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NIETZSCHE AND RILKE

THIS STUDY of Nietzsche and Rilke, and particularly of what they have in common, is meant to throw light on both and also on the relation of philosophy and poetry. To those who are used to comparisons of Nietzsche with Nero and of Rilke with St. Francis any insistence on common elements will come as a surprise; but it may also disabuse them of some misapprehensions. There are, of course, obvious differences between the two men; and it is unlikely that an extended contrast would prove illuminating. Some reflection on what they have in common, on the other hand, may help us more to understand the relation of poetry to philosophy than the customary juxtaposition of Dante and St. Thomas—as atypical a pair as one is likely to find: Thomas, with his dogmatic commitments, is utterly unlike any Greek or modern philosopher; the *Divine Comedy* is unlike any other poem; and Dante's relation to Thomas is unlike that of any other major poet and philosopher. Shakespeare and Seneca, whom T. S. Eliot juxtaposes not without sarcasm, could hardly be more disparate—in time, stature, or sensibility. Nietzsche and Rilke, on the other hand, furnish a nearly ideal pair. Probably they are, respectively, the greatest German philosopher and poet of the last hundred years: they wrote in the same language and belong roughly to the same age.

Two further facts make it strange that comparisons have not become a commonplace long ago, especially in view of the

vast literature that has accumulated around both men. First, Nietzsche's influence is very apparent, if as yet very ill digested, in some of Rilke's juvenilia. And secondly, both men loved the same woman—probably more than any other. Nietzsche loved Lou Salomé in 1882 when she was barely over twenty, and she listened to his innermost ideas without quite reciprocating his feelings. Their relation was short-lived but intense, and their break and Nietzsche's subsequent solitude precipitated his first attempt to develop his whole philosophy in a single major work, his *Zarathustra*. When Rilke met her fifteen years later, in 1897, Nietzsche was slowly dying; he was known the world over; Lou herself had recently published a book about him; and she was mature while Rilke, at twenty-two, was not. She was married to Professor Andreas but became Rilke's mistress, traveled with him, and their love was complete.

There is no need, however, for making a juxtaposition biographical: the only data required will be found in the work of the two men, and the emphasis will fall on Rilke's poems which will be cited, like all other quotations, in my own translation.¹ Nietzsche will be introduced only insofar as that which Rilke's poems express happens to be very close to the spirit of Nietzsche's work. The question of influence shall not detain us.

My approach differs almost equally from the distinctive critical methods of the 19th and the 20th Century. If 19th Century literary criticism has concerned itself too much with his-

1. All the Nietzsche quotations are from *The Portable Nietzsche*, selected and translated, with an introduction, prefaces, and notes, by Walter Kaufmann, The Viking Press 1954, except for the poem in section VI which is taken from my *Nietzsche*, Princeton University Press 1950. My Rilke translations are published here for the first time. No single German edition contains all the original texts: the two volumes of *Ausgewählte Werke* contain important items not included in the earlier six-volume edition of *Gesammelte Werke*; and the same is true of the two-volume and six-volume editions of the letters. Quite a number of poems, moreover, are available only in small separate volumes. The last poem in the present essay, for example, is to be found only in *Briefwechsel mit Erika Mitterer*. All of these books are published by the Insel-Verlag. With the only previous extended juxtaposition—Erich Heller's chapter on "Rilke and Nietzsche"—I deal in detail in another essay, in *Partisan Review*.

torical and biographical considerations which lead beyond the work of art, the "new" criticism, which has studied works without external reference, has rarely got beyond formal considerations. I propose to focus attention on the *contents* of Rilke's poems, on the experiences which they communicate, but without trivializing them biographically.

II

Rilke's earlier poems are often underestimated by those who admire his *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*, especially by those intent on finding a philosophy in these often obscure later works. But much can be said in favor of beginning with three pre-Duino poems which are short enough to be quoted without omission and simple enough to require no commentary. Moreover, they are among Rilke's best.

The Song of the Idiot

They do not hinder me. They let me go.
 They say, nothing could happen even so.
 How good.
 Nothing can happen. Everything revolves engrossed
 always around the Holy Ghost,
 around a certain ghost (you know)—
 how good.

No, one should really not suppose
 that there is any danger in those.
 There's of course the blood.
 The blood is the hardest thing. The blood is a chore,
 sometimes I think I can't any more.
 (How good.)

Look at that ball, isn't it fair—
 red and round as an everywhere.
 Good you created the ball.
 Whether it comes when we call

How oddly all things seem to humor some whim,
 they flock together, apart they swim,
 friendly and just a little dim;
 how good.

This poem from *Das Buch der Bilder* certainly does not communicate any philosophy nor even any belief. It does not develop any argument but proceeds largely by free associations which are frequently suggested by rhymes; and unrhymed translations are therefore particularly inadequate. The poet projects himself into the mind of an idiot and recreates an irrational stream of consciousness. And yet little is needed to transform this poem into a philosophic position: merely the claim that the world really is as it appears to the idiot. This, of course, Rilke neither says nor implies; and the poem is part of a sequence of similar projections into sane, if invariably sad, states of mind.

Even so the inclusion of this theme and Rilke's success with it invite the reflection that perhaps he does not feel too sure of the rationality of the world, and that a poet with a firm belief in a purposive world-order would have been very much less likely to write such a poem. Surely, the same might be said of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. But what is true of the novelist who forces us to see the world from the point of view of a castrated idiot is perhaps less applicable to a lyric poet who depends on different moods almost as much as a dramatist.

The next poem comes from the first part of *Neue Gedichte* and is one of Rilke's most perfect.

The Panther

In the Jardin des Plantes, Paris

His glance, worn by the passing of the bars,
 has grown so weary it has lost its hold.
 It seems to him, there are a thousand bars,
 and then behind a thousand bars no world.

The soft gait of the supple, forceful paces
revolving in a circle almost nil,
is like a dance of power that embraces
a core containing, dazed, a mighty will.

Rarely the pupil's curtain, soundlessly,
is raised—and then an image enters him,
goes through the silent tension of the limbs—
and in his heart ceases to be.

Again, nothing is asserted: no belief, no truth, no philosophy. And again it takes only a single additional line to transform a perfect poem into a doubtful philosophy; namely: this is a portrait of the human condition. Rilke's historical and geographical proximity to Kafka may suggest that this addition would be entirely in his spirit, but this is exceedingly doubtful. Why should not the poet who projects himself into an orphan, the Buddha, a prisoner, a woman's fate, Orpheus, Eurydice, and Hermes (all three in turn), the birth of Venus, Leda, and countless others, project himself also into the mood of those who feel more or less perpetually like Kafka?

A poem can illustrate a philosophy insofar as the philosophy itself is a metaphysical projection of an experience, a mood, an attitude. The poet may know this mood as one among many or as the dominant experience of his own life; he may enter into it as a virtuoso or be trapped in it; he may illustrate the same philosophy over and over again or bring to life many, whether as a tour de force or as an unwitting record of his own range of experience; and he may be quite unaware of the fact that others have converted such experiences into philosophies.

The third poem, from the second part of *Neue Gedichte*, is more direct than the other two. The poet no longer projects himself into an idiot or an animal but, as in most of his later work, seems to speak for himself.

Archaic Torso of Apollo

We did not know his high, unheard of head
 where his eyes' apples ripened. Yet his torso has
 retained their glowing as

a candelabrum where his vision, not yet dead,

only turned low, still shines. For else the breast
 could not blind you, nor could we still discern
 the smile that wanders in the loins' faint turn
 to that core which once carried manhood's crest.

Else would this stone, disfigured and too small,
 stand mute under the shoulders' lucid fall
 and not gleam like a great cat's skin, and not

burst out of all its contours, bright

as a great star: there is no spot

that does not see you. You must change your life.

If one considers this sonnet as an illustration of a philosophy, it must be a very different philosophy from that of the two earlier poems: no longer Kafka but Sartre, no longer nihilism but a call for a decision. Both philosophies, however, can be found in the work of Nietzsche, too, and in the same sequence as in Rilke.

The nihilism illustrated by "The Panther" is, after all, qualified by the suggestion that life is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon—and this is one of the key sentences of Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*. It would surely be false to say that all of Rilke's early poems illustrate this attitude, but enough of the best of them do to warrant the claim that the feeling about the world which Nietzsche formulated in this way was one which Rilke knew, too, first-hand, without any special feat of imagination.

In the "Archaic Torso of Apollo" this early aestheticism is transcended, but the achievement of the Greeks is experienced nevertheless in a characteristically Nietzschean manner. The

mere contrast between classical antiquity and our own paltriness is, of course, too common to establish any strong parallel: to mention a single outstanding example, it is one of the central motifs of Joyce's *Ulysses*. But Rilke, like Nietzsche, does not react with resignation, irony, or humor, leave alone romantic nostalgia. To him the archaic torso is a work of art and a human achievement rather than a symbol of an irretrievable past; and therefore he experiences it not only as a reproach but also as a challenge and a promise. His attitude is that of Nietzsche in his third book, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, where it is urged that besides the outlook of the antiquarian and that of the critic of the past there is, thirdly, the "monumentalistic" attitude. Rilke's poem may be taken as an illustration of this attitude which, as it happens, neither he nor Nietzsche ever relinquished.

We have no right, to be sure, to infer from "Archaic Torso of Apollo" that Rilke maintained a particular position or identified himself permanently with certain ideas. What the sonnet, taken by itself, shows is only that Rilke knew a certain experience which some other people, notably Nietzsche, have had, too. But what I shall try to show next is that Rilke communicated in his poetry quite a number of experiences which are far from common and rarely encountered in the work of other poets or philosophers—except Nietzsche. And I shall begin with four interrelated motifs which are equally characteristic of, and central in, the work of both men. Here are certain fundamental experiences which inspired both a philosopher and a poet, to be transmuted by each in accordance with his distinctive genius.

III

What Rilke has in common with Nietzsche is, first of all, his experience of his own historical situation. In his seventh elegy he formulates it in terms no less applicable to Nietzsche than to himself:

Every brute inversion of the world knows the disinherited
to whom the past no longer belongs, and not yet the future.

For most men their historical situation poses no problem; they are not even aware of it. It did not occur to Aristotle that the world of the Greek city states was disappearing forever under his very eyes. St. Thomas built confidently for all eternity. Kant hoped that his *Critique of Pure Reason* would enable men at long last to find the real truth within two decades. Hegel was the first great philosopher with any keen sense of his historical position, and he saw himself as the heir of three thousand years. He felt secure in his possession of the past, and his refusal to speculate about the future went hand in hand with the feeling that the past and the present were sufficient for him. Goethe's attitude was similar.

In the course of the 19th Century some writers found their relation to the past almost as troubled as their situation in the present. Marx is an outstanding example; but, denied the romantics' escape into the past, he fled into an equally imaginary future which he thought he could foresee and which he believed belonged to him. He still had a faith in a world-order and even a kind of moral providence.

Kierkegaard, for all his profoundly critical attitude toward past and present, was a man of faith; and so was Dostoevski, though his psychological insight was unclouded by any illusion. Rilke's two lines apply to Nietzsche as to no other equally outstanding figure before him.

Exactly the same is true of the following four lines from *Stundenbuch* which suggest the second great common motif and could be inscribed over Nietzsche's work no less than Rilke's:

I believe in everything unsaid still.
My most pious feelings I want to set free.
What no man has yet dared to will
shall one day be instinctive with me.

For those "to whom the past no longer belongs, and not yet the future," piety cannot mean what it once meant. The peculiar piety of Nietzsche and Rilke does not consist in any reverent acceptance of some tradition, but rather in a rejection of all that has hardened into stereotypes, and in the resolve to be open and ready for their own individual call. Without believing in any god, they feel that if only they will be entirely receptive they will be addressed personally and experience a necessity, a duty, a destiny which will be just theirs and nobody else's, but no less their duty than any categorical imperative.

What Nietzsche and Rilke want is a new honesty, and the sin against the spirit is for them the essentially insincere escape into traditional values and clichés. What is old cannot be altogether adequate now, for me, in an unprecedented situation. It is honesty that demands what is still unsaid. Honesty is the new piety.

Rilke speaks for Nietzsche, too, when he says in his first elegy "that we are not very reliably at home in the interpreted world." Most men, of course, are; and William James frankly insisted on the importance of feeling at home in the universe. But what is for James a legitimate approach to piety, is ruled out for Nietzsche and Rilke precisely by their piety: their new honesty does not permit any such security; their new piety involves an openness for experiences which explode our customary interpretations. They refuse to reduce an experience or insight to fit it into a preconceived scheme of things.

What is involved in this disdain for security is stated beautifully in one of Rilke's letters (April 12, 1923); and what he here describes as the central inspiration of his elegies and sonnets may be considered the third great common motif of his work and Nietzsche's. "Whoever does not affirm at some time or other with a definite resolve—yes, jubilate at—the terribleness of life, never takes possession of the unutterable powers of our existence; he merely walks at the edge; and when the decision is made

eventually, he will have been neither one of the living nor one of the dead. To show the *identity* of terribleness and bliss, these two faces of the same divine head—indeed, of this *single* face that merely looks this way or that, depending on the distance from which, or the mood in which, we perceive it—that is the essential meaning and concept of my two books.”

Here the poet does what Goethe scornfully refused to do: he states the “idea” of what he himself considers his greatest poetic work. But if we reflect on Goethe’s words to Eckermann (May 6, 1827), there is no real disagreement: “They come and ask me what idea I sought to embody in my *Faust*. As if I knew . . . that myself! . . . Indeed, that would have been a fine thing, had I wanted to string such a rich, variegated . . . life . . . upon the meagre thread of a single . . . ideal! It was altogether not my manner as a poet to strive for the embodiment of something abstract. . . . I did not have to do anything but round out and form such visions and impressions artistically . . . so that others would receive the same impressions when hearing or reading what I presented.”

Rilke’s “essential meaning and concept” could hardly be called the meagre thread of a single idea, nor is it anything abstract. It is his vision and impression of life. In his experience the terribleness and bliss of life are as a single face that merely looks this way or that depending on his distance from it or his mood. It is only by walking at the edge and seeking shelter that he can escape the terror of existence; but that means inevitably that no bliss is left either, only the balance of mediocrity. On the other hand, when he plunges into life, exposing himself to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, the very intensity of his suffering fills him with ecstasy.

From this point of view, the Christian martyrs deserve admiration as men who did not walk at the edge. The young Nietzsche considered artist, saint, and philosopher the highest types of humanity and always retained some feeling for the

ascetic. He might well have agreed with Rilke's statement, in the letter already cited: "I have often said to myself that this was the urge or (if it is permitted to say so) the holy cunning of the martyrs that they craved to put behind themselves pain, the most terrible pain, the excess of all pain—that which otherwise distributes itself unforeseeably over a whole life and mingles with its moments in small or larger doses of physical and spiritual suffering—to evoke this whole possibility of suffering *at once*, to conjure it up so that afterwards, after one has weathered it, there might be only bliss."

Although he does not walk at the edge, the martyr, too, seeks security. Far from choosing the precarious life which Nietzsche and Rilke elect, he throws away life to buy safety beyond. What separates Nietzsche and Rilke from the martyrs is ultimately—and this is the fourth great common motif—their complete repudiation of otherworldiness.

This is not only of the essence of Rilke's poetry but also the main theme of his last major prose work, "The Letter of the Young Workingman," written in February 1922, during the very days when he also wrote the elegies and sonnets. The fourteen pages of this protest against Christianity do not only breathe Nietzsche's spirit but echo particular passages in his books. It is hard to believe that Rilke should not have been conscious of this; but whether he recognized them or not, it is interesting that such passages should have come to his mind while he wrote the elegies and sonnets.

"Do not forever compel us to fall back into the distress and melancholy that it cost him, as you say, to 'redeem' us. Let us at long last be redeemed." Compare this with Zarathustra's discourse "On Priests": ". . . melancholy. They would have to sing better songs for me to have faith in their Redeemer: and his disciples would have to look more redeemed!" And the famous passage on Cesare Borgia near the end of Nietzsche's *Antichrist* is certainly the model for this contrast: "Even within the church,

indeed in its very crown, *this* world exacted its abundance and its native overflow. Why is the church not praised for having been so sturdy that it did not collapse under the weight of the vitality of certain popes whose thrones were heavy with bastard children, courtesans, and murders? Was there not more Christianity in them than in the arid restorers of the Gospels—namely, something living, inexorable, transmuted?" I recall the culmination of Nietzsche's passage: "But life! But the triumph of life! But the great Yes to all high, beautiful, audacious things! And Luther *restored the church*: he attacked it."

Some other parallels may be fully accounted for by the basically similar attitudes of both men; for example, the preference for the Old Testament over the New and the great indictment of the Christian attitude toward sex. What is most significant in any case is not the number of variations on the theme but the central motif of radical opposition to otherworldliness. And this is stated in "The Letter of the Young Workingman" not only in the spirit but even in the style of Zarathustra's discourse "On the Afterworldly":

What madness, to distract us to a beyond, when we are surrounded right here by tasks and expectations and futures! What fraud, to purloin images of earthly rapture to sell them to heaven behind our backs! Oh, it is high time for the impoverished earth to claim back all those loans which have been raised on her bliss to furnish some over-future!

Rilke accepts Zarathustra's challenge to remain faithful to the earth; and his earth, like Nietzsche's, is not that of literary naturalism or realism any more than the Victorian or romantic world or the universe of science or religion. It is an ecstatically experienced world alive with all the glory of the mystics' God. In a letter (February 22, 1923), Rilke recalls how he once used to speak of God and adds: "Now you would hardly ever hear me refer to him. . . . His attributes are taken away from God, the no longer utterable, and return to the creation."

IV

If ever there was Dionysian poetry in Nietzsche's sense—poetry that celebrates life with all its agony, verse that praises suffering as part of the passion of existence—it is found in the *Duino Elegies* and the *Sonnets to Orpheus*. For that matter, Rilke knew of course that the features of Orpheus and Dionysus blend ever in Greek legend; and the myth of Dionysus' martyrdom and rebirth, which is crucial for Nietzsche's conception, is related of Orpheus as well.

Dionysus versus "the Crucified One": there you have the contrast. It is not martyrdom that constitutes the difference—only here it has two different senses. . . . The problem is that of the meaning of suffering: whether a Christian meaning or a tragic meaning. In the first case, it is supposed to be the path to a sacred existence; in the second case, *existence is considered sacred enough* to justify even a tremendous amount of suffering. . . . The god on the cross is a curse on life, a pointer to seek redemption from it; Dionysus cut to pieces is a promise of life: it is eternally reborn and comes back from destruction.

In this passage from *The Will to Power* we can substitute "Orpheus" for "Dionysus" without the least change in meaning.

Nietzsche thought that this joyous affirmation of life with all its pain could be found in Greek tragedy. Certainly, for all the influence of the Greeks on classical German poetry, it could not be found in Goethe or Schiller. In *Faust*, to be sure, Goethe portrayed a man who craves the agony and bliss of the whole race, preferring the totality of experience, if there were such a thing, to the drab dust of a merely academic existence; but any love of the present moment, any boundless affirmation of it, any wish to hold on to it, is precisely what *Faust* cannot understand. In fact, he cannot distinguish it from Philistine sloth. Even in his final speech he tells the moment to abide only because he enjoys his anticipation of an imaginary future which is, moreover—and the poet takes pains to underscore this—utterly at

odds with reality.

Goethe, unlike his Faust, knew a completely un-Philistine appreciation of the moment, especially in his old age; but although Nietzsche, near the end of *The Twilight of the Idols*, celebrated Goethe's attitude as the incarnation of a "Dionysian" faith, the affirmation of Goethe's "It be as it may, It was, oh, so fair" seems serene rather than ecstatic. Here is resignation rather than rapture, peace rather than passion, even a touch of weariness.

Nietzsche fuses Goethe's radical this-worldliness with the genuine joy of Schiller's famous hymn which looks forward to another world:

Suffer bravely, myriads!
Suffer for the better world!
Up above the firmament
A great God will give rewards.

Generally, Schiller's attitude was not one of otherworldliness but of heroic defiance of suffering. The Dionysian affirmation of Zarathustra's "Drunken Song" strikes a new note:

Have you ever said Yes to a single joy? O my friends, then you have said Yes too to *all* woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored; if ever you wanted one thing twice, if ever you said, "You please me, happiness! Abide, moment!" then you wanted *all* back. All anew, all eternally, all entangled, ensnared, enamored—oh, then you *loved* the world. Eternal ones, love it eternally and evermore; and to woe too, you say: go, but return! *For all joy wants—eternity. . . . What does joy not want? It is thirstier, more cordial, hungrier, more terrible, more secret than all woe; it wants itself, it bites into itself, the ring's will strives in it; it wants love, it wants hatred, it is overrich, gives, throws away, begs that one might take it, thanks the taker, it would like to be hated; so rich is joy that it thirsts for woe, for hell, for hatred, for disgrace, for the cripple, for world—this world, oh, you know it!*

This feeling is significantly different from the romantics' occasional celebration of the lust of suffering and the voluptuous delight of agony. Novalis, for example, celebrates pain as a fore-

taste of death because he hates life. Altogether, the romantics' praise of suffering is, most typically, a repudiation of the present, akin to their escape into the past or the future: it is, at bottom, praise of another world or of a brief ecstasy which, while it lasts, lifts the poet out of this world. Nietzsche's attitude is not found in German literature, if indeed in any literature, before him; but it is the central mood of Rilke's elegies and sonnets.

In this mood the four motifs which we have stated separately are fused into a single experience: Nietzsche and Rilke, "to whom the past no longer belongs, and not yet the future," develop a new piety which denies them the security of any tradition as well as any escape from the terror of life, including even the ancient hope for bliss in another life; but their radical affirmation of this world with all its agony becomes an experience of ecstatic bliss.

V

A glance at one elegy and one sonnet may show how some apparently striking differences between Nietzsche and Rilke are merely superficial. "Why," Rilke asks at the beginning of his ninth elegy, "have to be human?" And he answers: "because being here is much" and then explains:

Once

everything, only *once*. *Once* and no more. And we, too,
once. Never again. But having
 been this *once*, even though only *once*:
 having been on *earth* does not seem revokable.

On the face of it, this is the very opposite of Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same events. But if we understand this doctrine as the metaphysical projection of the feeling expressed in the words we have quoted from "The Drunken Song," we see that the central experience of Nietzsche and Rilke is the same. What Rilke's emphatic "once" is meant to rule out

is not an eternal recurrence but a beyond; and what he, like Nietzsche, affirms rapturously is this world. A few lines later, Rilke exclaims—and this is surely the epitome of “The Drunken Song”: “Would love to hold on to all forever.”

One can, of course, pose philosophical puzzles about the eternal recurrence, and it is perfectly fair to subject the theoretical explication of a mood to theoretical scrutiny and criticism. Some objections, however, rest on a psychological misunderstanding, a failure to grasp the central experience. Interpreters have paid insufficient attention to Zarathustra’s opening discourse “On The Three Metamorphoses” in which the highest stage in the development of the spirit is represented by the child. One possible and particularly important attitude toward the eternal recurrence of the same events is neither moralistic nor speculative but rather like a child’s delight in a merry-go-round—or a child’s wish to have a story it likes repeated again and again and again.

The other great apparent difference between Nietzsche and Rilke is suggested by the references to angels in the elegies. Instead of examining all these passages in an effort to understand what exactly Rilke may have meant, it will suffice to cite a letter Rilke wrote during the last year of his life, November 13, 1925. It was written to his Polish translator and plainly intended by the poet as a major document. He explains how he wants to be understood: “*Not in the Christian sense* (from which I move away more and more passionately) but in a purely earthly, deeply earthly, blissfully earthly” sense. And again:

By making the mistake of applying *Catholic* conceptions of death, of the beyond, and of eternity to the elegies or sonnets, one moves away completely from their point of departure and becomes involved in an ever more thorough misunderstanding. The “angel” of the elegies has nothing to do with the angel of the Christian heaven (sooner with the angelic figures of Islam). The angel of the *elegies* is the creature in whom that transformation of the visible into the invisible at which we work appears completed.

In other words, he is the image or incarnation of the accomplishment of our striving, and his features thus merge with those of Nietzsche's *Uebermensch*.

In his discourse "On Poets" Zarathustra says: "all gods are poets' parables, poets' prevarications. Verily, it always lifts us higher—specifically, to the realm of the clouds: upon these we place our motley bastards and call them gods and overmen." In Rilke, gods and angels are indeed mere poets' parables and actually used interchangeably. In the third sonnet, for example, a god appears where the elegies would have introduced an angel, and Nietzsche the overman:

A god can do it. But how can one follow,
mere man, oh, tell me, through the narrow art?
Man's sense is discord. Where ways of the heart
are crossing stands no temple for Apollo.

Song, as you teach it, does not reach nor yearn,
nor does it woo what is at last attained;
song is existence. For the god, unstrained.
But when do we exist? When will he turn,

to help us to exist, the earth and sky?
It is not this, youth, that you love, although
your voice then opens up your lips—oh, try

forgetting that you ever sang. That flees.
Singing in truth is breath that does not flow.
An aimless breath. Flight in the god. A breeze.

In some translations the last word is rendered as "gale." But what Rilke exalts here is precisely the absence of any storm; and even if it is granted that god, angel, overman, Orpheus, and Dionysus become indistinguishable at this point, this lack of strain may seem to establish a marked difference with Nietzsche who is generally held to have conceived a more ferocious ideal. In fact, however, Zarathustra follows up his discourse "On Self-Overcoming" with one "On Those Who are Sublime"; and this

is strikingly similar in content to Rilke's sonnet:

I do not like these tense souls. . . . If he grew tired of his sublimity, this sublime one, only then would his beauty commence. . . . His deed itself still lies on him as a shadow: the hand still darkens the doer. As yet he has not overcome his deed. Though I love the bull's neck on him, I also want to see the eyes of the angel. He must still discard his heroic will; he shall be elevated, not merely sublime: the ether itself should elevate him, the will-less one.

Surely, this is the theme of the third sonnet to Orpheus.

VI

I now propose to consider three more late poems, all short enough to be cited without omission, and illustrate specific parallels to Nietzsche's thought. I am not implying that all the later poems are so Nietzschean nor, for that matter, that all are so clear or so good. Here, to begin with, is the ninth poem from the second part of *Sonnets to Orpheus*:

Jubilate not when you judge that no rack is required,
men's necks no longer stretched in metallic splendor.
None is enhanced, no man's heart, because a desired
spasm of mildness makes your contortion more tender.

What they received through the ages, the rack and the rod,
scaffolds surrender as children the toys of their previous
birthday. Into the pure, the high, the undeviating,
opened-up heart—thus does not enter the god

of genuine mildness. He would come with might and expand
radiantly as but the godlike will.

More than a wind for huge ships that are safe near the land.

Neither less than the secret, silent vibration
conquering us from within like a still
playing child of unlimited copulation.

This is the heart of Nietzsche's critique of modern man, the

point of his insistent question, "*whether we have become more moral.*" In the section of *The Twilight of the Idols* that bears this title, Nietzsche protests against a reviewer who "went so far that he 'understood' the meaning of my work—not without expressing his respect for my courage and daring—to be a demand for the abolition of all decent feelings. Thank you! In reply, I take the liberty of raising the question whether we have really become more moral." The "tenderness" of bourgeois morality seemed a mockery to Nietzsche and Rilke; and the poet evidently agreed with these sentences in the chapter "On Those Who Are Sublime":

Gracefulness is part of the graciousness of the great-souled. . . . When power becomes gracious and descends into the visible—such descent I call beauty. And there is nobody from whom I want beauty as much as from you who are powerful: let your kindness be your final self-conquest. Of all evil I deem you capable: therefore I want the good from you. Verily, I have often laughed at the weaklings who thought themselves good because they had no claws.

A similar experience is formulated near the beginning of Rilke's first elegy:

The beautiful is nothing
but the beginning of the terrible that we still barely endure,
and we admire it so because it serenely disdains
to destroy us.

The twelfth sonnet of part two concerns itself with the images of fire and change which are frequently encountered in Nietzsche's work, but the parallel extends far beyond the imagery.

Choose to be changed. Oh experience the rapture of fire
in which a life is concealed, exulting in change as it burns;
and the projecting spirit who is master of the entire
earth, loves the figure's flight less than the point where it turns.

That which would lock itself up—already is frozen.
 Does it feel safe in the shadow of colorless grey?
 Wait, what is hardest will warn from afar what has chosen
 hardness: a hammer will shatter its prey.

He that squanders himself as a well is cognized by cognition
 and it leads him rejoicing through the serene creation
 which often ceases to start and begins with the end.

Every span of delight is the child or grandchild of division
 which they traverse in wonder. And Daphne, since her transformation
 into a baytree, desires that you choose to be changed into wind.

This sonnet invites comparison with Nietzsche's dictum: *Nur wer sich wandelt bleibt mit mir verwandt*² (only those who continue to change remain related to me)—and with his little poem:

Yes, I know from where I came!
 Ever hungry like a flame
 I consume myself and glow.
 Light grows all that I conceive,
 ashes everything I leave:
 Flame I am assuredly.

While the first three lines of Rilke's sestet are certainly very obscure—and, I think, inferior to the rest of the poem—the octave is really deceptively clear. The meaning of the words is so easily seen that one is apt to overlook that what is meant is anything but easy. Everybody wants to lock himself up after having undergone a few transformations in adolescence and perhaps for a few years after that; everybody chooses some state of being, usually without even realizing that he chooses it, and says, more or less explicitly: that is the way I am, or happen to be. Or: I have always said that . . . Or: I am the kind who . . . Or one takes refuge in heredity and environment. Or, if one has read some of the psychoanalysts, one blames oneself on one's parents' mis-

2. From the poem concluding *Beyond Good and Evil*.

takes: It is all their fault. "Choose to be changed" is not only a call for continual growth; it is an implicit denunciation of all these myths and of any security that may be found in a tradition or expected from a single conversion; it is an invitation to the most precarious life imaginable.

The last of the three poems to be cited here may have been Rilke's last German poem. (Many of his last poems were French—reminding us of Nietzsche's occasional wish that he might have been able to write some of his books in French rather than in German.)

Dove that remained outside, outside the dovecote,
back in its sphere and home, one with the day and night,
it knows the secrecy when the most remote
terror is fused into deeply felt flight.

Of all the doves the always most protected,
never endangered most, does not know tenderness;
richest of all hearts is the resurrected:
turning back liberates, freedom rejoices.

Over the nowhere arches the everywhere.
Oh, the ball that is thrown, that we dare,
does it not fill our hands differently than before?
By the weight of return it is more.

The theme of this poem can be traced back beyond the prodigal son; but Rilke is not trying to lend a voice to some ancient wisdom but recording his own experience which is free of all otherworldly or doctrinaire overtones. And his "purely earthly, deeply earthly, blissfully earthly" feeling is no longer an illustration of the Biblical dictum that there is more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine just men—for the conception of sin is no longer meaningful here—but a variation in a minor key of Aphorism 283 in Nietzsche's *Gay Science*: "Believe me, the secret of the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment of existence is: to *live dangerously!*"

The image of the ball conjoined with the substantival use of the everywhere takes us back to the first poem we cited, "The Song of the Idiot," which also features both. In that poem "everything revolves engrossed / always around the Holy Ghost." In "The Panther" the image of revolving is maintained, but in the center there is "dazed, a mighty will." Still, life makes no sense. But if this will were awakened? In "Archaic Torso of Apollo" the senseless circular motion is given up, and the human organ of reproduction has become the center—the symbol of creativity. Now there is a possibility of meaning: "You must change your life." But how? "A god can do it. But how can one follow?" In the sonnets the answer is given again and again with the image of the wind. Singing in truth is a wind. "And Daphne, since her transformation into a baytree, desires that you choose to be changed into wind." The wind is that which never locks itself up in any form, which never seeks or finds shelter, the symbol of the utterly abandoned and exposed life that is yet unstrained. In the ball the image of the wind, of flight, merges with the older image of spherical revolution. Moving in circles is the epitome of senselessness, and so, in a way, is the child's throwing of the ball or the aimless blowing of the wind. There is nothing that gives our lives meaning, and viewed from the outside life, which ends in death, is senseless. There is no meaning outside, but Rilke and Nietzsche proclaim that a certain kind of life is its own reward, that a certain mode of experience makes life infinitely worthwhile, and that "the secret of the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment of existence is: to *live dangerously!*"