



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>

## Philosophical Note in Rilke's *Duino Elegies*: A Critical Analysis

**Jayadev Kar**

Research Scholar

G.M.Autonomous College, Sambalpur.

### **Abstract:**

The objective of the study is to reveal the philosophy as propounded by Rainer Maria Rilke, the famous German poet. Rilke's elegy is considered as the masterpiece of 20 the century for it is not a single elegy but combination of ten elegies in sequences. In order to understand one the other must be taken into consideration. Hence a detail analysis and generalisation have been drawn. In traditional elegies the writers lament for the death of someone. Rilke's Duino elegies are different in the sense that Rilke does not laments for the death of someone rather he laments for the death of emotion in our heart. According to Rilke our emotion evaporates and conflict is second nature to us and hence we suffer. All the animals and inanimate objects are happy because they have accepted the vast openness of nature but human beings have failed to accept the vast openness. Human beings try to create their own world and interpret various objects of nature basing on their own knowledge. Hence they failed to find a pattern to live life. This is what exactly for which Rilke laments in Duino Elegies. Accordingly to Rilke the lovers are better than the ordinary people in society. Because they are dedicated to one another and they accept the vast openness of nature for love making. Accordingly to Rilke the woman in love is better than her male partner. Because the male partner some time avoids her love on the pretext of busy schedule, on the other hand the beloved wait eagerly for her lover. Another theme that is reflected in these elegies is the struggle between consciousness and fate. The poems provide the message and hopeful possibility that fate itself can be overcome through the development of consciousness. The paper critically examines all this aspect of the elegies in a sequence manner.

**Keywords:** Angel, Animals, Beauty, Elegy, Death, Philosophy, Love, Openness,

### **Introduction:**

Rainer Maria Rilke is the most influential and epoch making German poet of twentieth century. His "Duino Elegies" is the short sequences of ten poems. It is widely considered to be the century's masterpiece of German lyric poetry. Rilke's poetry explores the inner experience and the symbolic process of the psyche. Two things are important about

these poems. Firstly, Rilke makes people conscious of their inner world. This is actually a process of healing of the mental suffering. The second important aspect is that is that a person's dream helps him as the guide in the process of becoming conscious. This consciousness enables us to orient our lives according to our values. It also enables us to perceive a relationship with the divine realm. Rilke wants to find the ultimate meaning of life in the earthly existence, not in external life. This can be possible by means of the affirmation of life and death, light and darkness, pleasure and pain animal and angel binaries. The fundamental question that haunts the mind of the poet is what are we? The answer to this question is that we are neither totally natural as animals nor totally transient as angels. We experience the despair because of the split of our consciousness. This keeps us in a hanging position. Therefore it is impossible for us to be something that remains constant. To be an "I" means to be constantly in touch with the polarities of animal and angel, of life and death. We can give meaning to an earthly shape, which is something that the angel cannot do. We can use things to express and give shape to our inner world. Things are those medium through which we can do humanness and we can approach the open.

### **Critical Analysis:**

The elegies received their name from "Duino Castle" located on the bank of Adriatic Sea in Italy. At this castle Rilke spent the winter of 1911-12 as a guest of Princess Marie Von Thurn Und Taxis Hohenlohe. In fact these ten elegies are dedicated to the Princess in extreme gratitude. Rilke seems to be divinely inspired during the course of writing these elegies. Even Rilke himself admits that he heard something from the wind which became the beginning line of first elegy.

Who if I cried out, would hear me among the angels' hierarchies?

And even if one of them pressed me suddenly against his heart

I would be consumed in that overwhelming existence.

For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror.

Rilke stood still listening to the voice of the wind. He wrote down these words in his notebook, came back to his room and added few more lines which came to him spontaneously. He knew that the Lord has spoken to him. And by evening the first elegy was complete. The content of the first elegy deals with the limitation and deficiency of the ordinary human life.

The first elegy begins with the interaction between the poet and the nature. But nature is given a mythical dimension, in terms of the wind's voice, which is interpreted as God's message. In Rilke's language beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror. This is a paradox which appears to be absurd on the surface, but it contains the underlying truth. The sudden interaction of the human with the divine will generate a terrifying experience. Beauty and terror are antithetical, but they are coupled together at the moment of union of the human with the divine. The angels are terrifying to those human beings who do not want to lose their own identity and yet want to achieve the divine. This is the reason for which the lyric personal holds him back and becomes aware of his own existence. This is the reason for which there is an affirmation of the human condition, both of joy and pain, of life and death. Then Rilke laments again for the pendulum like condition of human being. Rilke says at the time of need human beings cannot turn to any angel or to any animals who already know that the human beings are not really at home. Unlike the animals, the human beings don't have the acceptance of the "vast openness". Animals are at home because they live in a natural condition and they have the absolute acceptance of the openness of nature. On the other hand the human beings, having been more intelligent than animals, create their own living condition. Because of this the same world may be different for different persons. This is how the external world is observed into our internal consciousness. This is a human process which is entirely different from the animals' mode of perception. Yet the whole problem lies in the fact that our consciousness is not integrated, it is rather divided and fragmented. Therefore we are not able to give a pattern to our experience. This is the beginning of frustration which is the subject matter of the first elegy. The elegies are also written in the monologue, which continues the dramatic ideologies. The speaker addresses to his heart to listen to the voices that come from within. Outside in the world the same voice can be heard among wind. The so called saints have listened to such voices.

The second elegy is a continuation and extension of the ideas, presented earlier in first elegy, because all ten elegies fall into a sequence. The beginning line of the second elegy confirms that all angels are terrifying. Yet the lyric personal invokes the angel as spiritual guide. Then Rilke refers to the story of Tobias who found an angel named Raphael as his spiritual guide. But for Rilke it is difficult to find a spiritual guide for he fears his existence will be at threat if he comes near to an angel. And this is the core of his lamentation. Then he goes on to speak about human emotion which faints like perfumes. Even if someone tell us that we have entered his blood stream, his room and the whole spring is filled with us, it is all meaningless, because he cannot contain us forever. This is the difference between angel and

human. The thought of angel is perpetual whereas the thought of human is ephemeral in nature. Our emotions evaporate like dew drops on the morning grass, like the steam that goes up from the dish of the hot food. According to Rilke lovers are of course in a better condition in comparison to ordinary human beings. Because of their submissiveness to each other, their self-surrender, lovers remain contented and gratified in each other's embrace. They are as if in a state of eternity, whenever they are united. They are forgetful of the worldly conditions which torments and torture human beings. Yet the lyric persona asks the lover about the eternity of their love. Lovers promise eternity within their embrace, yet the course of love undergoes changes from time to time. For example, the beginning of love is different from the maturity of love. The surprise of the first look, the desire to meet at the side of the windows and the first walk together in the garden are quite different from the moment of the maturity of love. So the irony is that lovers cannot be united forever. Union and separation are the two aspects of the process of love. Yet lovers are far better than ordinary human beings even if they are not completely transcendent. Charge in the feeling of love they are pin pointed and concentrated on love and not dwindle till separation. In the third elegy the poet has glorified his mother and his beloved. In this sense we can term Rilke as a feminist who laments for the lost love of his mother and beloved in the same vein.

The fourth elegy deals with the philosophy of life and death, the problem of pleasure and pain. Therefore the fourth elegy is the most negative of his poems, which introduces the darkest world. The images in the poem are reminder of his past experience and personal relations. He has the sense of regret that he could not please his father, because his father has a lot of expectation about the happiness and success of his son. Rilke creates a melodrama of his own heart. The self dramatisation makes this elegy more appealing.

In the beginning of the elegy the persona addresses to the trees of life and asks them when their winter will come. Winter symbolises death and therefore, the beginning question points to the process of life leading to death. The implicit answer to this question is that we do not know when our winter will come, even if it is quite certain. The lack of knowledge about death is our ignorance. In this sense we are contrasted with the migratory birds. These birds can know their future dangers and accordingly prepare themselves to deal with those dangerous situations. But because of our lack of knowledge about future, we are overtaken by the hostile storm leading to our fall. Among other limitation we cannot concentrate on one object for a long time. We continue to fluctuate from one object to another. Secondly conflict is second nature to our character. While concentrating on one object we feel the pull of another desire and break our concentration. Even the lovers who are more refined than

ordinary human beings suffer from terrible conflicts. Even if they promise to remain vast and expansive, they have the habit to come to their own boundary. From the vast and the open they come back to their little home. Rilke writes:

But we, while we are intent upon one object  
Already feel the pull of another; Conflict is second nature to us  
Are not lovers always arriving at each other's boundaries?  
Although they promised vastness, hunting home

Hence, human beings don't have any knowledge about the actual shape and structure of their condition. Even if they have some knowledge about their emotions they only know them from outside. Their observation and understanding is always superficial and limited. Similarly Rilke echoes the same philosophical note in fifth elegy.

The sixth elegy is often described by Rilke himself as the "Hero Elegy". This hero is not the traditional hero or any hero in particular, but the concept of the hero refers to the heroic attitude that fights to overcome obstacles. In the process of spiritual quest, one undertakes the voyage within his interior self. He assumes various identities or wears different masks. The hero is one of them and the poet has already mentioned about the hero in the elegy. Although the hero continues his struggle and fight, it does not bring any real victory or success. Rather it brings him a sense of defeat and purposelessness. Yet according to Rilke this kind of feeling is a necessity to achieve the final mission of life, because it brings about a transformation in the mode of consciousness. The sixth elegy begins with the description of the "Fig" tree which symbolises the mystery of nature. This tree does not make any announcement while it blossoms or bears the fruit. And hence leads a peaceful life. But we human beings, when blossoming time come make announcements and thus suffer.

The seventh elegy was composed in the month of February, 1922. This elegy traces the significant advancement achieved by the lyric persona in his journey within his self. He is now sure that love is a means of liberation and it can transcend the human beings from material world to a spiritual world. In the beginning of the elegy the lyric persona says that he is no longer wooing because he is no longer melancholic or nostalgic. But he would begin to cry as purely as a bird, when the ascending season has provided him the high spirit to go up. The bird is a creature who is one with the deepest mystery. Her openness to the vast nature is the source of mystery. And when we listen to the bird we feel that the vast openness has entered our body and spirit. And in such moment we forget that we are the suffering creature. According to Rilke the woman one loved is more perfect in love than her male partner. The woman has something of her own, something that she suffers and through suffering she

achieves the perfection. On the other hand man has always the excuse of being busy with more important matter and work. He is not adequately prepared for love therefore it is of great importance for the man to sacrifice more for his love. With every new heartbeat he can undergo transformation. His development into a perfect lover is a long and difficult process. But for the woman it is so easy and so natural. She can wait for her lover without being bore. When her lover arrives she extends a warm welcome. The silent lover has to transform himself internally being more committed to his beloved. The spring time would hold the essence of love as a rich experience. This would be echoed everywhere as the song of annunciation, a significant event, which would bring the dawning of new consciousness. With the pure emotion of love the day will be affirmative. He can climb up the stairs that might lead to the temple of the future. Like a fountain he would burst out and begin to flow until it falls from a great height. After, spring the summer will come with bright days and tender flowers. The pathways and the meadows at the sun set can come to his notice. At this moment he would fall asleep with his premonition about the approach of dark nights. Even if the night is dark there shall be stars in the sky. They will be the stars of the earth and he can know them after his death.

The lyric persona says that he was calling his beloved, but she would not come if he just called her. Other girls would appear before him as the spirits emerging from the fragile graves. They are like the unripe spirits seeking the earth. The persona realises that even if the experience of one earthly thing is enough for a life time. This refers to the physical union between the lovers. At the end of the seventh elegy the poet addresses to the earth. In his view the pleasant spring time on the earth is no longer a necessity to win over him. Quite frankly the persona says that he has belonged to the earth from the beginning. He is not seeking an imaginary heaven; rather the concrete and tangible experience on the earth has been possible due to the holy inspiration of the earth. He is now quite sure that death is his only intimate companion. This is how the poetic persona affirms death as a necessary part of his spiritual evolution. So he is not afraid of death, but he shows a calm acceptance of death. But at present he is living with his sense of belongingness to the earth.

The eighth elegy brings out the condition of reality which man is destined to undertake during his journey of life. He has his unique position, distinguished from animals and birds. The whole world of nature includes many species, which look out into the open. The animals' degree of consciousness is such that it comes into the world without setting the world against itself, but we the human beings, treat the world as our antagonist. When the animal is in the world, we the human beings stand in front of the world. The reason is that we

have a peculiar turn and heightening of our consciousness. So according to Rilke the word “open” do not merely means the sky or air or space, but it also means the mode of observation and judgement of the object made by human beings. It is a contradiction that the so called “open” is closed for human beings. Animals can feel the open freedom, or the flowers can feel it in the process blossoming, we do not have such experiences, but we can have such experiences only in the first moment of love. At this time we see our own vastness in the person whom we love. We also have the similar type of feeling when we surrender to God in ecstasy of devotional emotion.

Nature has two sides, and Rilke uses the image of the mirror to explain and interpret the experience of reaching the other side of nature. One is the forward view and the other is the backward view, just as we see our own image on the mirror. Backward view is the rumination over past in front of the mirror, comparing and contrasting it with present appearance. The backward look helps us to find what we were in the past. The experience of openness is like the flow of a fountain, but it lingers for a brief time. The consciousness of eternity has gone and we look at our past, as to how we took our place in the womb of the mother, how we had the love with the first woman. Then everything is changed because of our inability to sustain that glorious and blessed vision of the past. The first home refers to the mother which gave us perfect shelter. But after we came out of the mother’s womb we are trying to find out shelter in another second home. Yet we have not been successful in achieving it. Our home is shattered or broken and again we try to rearrange the home, but very soon we are broken. Animals do not have the consciousness of death. So they do not have any sense of restlessness or do not feel that they do not have any home for taking shelter.

It is death consciousness and the operation of fate, which compels us to move away from the centre of our consciousness. This is a kind of escape from the real human condition which makes our journey purposeless.

The ninth elegy is more affirmative in tone and content. The lyric persona discovers earth to be a fine place and nature as a store house of infinite joy. The poet challenges before the angel that without his guidance he can experience the spirituality. Rilke writes:

But because truly being here is so much  
Because everything here apparently needs us  
This fleeting world, which in some strange way keep calling to us  
Us, the most fleeting of all

The poet also interprets his love with the woman as a source of pure emotions and pure joy. According to the poet the reality of any joy in the world cannot be described fully. But in his view the sense of joy is something which can be felt within. It is a pure addition out of nothingness. Then the lyric persona develops a serious desire to transform himself into a tree known as laurel. This tree is unique because it is slightly darker than other green trees. It can observe small waves of joy at the side of every leaf. Again the tree is fixed in its position, unlike human being who moves from one place to other in search of peace. Then the lyric persona ruminates about what we can carry with us to the realm of divinity. It is not certainly the art of looking which have happened here. But the suffering, the heaviness and the long experience of love, which cannot be expressed in language, can be taken with us. The lyric persona justifies that we are here to express the different objects in terms of language. These objects might include the house, the breeze, the fountain, the window, the tower etc. But to express the ideas relating to these objects in language we must try to understand that we have to express them more intensely than the objects themselves. This is the secret purpose of our life on this earth.

When an angel appears before us, we must praise the beauty of this world before him. We can use the language as if we are the witness of the event to describe the objects before an angel. The angel will feel himself superior to us, but we can show him something simple which is our own thing and it is our own experience, we can describe the things of this world before the angel. Rilke writes:

Praise this world to the angel, not the unsayable one  
You can not impress him with glorious emotion; in the universe  
Where he feels more powerfully, you are a novice  
So show him something simple which formed over generations  
Lives as our own, near our hand and within our gaze

According to the lyric persona in spite of the decay of things, the essence of their values remains forever. Strangely enough these things of the world need liberation, and they expect our love and attention, even if we are the most transient of all. Their expectation is that we must change them by their description in terms of language.

The tenth and final elegy brings out the note of resolution and the voice of consolation. It is marked by the lyric persona's affirmation of death as a central experience of the process of life. At the same time this final elegy brings out the reconsolidation between the polar opposites such as pleasure and pain, life and death, success and defeat. As a matter of fact, these solaces should occur at the end of the elegy. This is how Rilke keeps himself

tuned to the continuity of the tradition. However the solace is not derived from any established system of philosophy such as Christianity, rather the poet is trying to project his own philosophy which emerges from his concrete experiences of the life time.

In Rilke's view all modern religions have provided their believers with consolations instead of giving them the scope to understand the basic aspect of this consolation. Rilke does not accept the traditional idea that we are sinful, and therefore we need redemption. This theory cannot be accepted by a heart which has lived through condition of reality on the earth. Rilke questions why we should go wondering to reach out to God. Rather he believes that we have never left God within ourselves. The lyric persona emerges from the violent insight and expresses his happiness before the angel. The suffering on the earth has made his heart much stronger. The nights of anguish appear to be much clear to him. It paved the way for spiritual realisation. This is how Rilke has propounded a new philosophy to look pain as the pleasure in disguise.

### **Conclusion:**

In traditional elegies the poet laments for the death of someone nearer to him, but Rilke laments for the evaporation of emotion. Although there are references to the death of Rilke's father and separation from the beloved, these incidents do not form the core of the chief lament expressed in "Duino Elegies". It is rather the split of the consciousness for which the personal cannot find a pattern of life and hence laments. The personal tragedy is raised to the level of a universal experience. Therefore the fundamental thing that gives rise to the laments of poetic persona is not that his father is dead or the beloved separated but the spilt of consciousness. This very thing prevents us from reaching the open. We are always aware of ourselves, observing, comparing, interpreting and naming our experience. Self pride and consciousness separates us from the rhythm of nature. Yet consciousness is something which helps us to perceive many things. It also enables us to orient our lives according to values and to have relationship with the divine realm. If our ultimate aim is to reach out the open, the first and foremost thing is to accept the full experience of the earthly beings. It means to mix with every section of people. Therefore Rilke does not need the assistance of any angel. He wants to find the ultimate meaning of a divine life not escaping from this life but accepting this life and this earth.

The awareness of man's insignificance and imperfection in the face of eternal experience is moving away from man for which the poet laments. The consciousness can tell

us that we are human, not the divine. This means that there should be the affirmation of the pains and sufferings, joys and happiness of human existence. Rilke also says that acceptance of death is a necessary part of human life. But man does not know it. This is another cause of the poet's lamentation. This philosophy is not derived from the doctrine of Christianity or from any traditional mode of belief, rather the poet's own experiences and sufferings that he has passed through has ultimately lead to the formation of such philosophy.

### Works Cited:

Abrams, M.H, Geoffery Galt Harpham. *A Handbook of Literary Terms*. Delhi : Cengage learning 2011. Print.

Akwanya, Amechi Nicholas. "Angst in Rainer Maria Rilke's Duino Elegies" *Journal Of Humanities And Social Science* 13.6 ( 2013): 34-41. Print.

Flemming, Albert Ernest, trans. *Rainer Maria Rilke: Selected Poems*. New York :Routledge, 1990. Print.

Gosetti-Ferencei, Jennifer Anna. "Immanent Transcendence in Rilke and Stevens."

*The German Quarterly* 83.3. (2010) : 275-296. Print

Gray, Ronald. *The German Tradition in Literature: 1871-1945*. Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1965. Print.

Wilson, Peter Lamborn. *Angels: Messengers of the Gods*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1994. Print.