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Alfred Corn, translator. *The Duino Elegies*, by Rainer Maria Rilke. Norton, 2021.

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Abstract

Review of Alfred Corn, translator. *The Duino Elegies*, by Rainer Maria Rilke. Norton, 2021. 112 pp.

Keywords

translation, Rilke, Duino Elegies, German poetry, modernism

Alfred Corn, translator. *The Duino Elegies*, by Rainer Maria Rilke. Norton, 2021. 112 pp.

The American poet Alfred Corn has published a new translation of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. These ten poems were conceived in 1912 at Duino Castle near Trieste when, the story goes, Rilke heard the voice of an angel speaking to him in the wind of a violent storm. The poems' composition was interrupted by war, a troubled marriage, depression and ill health, but since their publication in 1923 they have ranked among the greatest works of 20th century European poetry. Corn began work on his translation in 2012 as a Visiting Fellow at Clare Hall, Cambridge and worked on them for the better part of a decade, during which time he traveled to Duino Castle and made a pilgrimage to the poet's grave in the Swiss village of Raron. The book also includes Corn's translations of four of Rilke's briefer lyrics, two of his *Letters to a Young Poet*, and a valuable introduction and notes.

The *Elegies* have been translated into English more than twenty times over the last century. William H. Gass's *Reading Rilke: Reflections on the Problems of Translation* (Basic, 1999) surveys fifteen of them, by comparing the translations of various lines before eventually offering Gass's own. For the Anglophone reader with little or no knowledge of German, Gass's text and commentary are instructive: looking back over the 20th century translations—from Vita Sackville West's 1931 version to those of such notable translators as C. F. MacIntyre, A. Poulin Jr., and Stephen Mitchell—Gass judges the 1939 translation by J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender to be the best. Nicole Krauss, reviewing Gass's book in the *Boston Review* in 2000 (vol. 25, issue 3), demanded that future translations of Rilke's work would need serious justification, given the panoply of choices already in existence (58). These definitive verdicts have not stopped others from trying, and since the turn of the millennium, in fact, several more versions have arrived, though none by a poet as notable and suited to the task as Corn.

The author of more than a dozen collections of poetry and essays, Corn is the recipient of the Levinson Prize from *Poetry*, fellowships from the Guggenheim and the NEA, and many other awards. His manual of prosody, *The Poem's Heartbeat*, remains in print nearly a quarter-century after its publication. The *Elegies* are mostly written in *vers libre*, though as C. M. Bowra pointed out in 1943 in *The Heritage of Symbolism*, the elegies' meter is primarily (but not

uniformly) dactylic, resulting in lines that feel more structured than most free verse. Corn's translation doesn't aim to reproduce these dactyls or what he calls, in *The Poem's Heartbeat*, "waltz-time meter" (32), but he is clearly attuned to the elegies' music. For example, the two elegies Rilke cast in iambic pentameter, the Fourth and Eighth, deviate noticeably in Corn's translation from the others in their shape and movement.

The *Duino Elegies* are notoriously challenging poems. Geoffrey Hartman, in *The Unmediated Vision* (1954), demonstrates that the biggest obstacle for non-German readers tends to be Rilke's reliance on etymologies of compound words (like *aufstehen* 'rise,' *angehen* 'approach,' and *ertragen* 'endure') to suggest new meanings or associations those words might not normally have. However, as Stanley Burnshaw notes in his careful prose translation of the First Elegy in *The Poem Itself* (1960), even native German readers find Rilke's often strange use of everyday words challenging. In Corn's translation, the famous opening sentence of the First Elegy begins *in medias res*: "For who, if I cried out, would ever hear me among the angels / and archangels?" (5). Gass, who had given us "Who, if I cried, would hear me among the Dominions of Angels?" (189), was critical of Poulin's decision to start with "And," since it "implies [...] an earlier communication, although nothing, surely, is prior to the poet's profound recognition of his isolation" (60). Corn, however, defends the choice of "For" in his preface to the poems, arguing that, as a stand-in for *denn* (which appears toward the end of the German line), it "postpones by a split second the drama of the interrogative pronoun 'who,' but it also lets us know that the conflict treated in the poem began in Rilke's mind even before any words came to him" (x).

Such attention to detail is evident throughout the sequence, as when, in the Fifth Elegy, Corn translates the German *Dastehen* as "Doggedness" to describe a group of acrobats in Picasso's 1905 painting *La Famille des saltimbanques* ('Family of Saltimbanques'), which serves as the poem's inspiration. In a note for that line, he indicates that the original word "would be thrown into even sharper relief as an enlarged initial for texts printed in the German typeface known as *Fraktur*," and explains his choice of "Doggedness" not only to mirror the original but also "to suggest the acrobats' will to endure" (47). In the final elegy, when Rilke imagines a *pschent* or double-crown on the Egyptian Sphinx despite having seen with his own eyes that the real Sphinx doesn't wear one, Corn argues that "a translation should probably retain the [original] word, however odd it is" since Rilke "chose to ignore what he saw" (87). Of the half-dozen earlier translations I

have next to me as I write this, only Leishman and Spender's opted to retain that strange but magical cipher. Corn long ago insisted, in an essay on John Ashbery first published in *Parnassus* in 1975, that "poetry is much more a matter of pleasure than it is of argument: we are more readily seduced than convinced" ("A Magma of Interiors" 223). This is certainly true of Rilke's mystical elegies.

Reviewing Leishman and Spender's version in *The New Republic* on 6 September 1939, W. H. Auden wrote, "There is no such thing as a perfect translation; it is a job that has to be redone for every generation" (135). Corn's new translation commands attention not because it is merely the most recent but because it is crowned everywhere with the poet-translator's own sensitive intelligence, an aptitude for the *mot juste*, and a pleasure in the work that is both seductive and convincing. This is a book that will be of value to students and teachers of German, comparative literature, and modernism, as well as those interested in translation studies.

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