

BOOKS & THE ARTS

Purely a Poet

WILLIAM H. GASS

though frequently fatuous enthusiasms, but still a lonely unloving homeless boy as well, with fears words couldn't wave away, a self-pity there were rarely buckets enough to contain; yet a persistence in the pursuit of his goals, a courage, that overcame weakness and worry and made them into poems...no...into lyrics that love, however pure or passionate or sacrificial, could never have achieved by itself...lines only frailty, terror, emotional duplicity even, could accomplish—an honesty bitter about the weaknesses from which it took its strength.

When he, whose profession was Waiting,
 stayed in strange towns, the hotel's
 bemused and preoccupied bedroom
 morosely contained him, and in the
 avoided mirror
 the room presided again,
 and, later, in the tormenting bed,
 yet again—
 where this adjudicating air,
 in a manner beyond understanding,
 passed judgment upon his heart—
 which could hardly be felt
 through its painful burial in his body—
 and pronounced this barely felt heart
 to be lacking in love.

Rilke's life, Rilke's poetry, Rilke's alleged ideas, have exerted an amazing attraction on many minds. It's not been just the highborn women who sewed a skirt about him, and wrote him loving letters, or offered him castle space, eager ears as
 him as
 a kitc
 check
 have
 troduced into a scholar-hungry Austria, and dozens of translators have blunted their skills against his obdurate, complex and compacted poems, poems displaying an orator's theatrical power, while remaining as suited to a chamber and its music as a harpsichord: made of plucked tough sounds, yet rapid and light and fragile as fountain water.

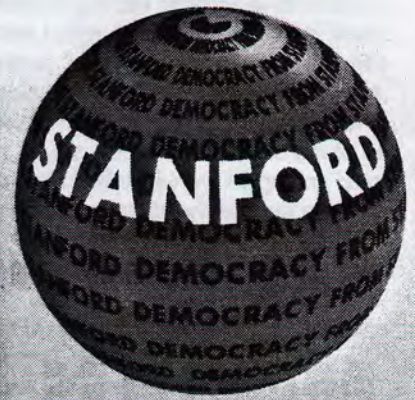
Ralph Freedman's *Life of a Poet* follows hard upon other lives—from the pioneering, slightly acidulous account by E.M. Butler in the forties, through Nora Purtscher-Wydenbruch's rather adulatory memoir, Eudo Mason's less starstruck depiction and H.F. Peter's charming version in the sixties, until the eighties, when the parade became its crowd: lives by J.F. Hendry, Donald Prater and Wolfgang Leppmann appearing in rapid succession. (Be-

fore Freedman, to my mind, Leppmann's biography—*Rilke: A Life*—contains the fullest and most adequate account.)

Rilke was, like most men and women, many men...and women. How to describe this crude and jostling crowd of parvenus and office-seekers without becoming fascinated or especially repelled by one or other of them, without turning into a sycophant or hanging judge, as Rilke's spiritual mumbo-jumbo charms, or his presumably snobby politics jars. He is passion's spokesman. He's a cold and calculating egotist, covering his selfishness with the royal robes of art. He's a poseur, a sycophant, a migrant, a loner. He hates the United States for reactionary reasons. He is charming and sensitive and given to shows of concern that melt the heart. His soul is a knot of childhood resentments. He is a trifler. He is too continuously serious—he thinks of himself as a creature of myth. He has all the moth-eaten arrogance of the self-taught, and sports a learning, both quirky and full of holes, that he is as proud of as a pup just trained to paper. Put on airs? An Eskimo has not so many layers of fuss and show. A priest of the poet's art, he takes the European lyric to new levels of achievement, forming, with Valéry and Yeats perhaps, a true triune god, and the texts of a worthy religion at last—one that we may wholeheartedly admire, in part because we are not required to believe.

Ralph Freedman meets this and the other challenges of the biographer's trade in admirable fashion. His narrative is rarely flat; he keeps his language supple and accurate; his judgments strike me as pre-eminently fair and carefully considered; neither does he avoid them, as if he weren't there, nor slant his material in the direction of some thesis or other (lives have no thesis, no more than poems); he is tactful without being prissy, and avoids those kinds of unfounded conjecture that so frequently disfigure scandal-bespattered biographies. If one compares Freedman's account of key moments in Rilke's life, both long and short, real and symbolic—his miserable adolescent days in military school, his attachment to Lou Andreas-Salomé, the notorious Tolstoy snub, his ill-advised marriage, the impact of Paris, his messy break with Rodin, his several inspirational "storms" and so on—with those given by other biographers, *Life of a Poet* appears to be superior on all counts: It is fuller, more accurate, clearer, more deftly narrated, more judicious and more sensitively observed.

Although Freedman tries to divide



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Rilke's life into rather romantically placarded phases like "Passing Through Eden," "Search and Renewal" and "The Muse Regained," he is driven by the nomadic nature of his subject's early career to track it through railroad stations, their towns and the appealing women who drew or held him there, as so many of Freedman's predecessors have been forced to do; and then, in Rilke's maturity, to fly, as the muses apparently did, from one creative outburst to the next.

In Linz it is Olga; in Prague it is Vally who helps him publish; then Rilke meets Lou, his lover/mother, in Munich, follows her to Berlin, accompanies her to Danzig, St. Petersburg, and back to Berlin again; he vacations in Viareggio, where he meets Elena; enjoys the company of Paula and Clara in Worpswede; marries Clara when bounced by Lou, although he does so against Lou's good advice, and rolls to Westerwede where there is a charming little cottage soon too full of child cries and other obnoxious duties; consequently he's shortly off to Paris where Rodin (and not a woman) is the lure, but it is no fun being poor in Paris, even if the parks are pretty; so with Clara (who has parked the kid with her parents), Rilke escapes to Rome, then valleys north to Scandinavia to visit Ellen Key, where he's handsomely taken care of by her friends, until it's time to return to Bremen, Göttingen and Berlin again; but not for long because it's Rilke's luck to enjoy a few more elegant estates—the Countess von Schwerin, the Baron von der Heydt, the beginning of a pleasant habit—before trudging back to Paris and a crankier Rodin.

Such summations are forms of exaggeration, yet so are maps and travel tables and those figures in the carpet.

It is a life of packing and unpacking, of smiling at new friends, looking out of different windows, sitting in trains, trying to write at odd and irregular hours, signing books and behaving like a literary lion, having ideas, getting used to strange dark halls, guest beds, always cadging and scrounging, eating poorly, keeping your pants pressed, and most of all, falling ill, the flu a favorite, sneezing into a pillow, dozing while wrapped up in a chair: life time that gets little report, for what is there to say about a sore throat or coughing fit? the fumble to find a pot beneath strangely squeaking springs? a plan to put one's ear out of range of the sleep-inducing bore who's been seated at your left?

It is a life of taking-in: landscapes and atmospheres, both run-down rooms and

lush islands, portrait galleries in this schloss and that lodge, books by forgotten Scandinavians, but sometimes by equals like Valéry or Flaubert, paintings by Cézanne, sculptures by Rodin; training his eye not to flinch, to see the thing seen and not to be the wadded ball of feeling his young heart flung at things; to absorb sensation as if it were food, and live on its sustenance, even in hibernation. *Regarde!* The result of his labor is to be found in the merciless exactness of Malte Laurids Brigge: "At last I am learning to see."

Most important, Rilke's life is the life of a great writer, a poet who trained on prose, who made his weaknesses into warriors; and it is therefore a life that is built of those great moments when, at white heat, he creates whole populations of poems and stories: the entire *Book of Monkish Life* from September 28 to October 14 in 1899, followed by *The Stories of God* from November 10 to 21; then thirty poems of *The Book of Pilgrimage* from September 18 to 25 in 1901, the thirty-four poems of *The Book of Hours* from April 13 to 20 in 1903, the stanzas that make up *The Life of Mary* between January 15 and 22 of 1912, the sudden announcement in Duino of the *Elegies* on the same month's 21st, or, of course, the greatest inspirational storm, perhaps, in poetry's history, the *Elegies'* surprising completion in Muzot, Switzerland, when, as if a tap had been left running, a sequence of sonnets he would say were to Orpheus appeared in the space of three days, from February 2 to 5 in 1922, priming the pump as it were, to draw forth the Sixth Elegy, compose the Seventh, then the Eighth and Ninth, as his pen entered the second week of that sacred month, with the main body of the Tenth to arrive on the 11th like a flourish of trumpets. The cycle is not complete just yet. A former Fifth Elegy is replaced by another on the 14th.

Such explosions of poetry were regularly accompanied by prose—such was the pattern of the past—and it was no different this time: Rilke writes *The Young Workman's Letter*, summing up his attitudes toward art, Christianity and sexuality, in his most important prose piece since *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. As if he is hitched to a runaway, the second section of *The Sonnets to Orpheus* rushes into being in eight more February days. There are now fifty-five of these dense yet crystalline poems. And Rilke still has the energy to write numerous triumphant letters. What had been wrung from him was more than wine.

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It caps a life, and Rilke feels, in a way, that he has been concluded like a symphony. Yet, as Edward Snow points out, his alleged dry spells, his troughs, are dotted, as a dry creek by nuggets, with remarkable poems that Rilke simply does not bother to collect, his focus elsewhere or his health a painful preoccupation. Snow's splendid selection supports his contention that these late poems—as occasional as lit matches in a crowd, and so different, in their quick responsive character, from the vatic seriousness of the *Elegies* and *Sonnets*—have their own high value and importance.

Because it pleads no special cause; because it neither shrinks, nor tut-tuts, nor pooh-poohs, nor exults; because it never looks at Rilke's traits as if they were knots to be cleverly untied but allows the poet's genius and his personal weaknesses to fall like a pair of gloves on the same table; and because it tells its tale in full awareness of the tale's importance, not of the teller's or the teller's thesis: Ralph Freedman's exemplary biography turns out to be, as Rilke would have wished, a book that, in the deepest sense, supports his poetry—*Rühmen, dass ist!*—and is a book of praise. ■