

Rilkes Paris
1920 • 1925 |
Neue Gedichte

Rilke

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ANTHONY PHELAN

Rilkes Stunden-Buch in einer neuen Übersetzung ins Englische

Rainer Maria Rilke's The Book of Hours. A New Translation with Commentary.
Translated by Susan Ranson. Edited with and Introduction and Notes by Ben Hutchinson. Camden House. Rochester New York. 2009. XLIV + 240 S.

Rilke's *Stunden-Buch* has maintained considerable popularity among English-speaking readers. Stevie Krayer's version, produced in the academic context of the Salzburg Studies in English Literature in 1995 was followed a year later by *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy, in a Penguin Books edition; and in 2001 Annemarie Kidner's translation *The Book of Hours. Prayers to a Lowly God* appeared with Northwestern. Clearly, the *Stunden-Buch* continues to attract translators and readers – or so the publishers must believe.

The attraction of this early collection in the Anglo-Saxon world is probably best demonstrated by the evident popularity of the Barrows Macy version. Joanna Macy is a well-known ecological activist and Buddhist teacher, Anita Barrows a poet, psychologist and peace activist. In their hands Rilke becomes a devotional resource for spiritual seekers. And it is perhaps no accident that Kidner first encountered the *Stunden-Buch* while living with religious and that her academic background is theological. The new translation of the collection, by Susan Ranson with introduction and commentary by Ben Hutchinson, offers a scholarly framework for the poems, so that they can be appreciated broadly as a stage in Rilke's poetic and aesthetic development, and at the same time provides English versions of Rilke's poems that are striking in themselves but also astonishingly close to some of his most colourful effects.

Ben Hutchinson, whose study *Rilke's Poetics of Becoming* (2006) illuminated the processes and theme of development (*Werden*) in Rilke's verse up to the *Neue Gedichte*, suggests in his introduction that in the case of the *Stunden-Buch* Rilke failed to establish any of the biographical context which he habitually set up to accompany and in some degree to control the reception of later collections and cycles. The experience of Russia and of Lou Andreas-Salomé behind the role-play of the artist-monk of the poems is suggestively re-told. This provides the foundation for a more rigorous discussion of Rilke's religious gestures in what Hutchinson describes as the »relentlessly subjective and emotional« »rhythms and cadences« of this verse. Far from providing a kind of New Age spirituality, Rilke's need for a poetic persona or mask reveals the extent to which self-projection is more significant than any authentically religious sense in the collection. Hutchinson gives a very plausible account of the autobiographical elements concealed in the poems, whether this is in their »poetics of pregnancy«, as part of Rilke's anxieties about fatherhood, or in the proximity of some texts (»Lösch mir die Augen aus«) to love lyrics. In this way, Rilke's inverted theodicy, perhaps rather uncomfortably, »seeks to justify both his art and his existence« (p. xxvii).

The introduction concludes with remarks on the problem of translation, particularly if Rilke's entire project is an attempt to »translate the untranslatable« Divine. As Hutchinson points out and Rilke recognised, his art demonstrates »a vanity that prayer does not possess« as it mimes a pursuit of mystical insight. In these terms an appeal to Walter Benjamin's *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* smuggles some kind of real presence back into Rilke's stylish pastiche. Susan Ranson's »Translator's Note«, on the other hand, confronts the practical difficulties of her task less arcaneously. She is acutely aware of Rilke's crowded imagery and of the complex sound-effects of rhyme and assonance that make Rilke's acoustic awkward for a modern English taste that is »intolerant of regularity«. Acknowledging that Rilke's luxuriant use of rhyme and assonance throughout the text can »camouflage« his insistent rhythms, Ranson successfully indicates how English versions have to find appropriate but distinct ways of orchestrating Rilke's virtuoso performances, without losing his sense of sonority or his willingness to experiment.

As Hutchinson points out, the very first poem from »Das Buch vom mönchischen Leben« demonstrates the boldness of Ranson's approach. »Da neigt sich die Stunde und röhrt mich an / mit klarem metallenen Schlag: ...« is a good example of the camouflage the translator had noted: the break across the line, and the continued /a/ sounds in line two yield a longer rhythmic unit than the tetrameter/trimeter we first hear. Ranson's version launches the book with terrific style: »Bright with metallic strike, the hour / tilts, and touches me: ...«. Even retaining the /ei/ sound of the original in »Bright« and »strike«, the version emphasizes the enjambment of the original in a formulation across the line end that *stages* the sense (»tilts«) in a very Rilkean way, while finding its own alliterative equivalent in »metallic«, »tilts«, »touches« to the sibilance of »Stunde« and »Schlag« in the original. It's a remarkable opening to the collection and sets the standard for what follows.

The neologicist use of »strike« in this example, giving an acoustic parallel, is dramatic in a way that »beats« (Kidner) or the more obvious »stroke« fail to be; and it is a feature of Ranson's own poetic style that verbs are given nominal force – a couple of pages later »wie ein Gewebe / von hundert Wurzeln« becomes »roots of secret weave«. These is no more than the necessary inventive license of the translator, and the careful use of adverbs to open up German compound nouns, and more generally a flexibility of grammatical form, join with the judicious inclusion of rhymes or half-rhymes to give the English reader a real sense of »what Rilke is like«. Occasionally an association is evoked that Rilke did not intend: when »Du freust dich Aller, die dich gebrauchen / wie ein Gerät« becomes »rejoice in all whose hands reserve / you for a tool« the English reader is likely to associate the reserved sacrament of Catholic tradition; or when in *An den jungen Bruder* »meine Kraft / schaut nach den Hügelrändern« yields »my strength refills / and gazes towards the hills«, it will be hard to avoid an allusion to Psalm 121. In neither of these cases is the new allusion irrelevant, however: they demonstrate the life that Rilke's verse takes on in its new language; and at their best these translations suggest an intimacy and intensity of thought alongside the Rilke's that leads to original implications in the English version.

For the considerable achievement of the translations Hutchinson also provides a

commentary, introducing each of Rilke's three books with a summary of their origins and a sketch of their arguments, and occasionally recalling Rilke's original prose commentaries. These notes are genuinely helpful where they reconstruct lines of continuity and coherence through the sequences of poems, underlining major themes and contrasts. This certainly yields a sense of progress, though it occasionally wears a bit thin when commentary seems little more than shorthand paraphrase. Similarly cross-referencing can seem unnecessary, as between »Gerüchte gehen ...« in Book 2 and the opening text of »von der Armut und vom Tode«, for example, where the parallel mining imagery seems obvious. And although the seasoned reader of Rilke will not need to be reminded of Rodin's »il faut travailler« when reading of »der in die Arbeit Eingekehrte«, the note usefully reasserts the biographical dimension of poetry than can so readily seem ungrounded and metaphysical. Malte, after all, insisted that »Verse ... sind Erfahrungen«.

It is a pity that the biblical reference cited to elucidate the line »in mir ist Davids Dank verklungen: ich lag in Harfendämmerungen« is misleading. As given on p. 211 »*Chronicles 1: 15/16*« is meaningless. It seems likely that 1 Chronicles 15-16 was intended, with its 2 Samuel 6 parallel. For the most part, however, the commentary is measured and judicious and will serve only to enhance the power of Susan Ranson's striking translation.