

Poetry | *Book Review*

Rilke's inventive work on words

A new German edition of the *Duino Elegies*

By Judith Ryan



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"Einmaligkeit und Hinfälligkeit" by Paul Renner, 2022; from *Kreativität* | © Paul Renner

IN THIS REVIEW

RAINER MARIA RILKE

Duineser Elegien und zugehörige Gedichte 1912-1922

494pp. Wallstein Verlag. €39.

Christoph König, editor

KREATIVITÄT

Lektüren von Rilkes

248pp. Wallstein Verlag. €30.

Christoph König

For decades scholars have bemoaned the lack of a “proper edition” of Rainer Maria Rilke’s works. The last updated, reliable edition, Ernst Zinn’s six-volume *Sämtliche Werke*, was published in 1966. In Zinn’s day, and for some time afterwards, Rilke’s publisher, Insel Verlag, resisted the notion of producing substantial tomes replete with learned annotations. Such an edition, it believed, might put off readers who were attracted by what they saw as Rilke’s “genius”. Never precisely defined, the concept was regarded as crucial to the poet’s public success, and the publishing house was wary of

losing readers for whom extensive notes might detract from appreciation of the poems themselves. Yet Zinn himself, the meticulous scholar who was most familiar with Rilke's manuscripts, felt increasingly uneasy about the notion of Rilke's genius.

From Zinn's time on many scholars working on Rilke were aware that, according to European law, copyright on Rilke's texts would lapse in 1996, seventy years after the death of the poet. With this in mind a group of distinguished experts decided to maintain the integrity of his writing by updating the copyright. Manfred Engel, Ulrich Fülleborn, Horst Nalewski and August Stahl undertook an edition, adding lengthy, up-to-date commentaries about the stages of Rilke's development as a poet. Written by members of the editorial committee, the commentaries were almost the length of books. Their edition was an immense service to the community of readers interested in Rilke; but still, it was not the full historical-critical edition for which so many in the scholarly community had longed.

In Christoph König's new edition of the *Duino Elegies*, the first in a planned complete edition of Rilke's work happily timed to commemorate the 150th anniversary of his birth in 1875 and the 100th anniversary of his death in 1926, König goes back to the question Zinn wrestled with during his work on the 1966 edition: if Rilke's idiosyncratic poetic style was not the result of genius, as Insel had long maintained, what constituted his special appeal? Addressing this issue takes König on a search for the nature of Rilke's creativity. The productivity he observes in the *Duino Elegies* takes two forms: some elegies come to the poet rapidly, with clean copies emerging more or less immediately; others emerge slowly and take the form of textual fragments, seemingly finished in their own way, but then written up in clean copy, corrected and redrafted.

Some readers today may retain nostalgic memories of the *Duino Elegies*, read years ago. Others may never have felt the appeal of Rilke's poetry. And then

there are new readers. The first thing any reader wants to see, however, is the poetry itself, not some lengthy preface or explanation of method. König's edition enters the text directly, plunging us into the *Elegies*, with their dedication to Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe, owner of the castle where, in 1912, Rilke composed the opening line of what was to become a sequence of ten individual poems. With the gift of a copy dedicated to her, she becomes in Rilke's mind the "owner" of the *Elegies* as well. We read the text as it appeared in 1922.

König's edition and companion volume do reserve surprises, though, one of the most significant of which is his claim that the German word "Kreativität" bears a special attribute absent from its cognates in English and French, "creativity" and "créativité". Almost hidden in an endnote to the *Kreativität* volume we find a quotation from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "The American Scholar": "One must be an inventor to read well." That quotation may also imply that one must be an inventor to write well, and König's emphasis on "Rilke's work on words" emerges as part of this idea. Looking for ways to describe the poet's special use of language, we might think of it as creative not just in the generic sense of imaginative, but also in this more specific sense of inventive. This idea of Rilke as someone who coined new forms of language plays a key role in König's project.

If his new edition of the *Elegies* argues against the assumption of "genius", so does his companion book, which presents readings of the individual elegies. Throughout these König emphasizes Rilke's inventive creation of his special language: his virtuoso play on verbs beginning with the prefix "ver-"; his piling up of energetic verbs to describe Picasso's acrobats in the Fifth Elegy; his use of genitive metaphors (such as those "hierarchies of angels" in the opening sentence of the First Elegy) as a mode of accessing abstract knowledge. Once satisfied with the results of his labour he would make a copy in his exquisite old German handwriting and send it to one of his benefactors with a special dedication. Several of these are reproduced in facsimile.

König's account of how his new edition came about begins with the extensive collection of Rilke's manuscripts and documents purchased in 2022 by the German Literary Archive in Marbach and known as the "Gernsbach collection", after the town where they were most recently stored in a private house. The papers were scrupulously organized by Rilke's descendants; although selected scholars and outside experts had been invited to view these papers, the existence of the collection was not widely known until their purchase.

Those given a chance to view the documents did not always act with discretion. In fact, two scholars not only copied texts by hand, but also - to the horror of the Gernsbach group - quoted from them in their own published work. Zinn's meticulous notes for his 1966 edition, meanwhile, survived his death in 1990. In other words a great deal of preliminary work for this new edition had already been done. Anyone joining the editing committee without close knowledge of the Gernsbach collection would have had to work hard to make up lost ground. Under these conditions a small group of people who had become familiar with the manuscripts in Gernsbach decided to set out editing principles.

König's edition revisits one of Zinn's most firmly held decisions. Zinn adhered strictly to the principle that the text should be in the first published form supervised by the author. One difficulty was caused by Rilke's plan to create a continuation or "second part" for the *Duino Elegies*, not least because he kept toying with his choice of poems and their arrangement. His attempt to come to a final decision about this second part was interrupted by his death in 1926. Without his explicit approval the concept of a projected second part had to be disregarded. Instead Zinn included the texts under the heading "Entwürfe" ("Drafts"), in a substantial third section of his second volume. Some texts in this section were obviously drafts, but it was hard to understand why so many others that seemed perfectly satisfactory in terms of completeness were included under this heading.

König takes a remarkable step, using as the baseline text the *Vorzugsausgabe* (luxury edition) prepared at first by Fritz A. Hühnich, a reader at the Insel publishing house, in co-operation with a typesetter. When Rilke received their corrections he was horrified to find that practically nothing of his own wording remained. In correspondence with Hühnich the poet expressed his response: "I had to strenuously reject your suggestions, with the exception of a few, a task that my eraser seemed to accomplish promptly and most effectively". The ensuing correspondence between Rilke and Hühnich can be regarded as the first published form of the second part of the *Duino Elegies* to be supervised by the author. König presents these poems under the heading "Fragmentarisches / (der "Duineser Elegien" zweiter Theil)", with Rilke's old-fashioned spelling of "Theil" giving a clue to the poet's participation in this formulation.

Illustrations by Paul Renner accompany the reading of the Ninth Elegy in *Kreativität*. Amusingly, he created sketches of these works while listening to Christoph König's discussions. (While König emphasizes abstractions in the elegy, the artist sketches more concrete versions.) Larger versions using oil paint and a special kind of resin create a paradoxical effect - combining solidity and transparency - that seems to correspond, appropriately, to relations between the abstract and the concrete, the one and the many, words and the things they name. "Praise this world, not the untellable world": Rilke's innovative poetry continues to inspire new generations of editors and artists.

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