

# Collected Works of Rainer Maria Rilke Poems, Auguste Rodin, Letter To A Young Poet (illustrated)

## Poems

*To the Memory of Auguste  
Rodin Through Whom I Came to  
Know Rainer Maria Rilke*

## The Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke

*εἴσι γὰρ οὖν, οἱ ἐν ταῖς  
ψυχαῖς κροῦσιν*

**Plato**

The supreme problem of every age is that of finding its consummate artistic expression. Before this problem every other remains of secondary importance. History defines and directs its physical course, science cooperates in the achievement of its material aims, but Art alone gives to the age its spiritual physiognomy, its

ultimate and lasting expression.

The process of Art is on the one hand sensuous, the conception having for its basis the fineness of organization of the senses; and on the other hand it is severely scientific, the value of the creation being dependent upon the craftsmanship, the mastery over the tool, the technique.

Art, like Nature, its great and only reservoir for all time past and all time to come, ever strives for elimination and selection. It is severe and aristocratic in the application of its laws and impervious to appeal to serve other than its own aims. Its purpose is the symbolization of Life. In its sanctum there reigns the silence of vast accomplishment, the serene, final, and imperturbable solitude which is the ultimate criterion of all great things created.

To speak of Poetry is to speak of the most subtle, the most delicate, and the most accurate instrument by which to measure Life.

Poetry is reality's essence visioned and made manifest by one endowed with a perception acutely sensitive to sound, form, and colour, and gifted with a power to shape into rhythmic and rhymed verbal symbols the reaction to Life's phenomena. The poet moulds that which appears evanescent and ephemeral in image and in mood into everlasting values. In this act of creation he serves eternity.

Poetry, in especial lyrical poetry, must be

acknowledged the supreme art, culminating as it does in a union of the other arts, the musical, the plastic, and the pictorial.

The most eminent contemporary poets of Europe have, each in accordance with his individual temperament, reflected in their work the spiritual essence of our age, its fears and failures, its hopes and high achievements: Maeterlinck, with his mood of resignation and his retirement into a dusky twilight where his shadowy figures move noiselessly like phantoms in fate-laden dimness; Dehmel, the worshipper of will, with his passion for materiality and the beauty of all things physical and tangible; Verhaeren, the visionary of a new vitality, who sees in the toilers of fields and factories the heroic gesture of our time and who might have written its great epic of industry but for the overwhelming lyrical mood of his soul.

Until a few years ago, known only to a relatively small community on the continent but commanding an ever increasing attention which has borne his name far beyond the boundary of his country, the personality of Rainer Maria Rilke stands to-day beside the most illustrious poets of modern Europe.



The background against which the figure of Rainer Maria Rilke is silhouetted is so varied, the influences which have entered into his life are so manifold, that a study of his work, however slight, must needs take into consideration the elements through which this poet has matured into a great master.

Prague, the city in which Rilke was born in 1875, with its sinister palaces and crumbling towers that rose in the early Middle Ages and have reached out into our time like the threatening fingers of mighty hands which have wielded swords for generations and which are stained with the blood of many wounds of many races; the city where amid grey old ruins blonde maidens are at play or are lost in reverie in the green cool parks and shady gardens with which the Bohemian capital abounds, this Prague of mingled grotesqueness and beauty gave to the young boy his first impressions.

There is a period in the life of every artist when his whole being seems lost in a contemplation of the surrounding world, when the application to work is difficult, like the violent forcing of something that is awaiting its time. This is the time of his dream, as sacred as the days of early spring before wind and rain and light have touched the fruits of the fields, when there is a tense bleak silence over the whole of nature, in which is wrapped the strength of storms and the glow of the summer's sun. This is the time of his deepest dream, and upon this dream and its guarding depends

the final realization of his life's work.

The young graduate of the Gymnasium was to enter upon the career of an army officer in accordance with the traditions of the family, an old noble house which traces its lineage far back to Carinthian ancestry. His inclinations, however, pointed so decisively in the direction of the finer arts of life that he left the Military Academy after a very short attendance to devote himself to the study of philosophy and the history of art.

As one turns the pages of Rilke's first small book of poems, published originally under the title *Larenopfer*, in the year 1895, and which appeared in more recent editions under the less descriptive name *Erste Gedichte*, one realizes at once, in spite of a lack of plasticity in the presentation, that here speaks one who has lingered long and lovingly over the dream of his boyhood. As the title indicates, these poems are a tribute, an offering to the Lares, the home spirits of his native town. Prague and the surrounding country are the ever recurring theme of almost every one of these poems. The meadows, the maidens, the dark river in the evening, the spires of the cathedral at night rising like grey mists are seen with a wonderment, the great well — spring of all poetic imagination, with a well — nigh religious piety. Through all these poems there sounds like a subdued accompaniment a note of gratitude for the ability to thus vision the world, to be sunk in the music

of all things. "Without is everything that I feel within myself, and without and within myself everything is immeasurable, illimitable."

These pictures of town and landscape are never separated from their personal relation to the poet. He feels too keenly his dependence upon them, as a child views flowers and stars as personal possessions. Not until later was he to reach the height of an impersonal objectivity in his art. What distinguishes these early poems from similar adolescent productions is the restraint in the presentation, the economy and intensity of expression and that quality of listening to the inner voice of things which renders the poet the seer of mankind.

The second book of poems appeared two years later and like the first volume *Traumgekront* is full of the music that is reminiscent of the mild melancholy of the Bohemian folk-songs, in whose gentle rhythms the barbaric strength of the race seems to be lulled to rest as the waves of a far-away tumultuous sea gently lap the shore. The themes of *Traumgekront* are extended somewhat beyond the immediate environment of Prague and some of the most beautiful poems are luminous pictures of villages hidden in the snowy blossoming of May and June, out of which rises here and there the solitary soft voice of a boy or girl singing. In these first two volumes the poet is satisfied with painting in words, full of sonorous beauty, the

surrounding world. From this period dates the small poem *Evening*, which seems to have been sketched by a Japanese painter, so clear and colourful is its texture, so precious and precise are its outlines.

With *Advent* and *Mir Zur Feier*, both published within the following three years, a phase of questioning commences, a dim desire begins to stir to reach out into the larger world "deep into life, out beyond time." Whereas the early poems were characterized by a tendency to turn away from the turmoil of life—in fact, the concrete world of reality does not seem to exist — there is noticeable in these two later volumes an advance toward life in the sense that the poet is beginning to approach and to vision some of its greatest symbols.

Throughout the entire work of Rilke, in his poetry as well as in his interpretations of painting and sculpture, there are two elements that constitute the cornerstones in the structure of his art. If, as has been said with a degree of verity, Nietzsche was primarily a musician whose philosophy had for its basis and took its ultimate aspects from the musical quality of his artistic endowment, it may be maintained with an equal amount of truth that Rilke is primarily a painter and sculptor whose poetry rests upon the fundamentals of the pictorial and plastic arts.

Up to the time of the publication of these volumes, Rilke's poems possessed a quietude, a stillness



suggested in the straight unbroken yet delicate lines of the picture which he portrays and in the soft, almost unpulsating rhythm of his words. The approach of evening or nightfall, the coming of dawn, the change of the seasons, the slow changes of light into darkness and of darkness into light, in short, the most silent yet greatest metamorphoses in the external aspects of nature form the contents of many of these first poems. The inanimate object and the living creature in nature are not seen in the sharp contours of their isolation; they are viewed and interpreted in the atmosphere that surrounds them, in which they are enwrapped and so densely veiled that the outlines are only dimly visible, be that atmosphere the mystic grey of northern twilight or the dark velvety blue of southern summer nights. In *Advent*, the experience of the atmosphere becomes an experience in his innermost soul and, therefore, all things become of value to him only in so far as they partake of the atmosphere, as they are seen in a peculiar air and distance. This first phase in Rilke's work may be defined as the phase of reposeful nature.

To this sphere of relaxation and restfulness in which the objects are static and are changed only as the surrounding atmosphere affects them, the second phase in the poet's development adds another element, which later was to grow into dimensions so powerful, so violently breaking beyond the limitations of simple expression in words that it could only find its

satisfaction in a dithyrambic hymn to the work of the great plastic artist of our time, to the creations of Auguste Rodin. This second element is that which the French sculptor in a different medium has carried to perfection. It is the element of gesture, of dramatic movement.

This might seem the appropriate place in which to speak of Rilke's monograph on the art of Rodin. To do so would, however, be an undue anticipation, for it will be necessary to trace Rilke's development through several transitions before the value of his contact with the work of Rodin can be fully measured.

The gesture, the movement begins in *Advent* and *Celebration* to disturb the stillness prevailing in the first two volumes of poems. Even here it is only gentle and shy at first like the stirring of a breath of wind over a quiet sea; and gentle beings make this first gesture, children and young women at play, singing, dancing or at prayer.

Particularly in the cycle *Songs of the Maidens* in the book *Celebration*, the atmosphere is condensed and becomes the psychic background of the landscape against which the gesture of longing or expectation is seen and felt. It is the impatience to burst into blossoming, the longing for love which pulsates in these *Songs of the Maidens* with the tenseness of suspense. *The Prayers of the Maidens to Mary* have not the mild melody of maidenly prayer; they vibrate with

the ecstasy of expectant life, and the Madonna is more than the Heavenly Virgin, their longing transforms her into the symbol of earthly love and motherhood. This expectation, in spite of its intensity, is subdued and is only heard like the cadence of a far off dream:

“How shall I go on tiptoe  
From childhood to Annunciation  
Through the dim twilight  
Into Thy Garden?”

Mention should be made of some prose writings which Rilke published in the year 1898 and shortly afterward. They are *Two Stories of Prague*, *The Touch of Life* and *The Last* ; three volumes of short stories; a two-act drama, *The Daily Life*, points to a strong Maeterlinck influence, and finally *Stories of God*. With both beauty of detail and problematic interest, the short stories show an incoherence of treatment and a lack of dramatic co-ordination easily conceivable in a poet who is essentially lyrical and who at that time had not mastered the means of technique to give to his characters the clear chiselling of the epic form.

A sojourn in Russia and especially the acquaintance with the novels of Dostoievsky became potent factors in Rilke's development and served to deepen creations which without this influence might

have terminated in a grandiose?sthesia.

Broadly speaking, Russian art and literature may be described as springing from an ethical impulse and as having for their motive power and *raison d'etre* the tendency toward socio-political reform, in contradistinction to the art and literature of Western culture, whose motives and aims are primarily of an?sthetic nature and seek in art the reconciliation of the dualism between spirit and matter.

Dostoievsky, whom Merejkovsky describes somewhere as the man with the never-young face, the face “with its shadows of suffering and its wrinkles of sunken — in cheeks... but that which gives to this face its most tortured expression is its seeming immobility, the suddenly interrupted impulse, the life hardened into a stone:” this Dostoievsky and particularly his *Rodion Raskolnikov* cycle became a profound artistic experience to Rilke. The poor, the outcasts, the homeless ones received for him a new significance, the significance of the isolated figure placed in the mighty everchanging current of a life in which this figure stands strong and solitary. In the poem entitled *Pont Du Carrousel*, written in Paris a few years later, Rilke has visioned the blind beggar aloof amid the fluctuating crowds of the metropolis.

Of Russia and its influence upon him, Rilke writes: “Russia became for me the reality and the deep daily realization that reality is something that comes

infinitely slowly to those who have patience. Russia is the country where men are solitary, each one with a world within himself, each one profound in his humbleness and without fear of humiliating himself, and because of that truly pious. Here the words of men are only fragile bridges above their real life.”

The great symbols of Solitude and of Death enter into the poet's work.

In the first decade of the new century Rilke reached the height of his art and with a few exceptions the poems represented in this volume are selected from the poems which were published between the years 1900 and 1908. The ascent toward the acme of Rilke's art after the year 1900 is as rapid as it is precipitous. Only a few years previous we read in Advent:

“That is longing: To dwell in the flux of things,  
To have no home in the present.  
And these are wishes: gentle dialogues  
Of the poor hours with eternity.”

With *Das Buch der Bilder* the dream is ended, the veil of mist is lifted and before us are revealed pictures and images that rise before our eyes in clear colourful contours. Whether the poet conjures from the depths of myth *The Kings in Legends*, or whether we read from *The Chronicle of a Monk* the awe — inspiring

description of *The Last Judgment Day*, or whether in Paris on a Palm Sunday we see *The Maidens at Confirmation*, the pictures presented stand out with the clearness and finality of the typical.

It is a significant fact that Rilke dedicated this book to Gerhart Hauptmann, "in love and gratitude for his Michael Kramer." Hauptmann, like Rilke in these poems, has placed before us great epic figures and his art is so concentrated that often the simple expression of the thought of one of his characters produces a shudder in the listener or reader because in this thought there vibrates the suffering of an entire social class and in it resounds the sorrow of many generations.

In *The Book of Pictures*, Rilke's art reaches its culmination on what might be termed its monumental side. The visualization is elevated to the impersonal objective level which gives to the rhythm of these poems an imperturbable calm, to the figures presented a monumental erectness. *The Men of the House of Colonna*, *The Czars*, *Charles XII Riding Through the Ukraine* are portrayed each with his individual historical gesture, with a luminosity as strong as the colour and movement which they gave to their time. In the mythical poem, *Kings in Legends*, this concrete element in the art of Rilke has found perhaps its supreme expression:

“Kings in old legends seem  
Like mountains rising in the evening light.  
They blind all with their gleam,  
Their loins encircled are by girdles bright,  
Their robes are edged with bands  
Of precious stones — the rarest earth affords —  
With richly jeweled hands  
They hold their slender, shining, naked swords.”

There are in *The Book of Pictures* poems in which this will to concentrate a mood into its essence and finality is applied to purely lyrical poems as in *Initiation*, that stands out in this volume like “the great dark tree” itself so immeasurable is the straight line of its aspiration reaching into the far distant silence of the night; or as in the poem entitled *Autumn*, with its melancholy mood of gentle descent in all nature.

In *The Book of Hours*, Rilke withdraws from the world not from weariness but weighed down under the manifold conflicting visions. As the prophet who would bring to the world a great possession must go forth into the desert to be alone until the kingdom comes to him from within, so the poet must leave the world in order to gain the deeper understanding, to be face to face with God. The mood of *Das Stunden — Buch* is this mood of being face to face with God; it elevates these poems to prayer, profound prayer of doubt and despair, exalted prayer of reconciliation and triumph.

*The Book of Hours* contains three parts written at different periods in the poet's life: *The Book of a Monk's Life* (1899); *The Book of Pilgrimage* (1901), and *The Book of Poverty and Death* (1903), although the entire volume was not published until several years later. *The Book of Hours* glows with a mystic fervour to know God, to be near him. In this desire to approach the Nameless One, the young Brother in *The Book of a Monk's Life* builds up about God parables, images and legends reminiscent of those of the 17th century Angelus Silesius, but sustained by a more pregnant language because exalted by a more ardent visionary force. The motif of *The Monk's Life* is expressed in the poem beginning with the lines:

“I live my life in circles that grow wide  
And endlessly unroll.”

Through the grey cell of the young Monk there flash in luminous magnificence the colours of the great renaissance masters, for he feels in Titian, in Michelangelo, in Raphael the same fervour that animates him; they, too, are worshippers of the same God.

There are poems in *The Book of Pilgrimage* of the stillness of a whispered prayer in a great Cathedral and there are others that carry in their exultation the music of mighty hymns. The visions in this second book are



no less ecstatic though less glowingly colourful; they have withdrawn inward and have brought a great peace and a great faith as in the poem of God, whose very manifestation is the quietude and hush of a silent world:

“By day Thou art the Legend and the Dream  
That like a whisper floats about all men,  
The deep and brooding stillnesses which seem,  
After the hour has struck, to close again.  
And when the day with drowsy gesture bends  
And sinks to sleep beneath the evening skies,  
As from each roof a tower of smoke ascends  
So does Thy Realm, my God, around me rise.”

The last part of *The Book of Hours*, *The Book of Poverty and Death*, is finally a symphony of variations on the two great symbolic themes in the work of Rilke. As Christ in the parable of the rich young man demands the abandonment of all treasures, so in this book the poet sees the coming of the Kingdom, the fulfilment of all our longings for a nearness to God when we have become simple again like little children and poor in possessions like God Himself. In this phase of Rilke's development, the principle of renunciation constitutes a certain negative element in his philosophy. The poet later proceeded to a positive acquiescence toward man's possessions, at least those acquired or created in the domain of art.

In our approach through the mystic we touch reality most deeply. It is because of this that all art and all philosophy culminate in their final forms in a crystallization of those values of life that remain forever inexplicable to pure reason; they become religious in the simple, profound sense of that word. Before the eternal facts of Life doubt and strife are reconciled into faith, will and pride change into humility. The realization of this truth expressed in the medium of poetry is the significance of Rilke's *Book of Hours*. A distinguished Scandinavian writer has pronounced *Das Stunden-Buch* one of the supreme literary achievements of our time and its deepest and most beautiful book of prayer.

In his subsequent poetic work Rilke did not again reach the sustained high quality of this book, the mood and idea of which he incorporated into a prose work of exquisite lyrical beauty: *The Sketch of Malte Laurids Brigge*.

In *New Poems* (1907) and *New Poems, Second Part* (1908) the historical figure, frequently taken from the Old Testament, has grown beyond the proportions of life; it is weightier with fate and invariably becomes the means of expressing symbolically an abstract thought or a great human destiny. *Abishag* presents the contrast between the dawning and the fading life; *David Singing Before Saul* shows the impatience of awakening

ambition, and *Joshua* is the man who forces even God to do his will. The antique Hellenic world rises with shining splendour in the poems *Eranna to Sappho*, *Lament for Antinous*, *Early Apollo* and the *Archaic Torso of Apollo*.

The spirit of the Middle Ages with its religious fervour and superstitious fanaticism is symbolized in several poems, the most important among which are *The Cathedral*, *God in the Middle Ages*, *Saint Sebastian* personifying martyrdom, and *The Rose Window*, whose glowing magic is compared to the hypnotic power of the tiger's eye. Modern Paris is often the background of the *New Poems*, and the crass play of light and shadow upon the waxen masks of Life's disillusioned in the *Morgue* is caught with the same intense realistic vision as the flamingos and parrots spreading their vari-coloured soft plumage in the warmth of the sun in the Avenue of the Jardin des Plantes.

Almost all of the poems in these two volumes are short and precise. The images are portrayed with the sensitive intensity of impressionistic technique. The majestic quietude of the long lines of *The Book of Pictures* is broken, the colours are more vibrant, more scintillating and the pictures are painted in nervous, darting strokes as though to convey the manner in which they were perceived: in one single, all — absorbing glance. For this reason many of these *New*

*Poems* are not quite free from a certain element of virtuosity. On the other hand, Rilke achieves at times a perfect surety of rapid stroke as in the poem *The Spanish Dancer*, who rises luminously on the horizon of our inner vision like a circling element of fire, flaming and blinding in the momentum of her movements. Degas and Zuloaga seem to have combined their art on one canvas to give to this dancer the abundant elasticity of grace and the splendid fantasy of colour.

Many of the themes in the *New Poems* bear testimony to the fact that Rilke travelled extensively, prior to the writing of these volumes, in Italy, Germany, France, and Scandinavia. His book on the five painters at the artists' colony at Worpswede, where he remained for a time, entirely given over to the observation of the atmosphere, the movement of the sky and the play of light upon the far heath of this northern landscape, is an introduction to every interpretation of the work of landscape painters and a tender poem to a land whose solitary and melancholy beauty entered into his own work.

More vital than the influence of the personalities and the art treasures of the countries which Rilke visited and more potent in its effect upon his creations, like a great sun over the most fruitful years of his life, stands the towering personality of Auguste Rodin. The

*New Poems* bear the dedication: “A mon grand ami, Auguste Rodin,” indicating the twofold influence which the French sculptor wielded over the poet, that of a friend and that of an artist.



One recalls the broad, solidly — built figure of Rodin with his rugged features and high, finely chiselled forehead, moving slowly among the white glistening marble busts and statues as a giant in an old legend moves among the rocks and mountains of his realm, patient, all — enduring, the man who has mastered life, strong and tempered by the storms of time. And one thinks of Rainer Maria Rilke, young, blond, with his slender aristocratic figure, the slightly bent — forward figure of one who on solitary walks meditates much and intensely, with his sensitive full mouth and the “firm structure of the eyebrow gladly sunk in the shadow of contemplation,” the face full of dreams and with an expression of listening to some distant music.

From no other book of his, not excepting *The Book of Hours*, can we deduce so accurate a conception of Rilke's philosophy of Life and Art as we can draw from his comparatively short monograph on Auguste Rodin.

Rilke sees in Rodin the dominant personification in our age of the “power of servitude in all nature.” For this reason the book on Rodin is far more than a purely aesthetic valuation of the sculptor's work; Rilke traces throughout the book the strongly ethical principle which works itself out in every creative act in the realm of art. This grasp of the deeper significance of all art gives to the book on Rodin its well — nigh religious aspect of thought and its hymnlike rhythm of

expression. He begins: "Rodin was solitary before fame came to him, and afterward he became perhaps still more solitary. For fame is ultimately but the summary of all misunderstandings that crystallize about a new name." And he sums up this one man's greatness: "Sometime it will be realized what has made this great artist so supreme. He was a worker whose only desire was to penetrate with all his forces into the humble and the difficult significance of his tool. Therein lay a certain renunciation of life but in just this renunciation lay his triumph — for Life entered into his work."

Rodin became to Rilke the manifestation of the divine principle of the creative impulse in man. Thus Rilke's monograph on Auguste Rodin will remain the poet's testament on Life and Art.

Rilke has lived deeply; he has absorbed into his artistic and spiritual consciousness many of the supreme values of our time. His art holds the mystic depth of the Slav, the musical strength of the German, and the visual clarity of the Latin. As artist, he has felt life to be sacred, and as a priest, he has brought to its altar many offerings.

*H.T.*  
*NEW YORK CITY,*  
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# First Poems

## Evening

The bleak fields are asleep,  
My heart alone wakes;  
The evening in the harbour  
Down his red sails takes.

Night, guardian of dreams,  
Now wanders through the land;  
The moon, a lily white,  
Blossoms within her hand.

## Mary Virgin

How came, how came from out thy night  
Mary, so much light  
And so much gloom:  
Who was thy bridegroom?

Thou callest, thou callest and thou hast forgot  
That thou the same art not  
Who came to me  
In thy Virginity.  
I am still so blossoming, so young.  
How shall I go on tiptoe





They fall with slow and lingering descent.

And in the nights the heavy Earth, too, falls  
From out the stars into the Solitude.

Thus all doth fall. This hand of mine must fall  
And lo! the other one: — it is the law.  
But there is One who holds this falling  
Infinitely softly in His hands.

### **Silent Hour**

Whoever weeps somewhere out in the world  
Weeps without cause in the world  
Weeps over me.

Whoever laughs somewhere out in the night  
Laughs without cause in the night  
Laughs at me.

Whoever wanders somewhere in the world  
Wanders in vain in the world  
Wanders to me.

Whoever dies somewhere in the world  
Dies without cause in the world  
Looks at me.