

Foreword

ORPHEUS. EURYDICE. HERMES: NOTATIONS ON A LANDSCAPE

Watercolors and Design by Ellen Kozak

Poetry by Rainer Maria Rilke

Translated by Stephen Mitchell

Foreword by Dore Ashton

Before he composed "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes," Rilke wrote to his wife from Italy: "There is a kind of purity and virginity in it, in this looking away from oneself; it is as when one is drawing, one's gaze is riveted on the object, interwoven with Nature, and the hand goes its way alone somewhere below, goes and goes, takes fright, falters, is happy again, goes and goes far below the face that stands above it like a star, not looking, only *shining*. It seems to me as if I had always created like that: my face gazing at far off things, my hands alone."

Rilke spoke after a long apprenticeship in seeing. First watching his wife and other young artists during his sojourns in the artists' colony at Worpswede; then studying, as he stressed, "patiently," the works of Rodin; then discovering the unexampled drawings of Hokusai, the silent gravity of frescoes from Boscoreale, and finally—Cezanne the "great event" in his life in the arts that so much contributed to what he called his "turning." A turning, he tried to explain in countless letters, that had to do with what he had once observed of painting and painters, their success in "being-only-eye." Few poets had taken so much heart from the experience of painters,

All his life Rilke had been careful to record his seeing, either in letters or in journals, especially his seeing of landscapes. Toward the end, ensconced in his twelfth-century tower in Switzerland, he was still looking outward and wrote to his wife in 1924 of a "ruthless encroachment that has grieved and upset me." Farmers had cut down an old poplar before his chateau, changing, he said, the landscape in which "that strong vertical drew it upward and gave it lift and lineage." Perhaps it was that poplar that formed the opening image in his first Sonnet to Orpheus in 1922 beginning with the simple declaration: "A tree ascended there. Oh pure transcendence!"

"Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes," Rilke's first poem to name

Orpheus, was written in 1904. The unmistakable memory of that poem is interwoven in the late Sonnets to Orpheus, written in one rapt bout in February, 1922. Astonishing how the feeling of the early poem is dispersed among the late sonnets; how the descents and ascents, the foreshortenings and driftings, are reexperienced, as though the first song were inscribed forever in his ear. For Rilke, who often deplored the insufficient use of the five senses in modern life, never ceased to listen for his rhythms as he gazed at far-off things and let his hand go its way alone.

And this is also what painters had done as they groped their way from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, likening, for want of a better word, their driving impulse to abstraction to "musicality." Rilke's task, sternly assigned himself in the first years of our century, was to find the true song. "True singing is a different breath, about / nothing," as he said. That "breath about nothing" was not unknown to the painters who came to see their work as in-itself; as the abstraction of a complex web of feelings, of senses, and not only as pictures. They, too, developed a diction of states of feeling. In those late sonnets Rilke laments again that man's soul, unlike a god's, is "split." That fatal cleavage was already present in the first portrait of Orpheus, whose disconsolate humanness, "His senses ... split in two," brings him to look back and ruin his entire work, so nearly completed. This is the Orpheus whose work will never be complete, as Rilke came to believe (and as he understood about Cezanne), for as he says in one of the sonnets, Orpheus "comes and goes."

In that coming and going, in so many almost familiar places, painter and poet tread common ground. What Wallace Stevens called the "migratory passings to and fro" occur, and are to be hoped for, not only between painter and poet but, in this case, among painter, poet, and translator. (How Stephen Mitchell must have turned and turned in this oh-so-circuitous path leading us into the poem—a veritable Virgil.) For, as Rilke came to know, there is a stillness, a quietness, a monumental dumbness in paintings that the poet longs to sound in; to draw it over into his own material. Similarly, there is a silence emanating from within the poem that Ellen Kozak knows, the root space of the poem so like the space from which the painted image emerges. Kozak, with long experience of the landscape of the Hudson River valley, trained herself to be, as Rilke said, only-eye. Her task is to distance, and at the same time bring close, all that she sees, but also all that she feels, as her eye sweeps over the great river with its turns, its neighboring ramparts and valleys, its bordering meadows and "forests made of mist." And through the speculum

of the scanning experience, Kozak comes to Rilke's poem.

A brush is a real thing and not the stuff that poems are made of. The artist must turn it, press it, direct it with the greatest of tact if she is to follow the poet into the inner realm, the "deep uncanny mine of souls." Kozak, her brush laden with the colors Rilke used to circumscribe the indescribable, follows Orpheus as he moves through various climates. She finds ways to suggest the distance—distance which is also a function of time. Knowing her material intimately, Kozak produces a craquelure that lends each image a quality of endurance, a thingness, Rilke might have said, that resists the ravages of time. And through the minute fissures flows the life of the landscape, of the poem, there where nature commingles with the song.

There are no final horizons in the zones Rilke traverses with Orpheus, and Kozak has had to alter the landscapist's reflex. She turns, with Orpheus, toward the light, but nearly always, as in *Steps*, the composition is horizontal: the darkness, the soul's mine, is not below but adjacent to the light, which is always oblique, as though seen through a misty scrim. Without a definitive horizon, all the compositions convey the absence of sound that Rilke suggests belongs to that subterranean place. Even Orpheus, his lyre forgotten, can fall silent as he walks impatiently through the heights, lakes, not unlike the landscape Rilke more than once described as he searched for El Greco in Toledo.

All these turnings come together in the paintings, which are in a true sense translations; and in the verse translation in which Mitchell goes to the root of the prefix *trans* and crosses elegantly over. The painter has seized in strokes, colors—the painting's thought—the spirit of the poem. Above all, she has not neglected to note, subtly, in each transcription, the splitness of it all, the twoness, the mirroriness that Rilke so often despaired over. Orpheus, in short.

—DORE ASHTON

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