

SONNETS TO ORPHEUS

Rainer Maria Rilke

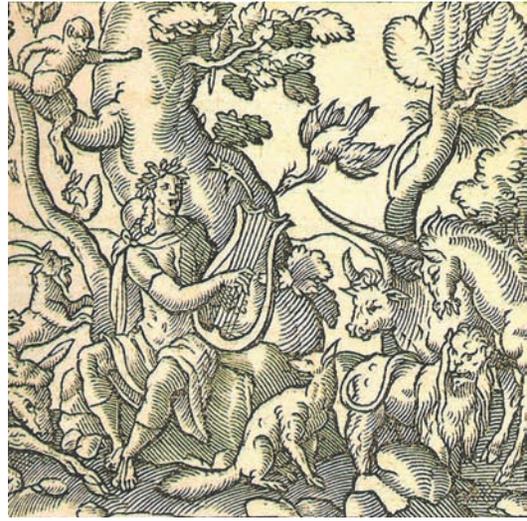
During a short space of time February 2-5, 1922, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) wrote the majority of these sonnets while living at the thirteenth-century Château de Muzot in Switzerland. The rest he completed by the final days of that February. Using Orpheus as a metaphorical figure, he called him, “the god with the lyre.”

Rilke is a transitional figure in twentieth-century European literature, midway between the traditional and modern movements within poetry. His work struggles with the difficulty of union with the transcendent, when we are trapped in an age that is marked by anxiety, disbelief, and isolation. Rilke traveled throughout Europe, was a Roman Catholic of Jewish ancestry, and wrote in German and French. Indeed, “Rilke called two places his home: Bohemia and Russia.”¹ As such, he is an iconic figure of the internationalism of the literary movements that marked early twentieth-century Europe.²

The [Duino Elegies](#) and the [Sonnets to Orpheus](#) are Rilke’s most lastingly popular works. Both were completed in February of 1922 while Rilke was struggling with health problems and post-war stresses at the Château de Muzot. Rilke’s lover, Baladine Klossowska, left him a postcard depicting “Orpheus under a tree with his lyre, singing to the animals . . .



Portrait of Rainer Maria Rilke (1906), Paula Modersohn-Becker, from the [The Yorck Project](#).

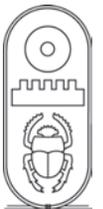


Virgil Solis, Orpheus with Lyre and Animals (1563) illustration of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, from *Ovid Illustrated*.⁴

to remind the poet of their moments spent together reading Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.³ After months at the Château, suddenly Rilke found his muse, and Orpheus inspired him to complete twenty-five of the sonnets in three days. By the end of February, all of the fifty-five Sonnets to Orpheus were completed, as well as the ten Duino Elegies.

What did Rilke find in the figure of Orpheus that broke through his literary stagnation? Rilke dedicated the Sonnets as a Grab-Mal (Grave Marker) for his daughter Ruth’s childhood friend, Vera Ouckama Knoop (1900-1919).⁵ Young Vera’s early death moved Rilke deeply. It would have been natural for him to turn to the classical figure of Orpheus who dared to journey to the land of the dead to rescue life. Yet there was more.

Through the story of Orpheus, Rilke connected with the archetypal divine-human whose gift is the harmony of all being in a time of chaos and disorder, and who is dismembered and journeys to the realm of Death and returns. Orpheus became the nexus allowing communion not only with his own story, but through him, with Tammuz of Babylon, with Osiris of Egypt, and with the



Christ who is broken as sacred bread to feed the people daily on the Altars of Christendom.

One can feel the resonances of this self-sacrificial giving, whose fruit is wisdom and divine union, throughout all world spiritualities, from Odin “a sacrifice of God to God, hung on the world-tree Yggdrasil,”⁶ to Hindu and Buddhist images. Orpheus slain can now live in whoever unites with his spirit.⁷ “His word is mightier than his presence,” sings Rilke in Sonnet Five, and through the Orphic spirit, we can “cross the line” to where—while “tied by the lyre’s grid”—we cannot go, to union with the source of all harmony, love, and being.



The Tortoise-Lyre, Raoul Dufy, from *The Bestiary or the Funeral Procession of Orpheus*, by Guillaume Apollinaire (1911).

Sonnet 1

There rose a tree. Oh growth so great!
Oh Orpheus sings! Oh tree, I hear you
now!
And all is silent, but even in the silence
new beginning, sign and change arose.
Out of the silence animals came from
bed and nest
in the forest, clear and calm;
and it happened that it was neither ruse
nor fear, per se,
that caused them to be silent,
but listening, yelling, screaming, roaring
seemed small in their hearts and where
there was no shelter to receive this,
no refuge of darkest desire
with an entrance with posts that shiver,
you created temples in their ear.

Sonnet 5

Don't build a monument. Let only the
rose
bloom every year in his honor.
For it is Orpheus, his metamorphosis
in this and that. We should not trouble
about other names. Once and always
it is Orpheus, when he sings. He comes
and goes.
Isn't it enough, when he outlasts the
bowl of
roses by a day or two?
Oh, that he must leave, so you can
understand!
Though he worries about leaving,
Because his word is mightier than his
presence,
he is already where you cannot follow.
His hands not tied by the lyre's grid.
And he obeys by crossing the line.⁸

Endnotes:

¹ Anna A. Tavis, *Rilke's Russia: A Cultural Encounter* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 1

² See “Rainer Maria Rilke,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rainer_Maria_Rilke.

³ Anita Burrows and Joanna Macy, *In Praise of Mortality* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), 4.

⁴ *Ovid Illustrated*, <http://etext.virginia.edu/latin/ovid/ovid1563l.html>.

⁵ “Sonnets to Orpheus,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonnets_to_Orpheus.

⁶ See “Odin’s Rune Song,” (Section 24, lines 140-141 of The Elder Edda) in *The Elder Eddas of Saemund Sigfusson*, translated by Benjamin Thorpe (London: Norroena Society, 1906), 44. Available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14726/14726-8.txt>.

⁷ This discussion is indebted to Anita Burrows and Joanna Macy, *In Praise of Mortality*, 6-9.

⁸ Original translation of Sonnets by Eberhard Ehrich, F.R.C.