illuminate this passionate faith and also give a precision and clarity to what sounds vague when stated baldly in prose. It should again be stressed that in these elegies Rilke is not simply abstracting what he wants from a known world, but actually *creating* a world. Without blasphemy, one can say of these poems, 'In the beginning was the Word'.

In the *First Elegy* he writes,

> 'Each single angel is terrible.
> And so I repress myself, and swallow the call-note
> of depth-dark sobbing. Alas, who is there
> we can make use of? Not angels, not men.'

The poet feels himself confronted by an impossible task where all that has true meaning, namely the angels, is infinitely withdrawn from him. He examines the night, the stars, the Hero, and then the lovers. He wishes to lose himself in these things but is unable to. And so, towards its close, the *First Elegy* becomes an inquiry into the nature of *religious* experience:

> 'Hearken, my heart as only
> saints have done: till it seemed the gigantic call
> must lift them aloft; yet they went impossibly
> on with their kneeling, in undistracted attention:
> so inherently hearers. Not that you could endure
> the voice of God—far from it. But hark to the suspiration,
> the uninterrupted news that grows out of silence.'

Nothing could be more sensitive and accurate than this description of the mystic's 'waiting on God'. But the poet cannot lose himself in such an experience, though he recognizes that

> 'one's gently weaned from terrestrial things as one mildly
> outgrows the breasts of a mother. But we, that have need of
> such mighty secrets, we, for whom sorrow's so often
> source of blessedest progress, could we exist without them?'

The *Second Elegy* continues this inquiry into the possibility of self-annihilation in God; but the examination is still on the level of the senses and the emotions:

> 'For we, when we feel, evaporate.'

And again, using now the image of Attic stelae, Rilke declares,

> 'Oh, think of the hands,
> how they rest without pressure, though power is there in the torsos.
> The wisdom of those self-masters was this: hitherto it's us;
> ours is to touch one another like this; the gods
> may press more strongly upon us. But that is the gods' affair.'

Rilke sees something perpetual and fruitful in a work of art; it is autonomous yet not sealed off from those who rejoice in it. Joy is, indeed, one of the keynotes of the elegies and these poems, so subtle, so profound, are a hymn to creation as Rilke sees it, as well as a record of the poet's struggle to achieve union with the power that underlies creation. The elegies are then, in some sense, a denial of Rilke's constant assertion of the inwardness of reality, and of his insistence that it only has meaning when transformed and re-created by the poetic imagination. In the *Elegies*, Rilke's conception of inwardness appears very like Hopkins's theory of instress and inscape. But the difference between Hopkins and Rilke is that, whereas Hopkins formulated his theory *outside* his poetry, Rilke found his in the very act of writing. He obeyed Eliot's requirement that a poet's theory should grow out of his practice, though it is certainly true that at times Rilke's theories were at odds with his practice.

In the *Third Elegy*, Rilke considers love, birth and childhood. He insists that men love more than the one woman they are making love to at a given moment; 'the innumerable fermentation', 'the dry river-bed of former mothers'—'This', says Rilke, 'got the start of you, maid.' And, characteristically, in his

instructions to the girl about how she should treat her lover, he passionately demands,

> '. . . give him those counter-
> balancing nights . . .
> Withhold him . . .'

Distance must be respected even in the most intimate relationship.

The *Fourth Elegy* scrutinizes more closely the fertile life of trees and of nature, and the sadness and ecstasy of childhood and of partings. The angels reappear:

> 'Angel and doll! Then there's at last a play.
> Then there unites what we continually
> part by our mere existence.
> . . . .
> Over and above us,
> then, there's the angel playing.'

Angels guard the child but even they cannot hold back death:

> 'death,
> the whole of death,—even before life's begun,
> to hold it all so gently, and not murmur:
> this is beyond description.'

The child contains death fearlessly even before he has begun to understand it.

In the *Fifth Elegy*, Rilke introduces his clowns and acrobats, those creatures who

> '. . . come down on the threadbare
> carpet, thinned by their everlasting
> upspringing, this carpet forlornly
> lost in the cosmos.'

Like his angels, Rilke's acrobats are free beings who possess

> 'the great initial
> letter of Thereness.'

It is the brooding intensity, the surrender and pliancy of these clowns that give the poet an image of *being* at its purest and most active. One is reminded of Aquinas's splendid definition of God as 'the act of pure being'. In this elegy Rilke demonstrates his supreme power over the use of verbs; he moulds them and shapes them as a sculptor shapes clay. 'Galloping', 'tingling', 'chasing', 'veering',—these, and many others, are employed to suggest a sense of controlled but vehement energy. In this elegy,

too, Rilke invokes the angels to preserve this sense of strength and movement by converting it into the stillness of art:

'Angel! oh, take it, pluck it, that small-flowered herb of healing!
Shape a vase to preserve it. Set it among those joys not yet
open to us.'

Such a passionate prayer is like that of the mystic who, held in the human bonds of desire and excitement, implores the silent ecstasy of union with God. This poem is crammed with secular symbols—with circus performers, lovers, fruits, urns—but they are only a means towards an end, an end which will both disclose and explain the unity of all things. It moves, too, precipitately, as the poet's imagination leaps from one image to another; he permits his mind perfect freedom in the assurance that such unselfconsciousness, such lack of contrivance, will lead to a complete world-picture, a totally integrated vision of life. If the poet asks questions, then they are rhetorical questions containing in their very articulation the answers and the solutions:

'Angel: suppose there's a place we know nothing about, and
there
on some indescribable carpet, lovers showed all that here
they're for ever unable to manage—their daring
lofty figures of heart-flight. . . .'

Rilke is here postulating a world beyond the immediate one which the senses bear witness to. As I have suggested already, he believed in something resembling the Berkeleian view of the universe—that nothing existed until the mind had apprehended it. Similarly, he felt that he actually created a transcendent, spiritual world by invoking and capturing it in his verse. But the tension in these great elegies lies in the implicit yet unacknowledged belief that reality exists autonomously in an area of experience that only poetry can penetrate.

The *Sixth Elegy* presents a brief, concentrated merging of Rilke's prevailing symbols—the fig-tree, the Hero, the child, the mother. As the elegies proceed, the excitement becomes more nervous, the mind more darting. It is almost as if his words and images moved so fast that Rilke could scarcely capture them. The tumultuous words slow down, however, at the end of this elegy and Rilke comments again upon one of his major preoccupations—his dissatisfaction with the transitoriness of sensual things:

'For whenever the Hero stormed through the halts of love,
Each heart beating for him could only lift him beyond it:
turning away, he'd stand at the end of the smiles, another.'

It is this 'beyond' that haunts Rilke, this vague awareness of a life and a power beneath and above the momentary delights of the senses. His poetry is, in a sense, a poetry of repudiation, of merely provisionary pleasures. Every poem is an act of discarding, not to destroy but, as Saint-Exupéry has put it, 'to pare down to perfection'. Rilke has expressed more vividly and fully than any other modern writer the strange admixture of power and frustration which is perhaps the very source of poetry. He describes that desire for *more* senses, *more* thoughts, more *time*, which every poet feels when experience seems to be galloping ahead of his ability to communicate it. Rilke is unique in that he captures in his verse this acute awareness of things moving out of his reach. It is almost as if he were trying to tame his talent while still delighting in its uncontrollability.

The *Seventh Elegy* is gentler, more meditative than the *Sixth*; it is like the slow movement in a symphony. The metaphors follow one another relentlessly but not so rapidly as in the preceding poem. Stars are introduced as something timeless which can only be apprehended in death. And childhood, with its lack of a sense of time, is praised and affirmed:

'You children, I'd say, a single
thing comprehended here's as good as a thousand.'

Towards the end of this poem, Rilke expresses quite unambiguously his deeply felt philosophy of life:

'. . . the most visible joy
can only reveal itself to us when we've transformed it, within.
Nowhere, beloved, can world exist but within.'

And, like the mystic struggling to contain his vision, the poet cries,

'Angel, gaze for it's *we*—
O mightiness, tell them that we were capable of it—my breath's
too short for this celebration.

. . . .

Chartres was great—and music
towered still higher and passed beyond us. Why, even
a girl in love, alone, at her window at night . . .
did she not reach to your knee?—Don't think that I'm wooing!

Angel, even if I were, you'd never come! For my call
is always full of outgoing; against such a powerful
current you cannot advance.'

But Rilke, unlike the mystic, feels that his own 'outgoing' is part of the visionary experience, so that even the angel appears temporarily to be vanquished.

The *Eighth Elegy* is entirely metaphysical in character. It asks the kind of questions that are usually asked in prose by philosophers. Rilke sees man trapped both by circumstance and by his very ability to know his own limitations. The child and the animal are, on the other hand, free:

'. . . the free animal
has its decease perpetually behind it
and God in front, and when it moves, it moves
into eternity, like running springs.'

But we, says Rilke, as men, never have 'pure space before us'. The visible world blocks our view and also acts as a mirror:

'. . . we perceive there
only a mirroring of the free and open
dimmed by our breath.'

The animal is 'unintrospective' and, being free, 'sees Everything . . . for ever healed'. And yet, Rilke continues, even the beast carries 'the weight and care of a great sadness' like 'a kind of memory'. He goes on to praise the unborn creature, the being who, still in the womb, 'can still leap within'. He compares the half-assurance of a bird with

'. . . those Etruscan souls, escaped
from a dead man enclosed within a space
on which his resting figure forms a lid.'

The elegy ends with a lovely and eloquent lament for man who, delivered from the womb, grows every day more aware of all things passing, himself included:

'we live our lives for ever taking leave.'

The movement of the *Elegies* is immensely varied and supple; Rilke has created a vehicle which, even in the heavy syllables of German, is pliant enough for the highest flights of eloquence yet equally capable of carrying the gnomic line or the philosophical reflection. Its cadences move now to violence, now to gentleness. It leaps adeptly from one image to another, from one idea to

another. There is no other modern poetry which gives so strong a sense of the poet both being carried away by his verse yet also of never quite losing his hold on it. It is easier to find a counterpart for the *Elegies* in music than in any other kind of verse. Like symphonic music, they repeat, improvise, return to the same themes, elaborate them and then, with an amazing simplicity, move into a single, bare, unfaltering phrase. Rilke has the elegance of a Mozart but also the sense of struggle of a Beethoven.

The *Ninth Elegy* is a painful, heart-rending consideration of time, of the fleeting moment. But the note sounded is a much deeper, more reverberating one than that of mere nostalgia. Rilke says,

'Us the most fleeting of all. Just once
everything, only for once. Once and no more. And we, too,
once. And never again. But this
having been once, though only once,
having been once on earth—can it ever be cancelled?'

In other words, every moment, simply because it has once existed, can never finally disappear or be valueless. And yet, Rilke continues,

'we keep pressing on and trying to perform it,
trying to contain it within our simple hands,
in the more and more crowded gaze, in the speechless heart.
Trying to become it.'

However, he soon discards this impotent desire for possession and acknowledges that time cannot be detained in this way. Only two things can halt time and perpetuate it—suffering ('the hardness of life', 'the long experience of love'—the pain and surrender of the saint, in fact) and the act of *naming* things. It is surprising that Rilke was not more interested in the Christian sacrament of baptism, that sacrament which both confers a character and gives a name, for he writes,

'For the wanderer does not bring from mountain to valley
a handful of earth, of for all untellable earth, but only
a word he has won, pure, the yellow and blue
gentian. Are we, perhaps *here* for saying: House,
Bridge, Fountain, Gate, Jug, Fruit-tree, Window,—
possibly: Pillar, Tower? . . . but for *saying*, remember,
oh, for such saying as never the things themselves
hoped so intensely to be.'

The finding and giving of names does much more than endow the namer with power over the things he has named: it also gives meaning and life to the things themselves. Similarly, in one of the *Sonnets to Orpheus* which is about the mythical unicorn, Rilke says that men

> '. . . fed it, not with corn,
> but only with the possibility
> of being.'

They imagined it and therefore it sprang to life. But the treatment of being and existence is more subtle in the *Elegies*, for in them Rilke considers the whole universe, not simply the myths that man has conjured up to explain it.

The *Ninth Elegy* is about eternity as well as time. 'Here', declares the poet, 'is the time for the Tellable' even though 'things we can live with are falling away'. The Angel represents timelessness and lives outside the dimension of here and now; yet man can do something which the Angel, of his very nature, is unable to do—he can speak of *things*, of fleeting particulars, of objects that begin to crumble even while they are being observed. The Angel, on the other hand, lives in eternity, in a cosmos where man is 'only a novice'. And so Rilke exhorts man to do what only he can do:

> '. . . So show him
> some simple thing, refashioned by age after age
> till it lives in our hands and eyes as a part of ourselves.
>
> . . . .
>
> Show him how happy a thing can be, how guileless and ours.'

And he goes on to praise all those things which 'live on departure' and which are rescued 'through something in us, the most fleeting of all'.

Rilke ends this elegy with a vision of Earth transformed, through us, into something invisible; he explains to the Earth that 'Beyond all names I am yours, and have been for ages', while Death, 'that friendly Death', is Earth's 'holiest inspiration'. Death is inspired and holy because by means of it man is at last wholly lost and contained both in the dust from which he came and in that world of the Untellable from which the Angel is the only messenger. Precisely *what* Rilke believed about immortality is hard to judge from the *Elegies*; it does seem fairly certain, how-

ever, that he expected a life after death and that such a life would be a fulfilment of personality rather than an extinction of it.

The *Tenth Elegy* begins by describing the poet's emergence from the 'terrifying vision'. After the rapture comes the recording of it and Rilke wishes to 'burst into jubilant praise to assenting Angels'. But, unlike the mystic who is too caught up in God's purposes to care whether or not the sign of his vision is written upon him, Rilke hopes that the 'new-found splendour' will appear on his 'streaming face'. Yet he shares with the religious visionary the knowledge of pain and of the 'Nights of Affliction', and embraces them gladly. The poet descends, like a man who has spent nights of prayer alone on a mountain-top, and he returns to earth cleansed, accepting and wiser. He has learnt the uses of suffering and explains,

> ' . . . We wasters of sorrows!
> How we stare away into sad endurance beyond them,
> trying to foresee their end! Whereas they are nothing else
> than our winter foliage, our sombre evergreen, *one*
> of the seasons of our interior year.'

These lines are a kind of exorcism of the earlier cry of grief,

> 'we live our lives for ever taking leave.'

The poet knows that he must now wander in the city of men, in 'the streets of the City of Pain'. He views the city with a sagacious disenchantment, reflecting 'how an Angel would trample it down without trace'. But there is the fairground also, the transitory home of clown, juggler and acrobat, those beings who do not try to stay the passage of time but whose whole lives conform to restlessness, rootlessness and wandering; and, by recognizing and accepting the tyranny of time, they are liberated from its relentlessness. Beyond the almost tragic frivolity of the clowns are the lovers and the children. The lover loves 'gravely' while the girl is perhaps 'just a lament'. Such gentle distress can only be comprehended by 'the youthfully dead', by those, in fact, who are too young either to be tarnished or disillusioned. The poet now enters a world of 'Lamentations', a world which might be cold and abstract had not Rilke something of Dante's power to make concrete the most tenuous thoughts and moods. The next lines of this elegy depict a world of fully realized and completely concrete ideas and perceptions. Here there are 'tall tear trees', 'fields of

flowering sadness' and 'pasturing herds of grief'. 'And' says the poet

'at times
a startled bird, flying straight through their field of vision
scrawls the far-stretching screed of its lonely cry.'

Almost, this might be a Purgatorio, a place of waiting and suffering.

The *Tenth Elegy* contains the most masterly handling of abstract ideas; Rilke has reached, delicately and surely, that state where reason has not been rejected but surpassed, where imagination creates an autonomous world, not simply an analogical one or a counterpart for what we call the 'real' world. He gathers together all the themes, creatures and objects which have been celebrated in the earlier elegies but now sees them transformed into astronomy, as stars peerless and distant:

'There
look: the *Rider*, the *Staff*, and that fuller constellation
they call *Fruitgarland*. Then, further towards the pole:
Cradle, *Way*, *The Burning Book*, *Doll*, *Window*.
But up in the southern sky, pure as within the palm
of a consecrated hand, the clearly-resplendent *M*,
standing for Mothers. . . .'

This last startling image which compares the moon with the Host held by the priest during Mass is linked with Rilke's conception of the role and power of the Mother: there may also perhaps even be a half-conscious allusion to the mother of Christ. The part played by the Mother here also reminds us of Julian of Norwich's daring declaration of the Motherhood of God; in *Revelations of Divine Love* she says 'the deep Wisdom of the Trinity is our Mother'.

The glory of this earthly vision does not, however, distract the poet from his recognition of the necessity and ennobling power of pain. 'The elder Lament' brings him to 'the source of Joy' and she explains to him 'with awe' that joy 'among men it's a carrying stream'. From this point he must travel alone to 'the mountains of Primal Pain' and never submit to the temptation to turn back. The elegy concludes on one of those notes of utter calm and simplicity which are just as unique a part of Rilke's greatness as

his tempestuous and crowded visions. The lines are like a hand pointing not to reprove but to guide:

> 'And we, who have always thought
> of happiness climbing, would feel
> the emotion that almost startles
> when happiness falls.'

This is very like an admission, however tentative, that there is a greater experience to come which only death can reveal. And these lines have also something of the entirely human and finite sense of peace which Milton described thus, at the end of *Paradise Lost:*

> 'They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow
> Through Eden took their solitary way.'

From this examination of Rilke's greatest work, we can see that it would be a grave error of judgment to align him too closely or too eagerly with the great orthodox Christian mystics; on the other hand, there is so much in feeling, thought and expression in the *Duino Elegies* that sounds like echoes of Christian mystical experience, that one can, I think, justly claim not only that Rilke knew personally both the darkness and the ecstasy of the search for and surrender to God (even though he often expressed it in very different terms), but also that such experience and the transcribing of it released him from his own intense subjectivity. The great flights of eloquence in the elegies are journeys from the self not *into* the self; they are, in effect, a kind of denial of many of the things which Rilke said in his letters and his prose works. It was honesty, not self-deception, that led him to distrust everything that he could not experience and affirm in his own mind. His poetry released him from the bonds this honesty imposed upon him so that he often wrote more profoundly than his conscious, rational mind knew. This is, indeed, one of the paradoxes of the poetic faculty; poets often do not know what they really think until they see what they write. Like the mystics, they are channels for truths and perceptions that are received rather than sought out.

Critics have sometimes rebuked Rilke for the way in which he altered, or appropriated, the parables and events of the New Testament, and they have cited his *Prodigal Son* and *Life of Mary* as cases in point. But it is a shallow judgment to suppose that

because he interpreted these things in his own way, he was therefore either profoundly at odds with Christianity or else took up a frivolous attitude towards it. He distrusted dogma, certainly, and yet most of his life's work was an attempt to erect a system of ideas which would both explain the universe and also make it tolerable. Where the Christian mystic lives by the ordinary rules of the Christian life and waits humbly upon God for the great moment of union and illumination, Rilke built up a series of provisional, pragmatic, beliefs as he went along. The important thing is that he was not afraid to abandon these beliefs when his poetic vision revealed to him a different world, perhaps a more painful one, certainly one more sublime.