

Interiority, Inseeing, Insight

Review of
*God Speaks to Each of Us:
 The Poetry and Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke*
 By Thomas Merton [5 CDs]
 Introduction by Michael W. Higgins
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Reviewed by **Detlev Cuntz**

These eleven conferences on the great twentieth-century German poet Rainer Maria Rilke were given by Thomas Merton to the Gethsemani community between mid-November 1965 and the end of March 1966, shortly after he had taken up permanent residence in his hermitage. They are prefaced by a valuable introductory lecture by Michael W. Higgins, who elegantly leads the listener into the most intriguing themes of the conferences and prepares the ground for Merton's commentary with his own insights and comprehensive overview of the collection.

In the opening conference, here entitled "Poetry and Imagination," Merton asks the monks, "What is poetic experience?" and focusing on Rilke's poem "The Panther" he asks, "Where does the poetic experience occur?" Merton speaks about the imaginative experience, which he says is itself creative, and claims that if you really connect with a piece of art, you are recreating the experience of the artist. He exhorts his audience not to start immediately reasoning about a piece of art – a painting, musical work or poem – and asking: "Who is it by?" and, depending on the answer, deciding whether it is good or not so good. Instead they should allow for the direct and unbiased experience with what they encounter.

Merton makes a very interesting statement about Rilke, which somehow reflects the ambiguity and inner tension he had with the poet: "Rilke is sometimes called a mystic, which he isn't. But he is like a mystic, he makes noises like a mystic and he is a lot more like a mystic than a lot of religious people are, because of his particular depth where he is at; he functions on a deep level where most of us don't function." Then he speaks about Rilke as a poet of "Innerlichkeit" ("inwardness" or "interiority") and what this means in terms of our relationship with reality and how God mediates himself to us. Finally in this session Merton reads Rilke's poem "The Merry-Go-Round" ("Das Karussell"), which reflects on the imaginative experience of childhood.

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In the second session, “Rilke’s Spiritual Influence: ‘The Panther’ and the ‘The Unicorn,’” Merton continues elaborating on the poetic experience as an experience of reality as it gets in contact with the inner being, the inner reality of the poetic object. He demonstrates this with three poems from Rilke: “The Panther” (“Der Panther”), “The Rose-Window” (“Die Fensterrose”) and “The Unicorn” (“Das Einhorn”). He reads the poems partly in the original German to demonstrate how the particular sound and the order of the words help to constitute this poetic experience, the reality of the inner being. For the modern world, he says, poets often fulfill the function the monk should fulfill when speaking about their experience of God.

In the third session, “Inseeing: Rilke as Contemplative Poet,” Merton talks again about the contact between the poet and his object and the poetic intuition of reality, which is distinct from scientific and philosophical reality. Merton demonstrates this using the Rilke poem “Losing Her Sight” (“Die Erblindende”), which he again reads partly in German to show how much stronger the phonetic sound of special words in German conveys the spirit of the poem. The essence of the poem is about a person losing her sight who is about to be transformed by suffering. Once again he makes clear that the poetic experience goes deeper than the physical experience because it deals with the individual and intends to experience with empathy what the other person experiences. Merton refers to Rilke’s concept of “Inseeing,” using a letter from Rilke in which the poet takes a dog as an example to show, as Merton says, that inseeing “is not to examine or to inspect but to encounter.” Inseeing opens into the view of God because it goes where “God sits in the middle of [the dog] and knows that it is good.” Finally “Inseeing” is described as an inner event in the person who sees. It takes place in the encounter with something else but it also reveals to us our own existence and the meaning of our own life.

The following four sessions – “Asceticism and Gluttony,” “Freedom and Spontaneity,” “Epictetus and ‘The Donators’” and “Freedom in Sartre and Marcel” – are in the main not directly related to Rilke, and Merton refers only occasionally to him. However they do serve to prepare the ground for a better understanding and appreciation of a poet like Rilke. The central theme in these conferences is freedom. Already in the second session Merton had said that Rilke is seeing things as modern philosophy sees them, and this especially holds true with respect to freedom. Merton initially approaches this theme by drawing on a variety of sources from the fifth-century Syrian Christian hermit Philoxenos and Stoic philosophers such as Epictetus to modern atheist and Christian existentialist philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Gabriel Marcel. Merton is eager to advise his listeners to become fully open to these different ideas and persons and realize how their Christian faith could be not only challenged but also nourished by them. He reminds them repeatedly that it is sometimes good to be shocked instead of always taking their Christian faith for granted. Further on Merton explains the strong connection between freedom and asceticism and demonstrates how asceticism should serve one purpose only: to make us free to do what in the depth of our heart we really want to do – free to love without impediment, free to do God’s will. Therefore asceticism should always be exercised as though there were no merits at all – without any compulsion. Instead it should free us from our compulsions in order to be fully aware, fully awake, fully alert and in contact with reality and ready to hear what God is addressing to us personally.

The eighth session, “Rilke’s Search for God,” is my personal favorite. Here Merton advocates a complete openness to the world, what means not to be closed in by things that had been decided for oneself beforehand. In this session he uses the personality and the work of Rilke to enthusiastically

communicate this message to the monks. He warns them that there are things about Rilke that will shock them – e.g. that Rilke had to suffer a great deal and died a kind of heroic death, but to the very end refused to see a priest. He asks the monks not to drop a person immediately who had shocked them because such a person might have deep and very valid ideas about life and death. He refers as well to other contemporary figures who had valid religious thoughts but were more to be found outside or on the margin of the Catholic Church, like Eugene O’Neill, Charles Péguy, Léon Bloy and Simone Weil. Merton argues that even though Rilke was neurotic, mainly resulting from struggling with the image of his “mama’s God,” this does not mean that there was anything wrong with his poetry. On the contrary his poetry owed a great deal to the fact that he was neurotic and it came out from this struggle, which he fruitfully accepted. Here we also get some hints of Merton’s own struggle to determine what he should finally make out for himself with respect to this poet. He refers to Romano Guardini’s critique regarding Rilke’s attitude towards religion and interpersonal relationships, which, as Merton seems to agree, was deficient, but only judging it, he adds, from an ideal standpoint. But for him and the monks, he says, it is of greater value to be thinking about fallible, mixed-up human beings than to think of ideal images because we are all fallible, mixed-up human beings. He reminds the monks that they are faced with a situation where all these questions are open and nothing has been decided. This, he says, they have to face from now on also in relation to the Church, in connection with the outcome of the Second Vatican Council which was just concluding at this time. He speaks of “the unprotected Church, out in the open and vulnerable.” Finally Merton talks about Rilke’s early Russian Orthodox approach to God and quotes some early poems from *The Book of Hours*.

In the ninth and tenth sessions Merton finally comes to Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, a collection of ten longer poems which Rilke wrote between 1912 and 1922, named after a castle on the Adriatic coast in Northern Italy where Rilke wrote – or, as he himself said, “received” – the first and second elegies. (Most of the other eight elegies were completed during a few days in early February 1922 in the Swiss Alps, at the same time as Rilke wrote his *Sonnets to Orpheus*, 75 shorter poems meant to complement the *Elegies*). The elegies poetically treat several highly existential themes, including angels, animals, human love, life and death, suffering and joy. What the elegies describe is the identity of terror and bliss, which according to Rilke are two sides of the same coin. Rilke was not concerned with religion but with spirituality and with life as it presents itself to us. This is what Merton described in his conferences as a struggle, which nevertheless was a coherent struggle. In these conferences Merton calls Rilke a person who is struggling and looking for ultimate answers but who finally makes a breakthrough, and that comes out in the *Duino Elegies*. According to Merton Rilke is raising the big questions about life, asking them as a poet and looking for a poetic intuition of the meaning of life. For Merton, Rilke approaches Being, and therefore the angels for Rilke are superior beings, because they have more being, more actuality than the rest of us. What haunts Rilke according to Merton is the relative lack of actuality in human life, and behind this, Merton says, is a sort of existentialist approach. Human existence is feeble, not just metaphysically feeble but experientially feeble, because men somehow never get around to making their existence mean what it is supposed to mean. The answer Rilke was reaching for does involve a change and not an answer to a riddle, not an answer explaining anything. But the kind of answer he was looking for was closer to home: what is going to make life meaningful here and now? How am I going to function in life even while not finding a complete solution to the problems of life? How am I making my life – which is a struggle – a coherent rather than an incoherent

struggle? This is extremely important, Merton says, because even with a mind full of correct solutions to theological problems one's life can nevertheless be totally incoherent. Therefore it is most important not just to have a lot of answers filed in one's mind, but to struggle coherently. Merton finally calls the human experiences which Rilke is poetically depicting in the *Elegies* experiences which appeal to us, because they are entrusted to us and we have to measure up to them. That is the task we have been given.

In the final session, "The Simple Things of Life," Merton talks about Rilke's famous *Letters to a Young Poet*. A young man who was serving in the army but sensed a vocation to be a poet wrote to Rilke about this vocation (we do not have the letters he sent to Rilke but only Rilke's replies). He also sent his own poems for Rilke's assessment and asked for advice regarding emerging troubles in his young adult life. Rilke writes in one of these letters – and Merton agrees – that people are mostly living more by social conventions than by what life really demands of them, and so conventional life becomes an escape from reality. This diagnosis for Rilke – and for Merton too – is most valid in connection with human (sexual) love. For Rilke life itself is a coherent unity. It is strongly centered on human (sexual) love and man has to appreciate how terribly difficult this is instead of taking it lightly. Rilke writes that "for one human being to love another, that is perhaps the hardest of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation." Merton adds that while this does not directly apply to himself and the other monks because Rilke is talking about marriage, it is analogous to the monastic life, because "the life of the vows is not easy either and it requires an analogous preparation." Finally Merton agrees with Rilke that "surrender is not the answer, because you've got to have something to give; if you haven't anything to give, you are surrendering nothing."

For every serious Merton scholar or disciple these conferences are a gift of great value, providing a revealing perspective on Rilke's importance for Merton himself and on his ability to share his enthusiasm with his monastic brothers. Anyone who really wants to encounter Rilke the poet needs to dive headlong into his poetry, especially his late and most mature works like the *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*; and as Merton stressed repeatedly, one would get so much more out of it if one had the opportunity to hear the poems in their original language, because the poetic power of the German words is so much greater than any translation is able to convey. While Merton's reflections and citations of Rilke's poems are hardly more than pointing with a finger at the moon, as the Zen saying goes, they do point in the right direction.