

Rilke

The Testament
(& Other Texts)



[illegible]

(Briefentwurf)

Hilfs B..., ohne Datum:
immer.

Wann, Geliebte, wann, wann rieft dir,
soll ich dir den besondern Abschied meines
Gegensatzes anzuvertrauen? Wann er dir die Noth
nachsetzt, bedenkst, wie groß die Noth sein
muß, aus der ⁱⁿwärts ist das folgende auf-
gehoben.

Es habe zuerst gesehen; Unverw. Es habe
die Umstände, die wir noch sechs Jahren der
Zustimmung und Hinderung mit B... geboten
waren, nicht ausgenutzt für die ^{un}er-
schütterbare innere Aufgabe; sie ist ein noch
keinermal unter den Händen unterworfen
worden. Das muß ich mir nun nicht
haben.

Du weißt, Liebe, wie mir jene ^{un}er-
schütterbare, vom zufälligsten bis ins (dahin),
zusagten, wie aufzulegen ist sie anzu-
nehmen. Das vermagst du, sie mir zu geben:

The Testament



The Testament (& Other Texts)

Rainer Maria Rilke

Edited by Rainer J. Hanshe

Translation & Introduction
by Mark Kanak



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TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Rilke's Testament of Solitude

If some of the shorter pieces included in this volume have been published in English translation, the central and longest one has not, and so, *The Testament (& Other Texts)* marks the first time they are gathered together in a single book, and this on the 150th anniversary of the poet's birth and one year in advance of the 100th anniversary of his death. The material comes from a unique period in Rainer Maria Rilke's life where, having endured the tumultuous & devastating war years, he was searching for the solitude required to complete his magnum opus, *The Duino Elegies*, which he had begun in January 1912 at Duino Castle, near Trieste. The poet's restless vagabondage and penurious situation certainly contributed to his bouts of depression and occasional ill health, and though he was constantly searching for the moment and location to dedicate himself to his task, no real opportunities had arisen. Prior to the ultimate completion of the well-known lyric revelations of the *Duino Elegies* and the luminous density of the *Sonnets to Orpheus* in February 1922, Rilke created quieter, often overlooked works — elliptical, speculative, half-lit by metaphysical inquiry and half-rooted in

the perduring matter of earthly life. If the short, philosophical piece "Primal Sound" (October 1919) and the long, anonymous "Letter from a Young Worker" (February 1922) are the key texts in this phase, then the core of the arc comprising a transition in Rilke's late voice is *The Testament* (April/May 1921) and the poem cycle "*From the Literary Estate of Count C.W.*" (November 1920 / April 1921). Taken together, these works comprise a trajectory leading to his greatest achievements as a poet.

At the end of 1918, the war years had disrupted not only Rilke's outer life, but his inner one as well: conscription, displacement, and spiritual injury had left the poet isolated and creatively blocked. By early 1919, he was recovering in Switzerland, adrift between sanatoriums and small villages, unmoored but receptive to any sign that might provide the impetus he needed to continue his work in earnest. If only for a fleeting moment, his heart was also keyed more to the world. Although the short piece that opens this collection, "(Draft of a Political Speech)," may seem incidental, it conveys a social and psychological consciousness perhaps unique for Rilke, one that stretches beyond the confines of the artist's monastic spaces and evokes in part the work of Freud,

Jung, and Reich. The hour of the age has struck midnight, a bell stroke that to the poet offers the promise of a new future, but one with an exigent task. The quintessential element of five years of global horror, injustice, and death ("the most deathly kind of death," he says) is an immeasurable pain, but one that has been repressed, "disconnected from any inner continuity of life." Endangered by this lack of discharge and psychic unity, the neutered senses unable to grasp the invisible, Rilke expresses a deep-felt need for civilization to break through its character armor and undergo a cathartic exorcism. Without it, there can be no peace, and no free future.

In the midst of seeking such catharsis himself, in this moment of retreat and exhaustion following his psychological collapse, the poet received a letter from Hans Prinzhorn — the psychiatrist and art historian known for collecting the works of his patients — asking him whether he believed in a kind of primal sound. The resulting response was in fact entitled just that, "Primal Sound" (*Ur-Geräusch*), and comprised a curious, luminous reply. The text imagines a phonograph needle running along a groove, producing vibration — and from that vibration, a sound so ancient & fundamental

it might predate language itself. Rilke proposes this as a metaphor for resonance beneath perception, for something the world utters before we interpret it. But the gesture is more than acoustic; it is metaphysical. In listening for the primal sound, Rilke listens for the lost thread of connection — to being, to memory, to the pre-verbal self. In his 1844-essay (the year of Nietzsche's birth), "The Poet," Emerson speaks to this Orphic praxis when declaring that "poetry was all written before time was, and wherever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings and attempt to write them down..." When stating that "the men of more delicate ear write down these cadences more faithfully, and these transcripts, though imperfect, become the songs of the nations," Emerson could have been speaking of Rilke *avant la lettre*. As someone with more of an attuned ear, Rilke was able to perceive such music, and "Primal Sound" anticipates the dense sonic architecture of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, but at this point, it is only a tentative signal: a vibration signaling through fog. The essay was not poetry; it was philosophy in miniature, speculation as survival, an attempt to sense the primal warblings.

INTRODUCTION

What mattered was not the sound itself, but the idea that listening — *real listening*, what Heidegger called hearkening to being — can carry us toward what we've forgotten. "Primal Sound" is not then just the guiding tonality of this collection, but the prelude to Rilke's full re-entry into the world: not through image or symbol, but through pulse.

*

At the end of a decade of death, turmoil, and destruction, Rilke had already feared that he would never be able to complete the *Duino Elegies*. The outbreak of World War I had brought work to a standstill for more than a year when the poet was conscripted into military service; writing resumed only in the fall of 1915, resulting in the Fourth Elegy, written in one sitting in Munich in November. Yet, even after Rilke was discharged in the summer of 1916, the voices remained inert. He could no longer work every day as a craftsman, as Rodin had counseled him to do. The poet could not, it seems, access the images imprisoned within him; the new turning point had yet to arrive. It wasn't until the fall of 1918 that he would finally entrust clean copies of the pieces he

had worked out or begun up to that point to his publisher Anton Kippenberg and his dear friend Lou Andreas-Salomé. Not much later, Rilke moved from Munich to Switzerland (the summer of 1919), a shift in locale and personal space that gave the poet hope that he would be able to create the living and working conditions necessary for his main task. This goal finally seemed to have been achieved when, at the beginning of his second post-war winter in Switzerland, a benefactress offered him a remote castle in the Canton of Zurich (Berg am Irchel) as a temporary residence. He would end up living there for half a year from November 12, 1920 to May 10, 1921. From the very first day, he realized that he had found the refuge he had long been seeking. The concentration he quickly achieved soon allowed him to complete some preliminary works, such as the French-language "Préface Mitsou/Quarante images par Balthusz" (referenced in *The Testament*) and the cycle of poems included in this volume, "From the Literary Estate of Count C.W." (*Aus dem Nachlaß des Grafen C.W.*).

During this time, Rilke was invited to present his work at the Zürich Readers' Circle at Hottingen, an occasion that gives us his "Preface to a Reading from my Own Works."

The Testament

[April 24-30, 1921]

In order to understand his condition at the close of that winter, it is necessary to revisit the summer of 1914. The outbreak of that catastrophic war, which disfigured the world for the span of many lifetimes, prevented him from returning to that incomparable city, the place to which he owed the majority of his opportunities. What followed was an endless stretch of waiting in a country connected to him solely through language — though, having lived in various countries, he had so thoroughly subordinated this language to his innermost tasks that, for a while, he came to see it as the pure and autonomous substance forming the basis of his creative work & mode of thought.

The bond to that friend, upon whose special abilities he had pinned hopes of securing a doctor, occasionally so urgently needed, grew increasingly tenuous and had already been severed long before the day this man, wholly devoted to his profession, suddenly succumbed to exhaustion.

His sole attempt to resume his work — interrupted by the loss of his entire natural life — ended abruptly when he was conscripted into a military regiment, forcing him into a

repugnant and utterly wasted period in the capital of the country that had dominion over him. Freed after many months from these idle obligations and returning to the place where he had been biding his time, he found himself lacking the inner clarity and freedom necessary for his ineffable work to thrive. He also resisted incorporating it in any way with the grim disasters of those agonizing years: at the very least, he felt compelled to excuse his inability in several letters, admitting he felt like a child, plagued by toothache, who refuses even to touch the objects most dear to him.

Finally, when the war had already degenerated into the diffuse chaos of revolutionary convulsions, and he had even managed to distance himself somewhat from this senselessness by translating Mallarmé, he accepted an invitation to give readings. He left behind the city — long since utterly intolerable — and his nearly public apartment, plagued by visits from strangers and casual acquaintances alike, to answer a desired summons to another country; one that, incidentally, had remained neutral and beneficial throughout the recent years' upheavals. Yet this was the very landscape through which he had frequently traveled before, coming from the southern regions,

intentionally keeping the carriage curtains closed: something in his nature clashed with the stark, dramatic mountainous landscape that earlier generations had so celebrated. It was this country that now offered itself to him through that attentive calling as well as through the hospitality at the shores of one of its lakes.

Even his new residence, located beyond the borders he had once found unbearable, soon became little more than an extension of his prior waiting, though somewhat gentler. Relief came, yet the crucial conditions for the inner repose essential to his work were still lacking. His residences changed frequently. He found himself compelled to forge numerous new connections, some offering brief satisfaction. The attraction that his serious yet incomplete solitude occasionally exerted on others against his will (a longing persistently denied) also led him into strange circumstances requiring he share and communicate extensively, undermining the accumulation of inner reserves & fostering anxiety within his psyche, month after month.

Then, after more than eighteen months, at the onset of a new winter, when a return to the ill-fated land, a sickroom still rife with war's

aftermath & woeful fates, seemed inevitable, — something entirely unforeseen occurred: A remote, ancient manor was offered to him where a quiet, taciturn housekeeper awaited. Barely settled in (on November 12), he sensed a surrounding benevolence & benefit surpassing his highest hopes.

The spacious, low-ceilinged study with its white paneling, large old tiled stove, and open fireplace appeared to have been waiting for *him*; everything necessary was provided day by day, no explanations required — outside the windows lay a quiet park. Softly blooming charmillles framed the spacious lawn on either side, alongside an unframed pond, whose unceasing fountain's soundscape, as it were, translated into the ear what was so fulfillingly still for the eyes. As autumn advanced, the park with its grand plane trees and an avenue of ancient chestnuts stretching into the open deepened the effect of the view. Without constraining the visual desires, meadows fell gently, defining the foreground, while wooded slopes rose beyond: though he cherished the plains, in these moments of contemplation, the boundary suited his inner landscape, nurturing the realm within him with each passing day.

The Testament

*"Mais j'accuse surtout celui qui se
comporte
contre sa volonté "
Jean Moréas*

"But I really blame the one who
acts
against his will."

Jean Moréas

(in April)

Spring, which arrived so early this year that the cardamom flowers have blossomed in the fields and dandelions have already faded into scattering yarrows, has never been favorable to reflection — its powers do not support contemplation. Nevertheless, after so many months lost to it, one must seek focus in the final phase of this blessed refuge.

As my relationship with my Beloved had calmed enough that I foresaw that I would be able to devote my undivided attention to myself for a while, a small building, which I mistook for a barn & paid no further mind, appeared at the edge of the park. It turned out to be an electric saw mill, now running nonstop for ten days, whirring and buzzing relentlessly. My silence is shattered. I realize that what I had planned cannot be completed as a last-minute rush, like a postponed school assignment that now weighs heavily on my conscience. The time for work is over. Now the saw holds court.

How precise the judgment is. Strange: I realize how much I have heard all this through my hearing — and now it has already been taken away from me. At night, when I wake

up, or in the late evening (for one works long hours there in the saw mill & sometimes the noisy workday starts soon after five o'clock in the morning), that broad, pure auditory-realm I had taken to inhabit so long ago restores itself with indescribable gentleness. It was just beginning to be 'patterned,' as it were, by little birdcalls; but its center was still the fountain, and now I lie down in the middle of the night and bid it farewell. This was it, what should have provided me with the order I needed throughout these many following weeks of balanced, listening attentiveness. How I understood it immediately, how I absorbed it, on the very first day: this multifaceted variation in its flow. The slightest breeze changed it, and when it was completely still around the suddenly isolated jet, cascading upon itself, it sounded quite different from the noise it made in the mirrored surface of the water. Speak, I said to the fountain, & listened. Speak, I said, and my whole being obeyed it. Speak, you pure meeting of lightness and weight, you, the tree of games, you, a parable among the heavy trees of fatigue that fester within its cortex.

And with an involuntary & innocent cunning of my heart, so that nothing would be but this, from which I wanted to learn to be,

— I equated the fountain with the Beloved, the distant, restrained, silent one.

Ah, we had agreed that silence should reign between us: it would be the law of this winter, a harsh, implacable law — but now our tenderness was beginning, & not only ours; the weariness of what had been achieved would dwell in my heart. Perhaps — the necessity was so immense — we would be strong enough to keep silent, — but we would not have broken it; the mouth of fate opened & showered us with tidings. For love is the true climate of destiny; as far as it stretches its orbit through the heavens, its Milky Way of billions of stars of blood, the country beneath these heavens lies pregnant with calamities. Not even the gods, in the transformations of their passions, were powerful enough to free the earthly Beloved, the frightened and fleeing one, from the entanglements of this fertile soil.

Is what I am writing madness? Why do lovers' letters never address this conflict? Alas, their worries are different. It always seems as if the lover is swinging the Beloved higher than he could ever throw himself. Her desire for him makes him more beautiful and more capable. The expectation of her open arms

Oh, none of this took me by surprise as it might a madman in his delirium or a fool in his frenzy. While my judges pronounced the verdict with frustrating slowness beneath the light of my happiness, I stood beside them, witnessing the entire verdict unfold.

One night, however, I reached my limit. The protective silence of the house, which still supplies all necessities, and my shocking isolation within it, sparked a conflict in my heart so intense that I doubted I could continue living. Unable to read, or even find comfort in the ever-warming fire among the fir trees, I took down a folder from the bookshelf, one I had never opened before, and forced myself to examine its contents. The pages displayed reproductions of paintings from the great galleries, and their vague, disharmonious colors irritated me. I don't know how many images I fixed my gaze upon; there were countless ones, & I turned the pages ever more rapidly: suddenly, I realized what had been gnawing at me: Where to? Where to?

Where to, to freedom? Where to, to the calm of existence itself? Where to, to the innocence that had become indispensable?

I returned to myself; more alert, even wary, as if some inner awareness had burst forth,

**From the
Literary Estate
of Count C.W.**

[At the end of November 1920/
end of March 1921

Schloß Berg am Irchel,
Switzerland]

FIRST PART

I

White horse — how? Or torrent's .. fall?
What image stayed behind in sleep's dim hall?
A chalice tilted, mirror-bright and deep —
Then day drove out the hush & hauled my sleep!

Returning — what within will I then meet,
when night lets fall its heavy inward feet?
Dream, now carry forth: is the plate of tin —
will the strange fruit reveal its skin?

Will I know what drink I truly sipped —, or
was it passion from a hill long dipped?
And whom to tell, when in the end decay
threads through the dregs that taste has
drawn away?

Is it enough that outward still I gaze —,
Does sleep's cook still need herbs to spice
his maze?
Or tosses he, with hesitant, unsure hand,
his seasonings into a dish unplanned?

—

II

Curtain, chessboard, and the slender handle
of that glass jug that betrayed the wine —
one late evening, later, knows the grandchild:
then his heart resolved it's way, it's line,

thus to go, as it must. But how?
Ah, toward women strangely did it fall.
(Dared he, even during mid-prayer, to allow
his gaze upon it...!) Without sense at all

it trembled before youthful faces! At times it took
its pace from some other man's command,
what urged it on was something vague, mistook,
and something vague as well would stay its hand.

Oft it started running through the sloping
of its landscape, like a child that flees,
further, further... till, in finger's pointing
—: stood there, breath-abundant, ill at ease.

III

Maiden, does summer's day make you bloom?
Evening holds quail-heartbeats in its warm room,
and the lover stands near.

He sees how your window frames you bright,
your posture held, your smile alight —
he senses you here.

The door is cool, and by morning light,
it will chill through and through.
But your friend burns hot. Oh, glow!
Glow, and draw him to you.

Letter from a Young Worker

[February 12-15, 1922]

Last Thursday, at a gathering, someone read from your poems, Mr. V., and the words have haunted me. I know no better response than to write to you — to set down, as best I can, what has remained unsettled in me.

The day after that reading, I ended up — by chance — in a Christian gathering, and that encounter may well have been the catalyst that ignited the flame that set this restlessness in motion & driven me to rush toward you with the entirety of my being. Beginning something requires a prodigious degree of force. I can't *begin*. I simply skip over what should serve as a beginning. Nothing is as strong as silence. If we weren't each born into the midst of speaking, silence would never have been broken.

Mr. V., I am not speaking of the evening when your poetry struck a chord in us. I'm speaking of the evening after. I feel compelled to ask: who — yes, there is no other way to put it — *who* is this Christ who keeps meddling in everything? He knows nothing about us — not about our work, our struggles, not about the joy we now fight to achieve, go through, & live — and yet, he still demands to be *first*

in our lives. Or has that demand simply been placed in his mouth? What does he want from us? People say he wants to help us. Yet he acts strangely helpless around us. His world bore little resemblance to ours. Or do circumstances really not matter? If he were to step into this room now, or into the factory across the street — would everything shift, become whole, become right? Would my heart beat within me and, so to speak, continue on a different path, always in his direction? My gut tells me that he *cannot* come. That it would be pointless. Our world is not only outwardly different — it has no opening for him. He wouldn't *shine* through a ready-made coat; it isn't true, he wouldn't shine through. Wearing a seamless garment was no coincidence. And the core of light within him — whatever gave him that steady radiance — has long since dissolved, scattered into something else. But, if he truly was great, then, the least we could demand of him: that he somehow dissolved without a trace, indeed completely without a trace — without a trace...

I can't imagine that the *cross*, was ever meant to *remain* — it was only a station of the cross. It certainly shouldn't be imprinted on us everywhere like a cattle brand. It should

be dissolved, even within him himself. For isn't it *so*: he simply wanted to create a higher tree, one under which we might ripen more fully. He, upon the cross, becomes this new tree in God, and we were meant to be the warm, joyful fruit that grows near the top.

Now, one shouldn't keep speaking of *that* which came *beforehand*; but rather, the *Afterwards* should have already begun. This tree, it seems to me, was meant to become one with us — or we with it, *upon* it — so deeply that we no longer need to concern ourselves with it, but simply and calmly with God, to whom he meant to raise us, more purely, more quietly.

When I say: God, I speak from a deep, never-learned conviction within me. The whole of creation seems to say this word — not without deliberation, but often from a place of deep thought. If this man Christ helped us to say it with a clearer voice, more fully, and more resonantly, all the better — but let him step aside. Don't always force us to relapse into the toil & tribulation it supposedly cost Him to "redeem" us, as people say. Let us, finally, enter into this redemption. — Otherwise, the Old Testament would even be better off — full of fingers pointing toward God, wherever one opens it, and someone always falls,

About the Editor

Rainer J. Hanshe is a writer and the founder of Contra Mundum Press and the journal *Hyperion: On the Future of Aesthetics*. He is the author of two novels, *The Acolytes* (2010) and *The Abdication* (2012), and the editor of Richard Foreman's *Plays with Films* (2013) and Wordsworth's *Fragments* (2014). He is also the author of the hybrid entity *Shattering the Muses* (2016), *Closing Melodies* (2023), a phantomatic encounter between Nietzsche and Van Gogh, *Dionysos Speed* (2024), and *Humanimality* (2025). Work of his has appeared in *Po&sie*, *Sinn und Form*, *Asymptote*, *ChrisMarker.org*, and elsewhere. In 2016, Petite Plaisance published an Italian translation of his second novel, *The Abdication*. Shorter and longer works of his have been translated into other languages, and in 2021, the journal *Po&sie* staged an event at Maison de la poésie in Paris to honor his work. His own translations include Baudelaire's *My Heart Laid Bare* (2017; 2020), *Belgium Stripped Bare* (2019), and *Paris Spleen* (2021), Évelyne Grossman's *The Creativity of the Crisis* (2023), Antonin Artaud's *Journey to Mexico: Revolutionary Messages* (2024), and Léon-Paul Fargue's *High Solitude* (2024), as well as longer and shorter works by other authors. Eris Press published his translation of Fargue's *The Stroller of Paris* in 2025. *Beyond Sense*, a vatic exploration of the aphasiac disintegration of Hölderlin, Baudelaire, Nietzsche, and Artaud, is due out in 2026, *The Accumulating Wreckage* in 2027, and *Paris Without End: Assorted Translations From Giacometti to Artaud* in 2028. He is at work on a new book entitled *Burn Poet Burn*. Author site: literaryabsolute.com

About the Translator

Mark Kanak is a German-American writer, translator, and radioplay producer/creator, writing in German and English (simultaneously). He has published nine books and countless translations, including Walter Serner's *Last Loosening* (2020) and *The Tigress* (2025), Rolf-Dieter Brinkmann's only novel, *No One Knows More* (2022), Blixa Bargeld's *Europa Crosswise* (2022), and many others. He has worked in an editorial capacity for magazines (*perspektive*), produced radioplays, and provided contributions to many anthologies and journals (*Triedere*, *IDIOME*, etc.). He is author of *Tractatus illogico-insanus* (2018) and *Lügendetektor / Lie Detector* (2023). His most recent radioplays include *Tollhaus* (Madhouse, 2022) & *Atmung* (Breathing, 2024), published by Belleville Verlag (Munich) and both featuring Blixa Bargeld of Einstürzende Neubauten in the lead role. Both were shortlisted for radioplay of the year by *Preis der deutschen Schallplattenkritik*. He also produces music under the name of "Irrflug," and his album "Silver" is upcoming as a vinyl release in Sähkö Recordings. *Tollhaus* will premiere as a film, directed by Sarah Earheart and Thomas Antonic, in 2026.

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Rainer Maria

Rilke's *Testament* opens with the outbreak of WWI, a devastating world event that prevents the poet from returning to "the incomparable city of Paris," and which is entwined with his own debilitating crises. ¶ In this decisive period, before which recovery or death waits, Rilke undergoes a kind of auto-da-fé and gives us a record of his failure and achievement. With insights into what he called his peculiar fate, the writer forges a will and testament, which he says "will remain his *last*, even if his heart still faced many years of challenges ahead." Is this the final word on his struggle between love in life and love transformed into the mosaic of art? ¶ Written while suffering an impasse with the *Duino Elegies* and just before he and Merline Klossowska discover the Chateau de Muzot, which would become a fertile sanctuary for the nomadic poet, Rilke turns to translation as a *pontifex* to carry him through his muteness. Having at last opened some free associative realm, he begins sketching terse reflections, lyrical draft letters, and dense, wistful prose, fragmentary writings that speak to the powers of destruction and creation. ¶ Long secret, this enigmatic and charged series of experimental texts is the record of the close of a remarkable winter, wherein the work of poetry, the artist's struggle with life, is tested in the crucible of solitude before the sinister expanse of blank pages. An illuminating *ars poetica*, Rilke's *Testament* constitutes the mortal risk of not going beyond love, and the risk of the potential death of the artist, where the silencing of the logos puts creative potency under threat. ¶ This world premiere English translation also includes essays on politics, poetry, sound, the sacred and sexuality, and the complete poem sequence "From the Literary Estate of Count C.W.," all works dating from 'the testament years'. *The Testament (& Other Texts)* documents a creative interregnum and is the dark passageway between the *Duino Elegies* and the *Sonnets to Orpheus*.

Edited by Rainer J. Hanshe

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