



Rainer Maria Rilke: To the Bottom of the Roses

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The great achievement of Rainer Maria Rilke was to win the hearts of all the princesses, duchesses, marchionesses, and baronesses of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and also of their respective husbands; to be invited to their castles, palaces, and homes; and to leave in them as payment nothing more a few poems. With them, his noble hosts would feel honored.

This man with watery blue eyes was a wandering poet who went from mansion to mansion—in Venice, Capri, the Black Forest, Paris, Stockholm, Florence, Saint Petersburg, and Duino. Wherever he went, he would leave a trail of impossible loves.

A banal action divides Rilke's life into two parts: in 1906, he cut off his red goatee and left his Tartar style mustache which would stay with him to his death. He was 31 years old. At that moment, fame was already knocking at the door and the poet was preparing himself for the photographs.

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He was born in Prague in 1826, son of a frustrated military man, Josef Rilke, who wound up as a railway official; and of a mother, Sophie Entz, whose head was filled with delusions of grandeur—of fur coats and dance cards, and who never managed to accept her middle class status. In fact, she quickly separated from her husband and went to live in Vienna in order to be surrounded by the great world of the court. She left her nine year old son, whom she dressed like a girl with ribbons and lace in Prague with his Uncle Jaroslav, a brother of his father.

There are doubts about whether Rilke was able to get over this trauma since his hatred toward his mother lasted for his entire life; however, perhaps from her, Rilke inherited his love of the nobility.

He entered the Military Academy of Moravia at his uncle's expense; however, he was a sickly cadet and had to abandon a military career. Later, he studied philosophy and law at the University of Prague. He very quickly discovered that his destiny lie elsewhere.

He wrote verses. He only considered himself a writer. He had someone carve for him a family coat of arms with two greyhounds rampant¹ and, with the help of an allowance of 200 korunas that his uncle gave him, he launched his first expedition and wound up in Munich where he quickly realized his first conquest.

In a beer hall, he met the Countess Franziska von Reventlow, a beautiful creature and a bohemian who had been abandoned by her family and who was wandering aimlessly in the midst of solitude. Rilke tested his particular formula for conquest on her: a preliminary approach through tenderness, a few incandescent verses, and when his prey had finally submitted, the poet fled while inundating her with lovely memories through letters and messages, returns and departures.

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Some time later, a bigger game trophy entered his life: Lou Andreas Salomé, a Russian woman from Saint Petersburg, the wife of a professor of Asiatic languages. This woman devoted herself to sampling men from the highest level, hovering over them, getting them to fall in love with her, and then abandoning them while, at the same time, making herself unforgettable. During her life, she possessed Nietzsche, Freud, Mahler, and other 14 point stags. She and Rilke shared the same form of love.

The poet was 21 years old when he was captured by the personality of this liberated woman who was ten years older than he was. Between them, they formed an intellectual passion, a loving complicity, and, at the same time, a submissiveness tempered by admiration, and an androgynous madness that ultimately morphed, as in other cases, into an aesthetic friendship.

¹ standing on one hind foot with one foreleg raised above the other and the head in profile — used of a heraldic animal. (Merriam Webster)

They lived together. They traveled together. She took Rilke to Saint Petersburg—her country, and later they lived in different secret refuges. No one knows which provided them more pleasure: finding one another or each one seeking solitude for himself or for herself.

That passion was the source of many love poems:

“Extinguish my eyes, I'll go on seeing you.
Seal my ears, I'll go on hearing you.
And without feet I can make my way to you,
without a mouth I can swear your name.”²

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Rilke moved through the most luxurious salons and the most run down boarding houses in a superhuman effort to transform the invisible to the visible with his poems. In the middle of destitution, suddenly he would receive an invitation. It might be from Rodin in Paris, for whom he was a secretary; or from the Countess Valmarana of Venice—Rilke had fallen in love with one of her daughters on a previous journey. He had won many lovers in Venice; the first of them, Mimi Romanelli, would never recover from the effect of the poet's verses.

² Complete version:

“Extinguish my eyes, I'll go on seeing you.
Seal my ears, I'll go on hearing you.
And without feet I can make my way to you,
without a mouth I can swear your name.

Break off my arms, I'll take hold of you
with my heart as with a hand.
Stop my heart, and my brain will start to beat.
And if you consume my brain with fire,
I'll feel you burn in every drop of my blood.”

But the call might also come from Berlin or Hamburg. In these cities there were aristocrats who collected nights with Rilke and he would visit them upon their requests. He would fulfill the appointment, pass a few days, a few weeks, a few months among gardens and porcelain; and he would bleed in solitude to liberate the profound poetry that lived inside of him. In this way, he left his books behind.

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Despite all his flights, there came a moment when Rilke found himself married. It was with a sculptor named Clara Westhoff; he lived with her just long enough for her to give birth to a daughter. Rilke's style was to brush up against his lovers as if with the wings of angels. He sought a woman who would be the guardian of his solitude. Apart from that, the poet needed only silence. Clara gave him silence and distance, as did Lou Andreas-Salomé; as did the girl beggar in the streets of Paris, Marthe Hennebert, for whom Rilke provided shelter and education, and whose love Rilke won before he abandoned her.

—When one loves a person, he always desires that she goes away so he may dream about her —Maria Tsvetáimeva, a writer with whom he had fallen in love, told Rilke.

—Love lives in the word and dies in actions —Rilke responded.

Once again the letters; once again the memories.

Princess Maria von Thurn ceded him her castle in Duino which was near the Adriatic Sea, and there Rilke wrote his elegies.

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There was a moment in which his editor, Kippenberg, took charge of his dispersed works and assured a regular stipend for the poet. By then, Rilke had traveled to Egypt and had been enraptured by the temples in Luxor and in the Valley of the Kings.

Now he was still dreaming of Toledo. One day, he began heading south to satiate himself with all of El Greco's mysticism; fleeing the cold of Castilla, he reached Sevilla and Ronda where he lodged at the Hotel Victoria.

Beauty and terror pursued him wherever he went and he always seemed to be in search of himself. When he felt himself terminally ill, Princess Marie von Thurn relinquished her mansion at Valois to him.

A God without Christ as intermediary awaited him.

Rilke was a symbol of his time. In the middle of the wars and massacres of a Europe that was breaking into pieces amidst a bloodbath, this seraphic poet transcended that space like an unsullied being imparting the gift of beauty.

He died in the early morning of January 2, 1926, when every bell in the valley of Valois was ringing in celebration of Mass. Upon his tomb was engraved the epitaph that he himself had written:

*Rose, oh pure contradiction, delight
of being no one's sleep under so
many lids.*

His tomb was surrounded by devoted lovers, old friends, his editor Kippenberg, his wife Khaterina, and some simple folk, who were all princesses.