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Richard E. Ziegfeld

The Elegies of Rilke and Henderson: Influence and Variation



Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duineser Elegien*, first published in 1923,¹ has been recognized internationally as a twentieth-century masterpiece. Hamish Henderson's *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica*, first published in 1948, has received attention only in Britain. Reviews there have focused on Henderson as a poet who offers a documentary rendition of the North African campaign during World War II or as a member of the Scottish Renaissance movement, contexts that severely limit the poem's appeal and that threaten to date it.² Henderson's work may, however, be placed in a significantly larger context because of its similarities to Rilke's *Duineser Elegien*, which include formal elements, cultural references, thematic concerns, and symbolic constructions. Comparison of the elegies, though, indicates that Henderson transcends Rilke's influence to create an independent work that shifts the focus from intense individualism to a social perspective not found in Rilke's poem.

Even a cursory examination shows both formal similarities and cultural contacts between the two poems. In a century in which the elegy has virtually disappeared, Henderson chose to write elegies; even more striking, though, is the fact that he should write the same number of elegies as Rilke--ten. Moreover, both works elegise a group of persons--the dead--rather than one person, as is customary. Even here, though,

distinctions emerge, as Rilke elegises the kingdom of the dead (no particular person), but Henderson elegises the North African war dead.

Though Rilke is not usually thought to have been widely-known outside Germany during the 1940's, the Scottish Renaissance movement, with its emphasis on the internationalism of literature, took special interest in nineteenth- and twentieth century German poets, and in Rilke in particular; consequently, Scottish translations of Rilke's work were produced quite early. In two different essays, Hugh MacDiarmid, the leading figure in the Renaissance movement, mentions Scottish interest in and translation of Rilke, noting as early as 1931 that "contemporary Scottish poetry includes excellent translations or adaptations of Rainer Maria Rilke (we owe the belated English translation of 'The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge' to a Scot--John Linton)."³ John Speirs, to whom Henderson dedicated his *Elegies*, was also aware of Rilke quite early. He drew attention in 1940 to Rilke's influence on Hugh MacDiarmid's *Circumjack Cencrastus* (1930). Speirs notes: "The impact of the poetry of Rilke has acted as a condenser to give a temporary form to the formlessness" [of MacDiarmid's *Circumjack Cencrastus*].⁴

Henderson, who displays an interest in other national traditions, having translated a number of modern Italian poets, was obviously aware of the Germans as more than military foes, because in the *Elegies* he quotes Goethe, Hölderlin, and Winckelmann in German; translates the quotation from Goethe; sprinkles his elegies with German phrases and words; and, most tellingly, refers to Rilke by name in the eighth elegy.

While these formal similarities and the Scottish interest in Rilke raise the possibility that Henderson may have had the *Duinsler Elegien* in mind as he wrote his *Elegies*, analysis of thematic, structural, and symbolic elements produces clear evidence that Rilke must have influenced Henderson. The thematic similarities between the two artists center on their common interest in providing a poetic rendition of human consciousness. The most fundamental feature of human consciousness, they both argue, is the tension between life and death. Man must seek a means to transcend life's disharmony and transience, without trying to eliminate them. Both poets become fascinated with death as a refuge from transience, but they do not, as the German Romantics occasionally did, embrace death at the expense of life. Instead they seek to affirm, even to reconcile, both life and death through the power of art. Because of their faith in this power, they make no attempt to present a logically-developed philosophical statement about the relation of life and death. In fact, the mood in both poems shifts so abruptly from one elegy to another, and even

within a single elegy, that *vacillation* becomes a key word in the description of the two works. A philosophical statement is imbedded in each poem, but the abrupt and frequently puzzling vacillations force the reader to work at extrapolating the two poet's positions. Their conviction that art is the means for reconciling the tension between life and death prompts both Rilke and Henderson to create complex, extensive symbolic systems. Here one of several major distinctions arises: Rilke seeks to transform the symbolic object (which is visible) into "an invisible inward possession" (*innen Raum*) (Stahl's Rilke, xxvi-xxvii), while Henderson relies on accessible, visible symbols and a rich heritage of Egyptian mythology and history. Each poet, though, in his own fashion saturates his work with symbol, allusion, or mythical reference. Each, too, is firmly convinced that it is the poet who transforms objects into significant, powerful symbols and who creates or preserves man's artistic treasures.

Juxtaposition of brief descriptions of the elegies highlights two points. It documents the extent of the vacillations in mood. It also calls attention to the similarity in both the content and the pattern of mood vacillation between the *Duineser Elegien* and the *Elegies for the Dead*. The plus and minus following the numbers indicate the general mood of the elegy (plus=positive; minus=negative; plus and minus=mixed tone).

RilkeHenderson

Prol.: Fragile irony between death and life; art may unite the two.

Part I Epig.: Gods give infinite joy and pain to their beloved.

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. (+) Affirms life and death; hope; praise. | 1. (+) Recognition of dead; attempt to praise them. |
| 2. (-) Negation: transience in relation to angels. | 2. (-) Ennui and transience, but a sense of unity with enemy. |
| 3. (-+) Freudian; submerged, physical base for life. Love of man, woman, mother. | 3. (-+) Filth in life and death; attempts affirmation. |

RilkeHenderson

- | | |
|--|--|
| 4. (--) Most bitter, problem of divided consciousness; waiting. | 4. (--) Most bitter, call for endurance; inactivity. |
| 5. (-) Acrobats' perfection is difficult but routine and transient; isolation. | 5. (-) Monotony; dashed hopes; difficulties; attempts comfort. |
| - | <i>Part II Epigr.:</i> Enemy experiences no pleasure in his own death; sympathy for enemy. |
| 6. (+) Fruit of life is death; birth into new, higher realm. | 6. (+) Hopeful; words of love; reconciliation. |
| 7. (+) Positive toward this life; base for transformation into permanent inner world; transform "things." | 7. (-) Pessimistic about purpose of death; oneness of man--both ally and enemy. |
| 8. (-) Man as quiet observer with his divided consciousness. | 8. (+) Quietly observes relation of permanence and transience; lauds cultural/artistic achievements. |
| 9. (+) Affirmation; transformation through words of poet; transitory celebrated as a condition of existence. | 9. (-+) <i>Pietas</i> ; man is transitory; honor even the enemy's death. |
| 10. (+) Affirms suffering; life open to death; look to new stars. | 10. (+-) Dialectic persists; tenuous affirmation. |

Epil. Epigr.: Need suffering and death. Overcome suffering.

Epil. (+-): Seeks and relishes the dialectic.

The plus and minus signs graphically illustrate the radical shifts in mood within each poet's work, but far more striking is the similarity in the pattern of the shifts. In Henderson's

sixth through ninth elegies, though, the correlation seems to disappear. However, if we consider elegies seven and eight (in both Rilke and Henderson) as one group and elegies nine and ten and the epilogue (in both Rilke and Henderson) as a second group, the similarities between the two poems re-emerge. Essentially, Rilke and Henderson cover the same points in their seventh and eighth elegies, but Henderson reverses the order. In the ninth and tenth, Rilke celebrates transience and affirms man's capacity to create new, permanent vistas in spite of the transience. In the ninth, Henderson is somewhat dismayed by the transience, but he achieves a crescendo in the tenth elegy and the epilogue, in which he raises the same issues as Rilke. Ultimately, Rilke is slightly more affirmative than Henderson, but the pattern of development in Henderson's *Elegies* clearly reflects Rilke's influence.

In addition to thematic and structural similarities, points of contact develop in a third area--symbolism. Rilke's poem has been widely acclaimed for its use of innovative, personal symbols, the most important of which are internal and external worlds, heroes and the youthful dead, lovers, angels, the smile, passage to death, sleepers, and "things." Henderson also creates an impressive web of symbolism, a substantial portion of which is similar to Rilke's. The most significant of Rilke's symbolic constructions, the tension within the individual between external reality and his *innen Raum* (see elegies seven and eight), points to the differences as well as the similarities between the two poets. Rilke uses the term *welt* (*Welt*) to distinguish between the individual's external existence (which is visible and transient) and his internal existence (invisible and eternal). Rilke describes the distinction as follows:

We want to be visibly
 able to show it, whereas the most visible joy
 can only reveal itself to us when we've
 transformed it, within.

Nowhere, beloved can world exist but within.

Sichtbar
 wollen wirs heben, wo doch das sichtbarste Glück uns
 erst zu erkennen sich gibt, wenn wir es innen
 verwandeln.

Nirgends, Geliebte, wird Welt sein, als innen.⁵

For Henderson, division in human consciousness is also an important issue, but while Rilke divides the individual human

consciousness against itself, Henderson perceives division within the social realm, an initial indication that he is more concerned with a social than with an individual perspective. The two poets, then, utilize the word *human* differently, Rilke referring to the individual man and Henderson to mankind. As Henderson develops his sense of the word *human*, he exploits the traditional implications of war symbolism--one of his symbols for the division of the human consciousness--by contrasting the German and Allied forces, but as he notes in his preface "the conflict seemed rather to be between 'the dead, the innocent'--that eternally wronged proletariat of leveling death in which all the fallen are comrades--and ourselves, the living, who cannot hope to expiate our survival but by spanning history's apollyon chasm."⁶ Henderson's use of war symbolism does involve the risk that his *Elegies* will be taken too literally as documentary poetry on the enmities of the World War II era. However, in comparison with Rilke's external-internal configuration, Henderson's description creates a sharper sense of division in the human consciousness over the issue of life and death. In the "Barrage" section of Henderson's "Interlude" ("The Opening of an Offensive"), a particularly good example occurs when he says:

Hélls bélls
 blind you. Be broken, bleed
 death's head blackness

 We'll bomb you, doom you, tomb you into grave's
 mound. (31)

Moreover, Henderson's war symbolism evokes a sense of man's common plight, as when he notes that "the laager is one/ Friends and enemies, haters and lovers/both sleep and dream" (2nd, 22). Rilke's description, on the other hand, tends to isolate the individual or to prompt a sense that the individual is estranged from other people to whom he has difficulty communicating his vision of life. The estrangement becomes obvious when Rilke tells the lover that he cannot even share his transformation with his beloved (7th, 60-61). However, Rilke's description, which lacks the sharpness arising from the documentary quality of Henderson's (with its reference to actual places and battles from World War II), renders the prospect of transcendence and reconciliation more feasible. By not referring to actual disputes and factions, Rilke has virtually no hostility to counter (as Henderson does). Additionally, when Rilke refers to a non-specific location within the mind, his reader is less likely to recollect tangible situations that might remind him of the difficulties involved

in reconciling life and death. Henderson attempts to counter the sharpness of his distinction between foes, though, by humanizing the German soldier and his attitude toward death (in the seventh elegy--"Seven Good German," and in the epigraph to Part II by Sorley MacLean), thereby calling attention to the levelling effect of death upon all men.

Henderson provides a second version of the division in human consciousness, which ironically creates an additional link with Rilke: his description of the North African setting and its historical past. He juxtaposes the harshness of the desert and the lushness of Cyrenaica, which is a lush "terrestrial paradise" (Leishman's comm., 115). Although we expect the Germans and the Allies to vie with one another in North Africa, Henderson's soldiers discover a common enemy in the desert:

They [the sleepers] feel through their blankets
the cold of the malevolent bomb-thumped desert,
impartial
hostile to both. (2nd, 22)

Rilke, too, it seems, was interested in Egypt, even providing comments on the effect of the desert (for him, the desert evoked a sense of clarity like that of the dead's consciousness).⁷ Moreover, even though Rilke's poetic vision is dominated by personal symbols, one of his few borrowed allusions is the Egyptian imagery of the Lament in the tenth elegy. In his commentary, J. B. Leishman notes that the Lament imagery was inspired largely by "Rilke's recollection of Egypt, which he visited during the winter of 1910-11, and of his studies in Egyptology" (Leishman's Rilke, 114-15).

Both Rilke and Henderson also describe the crucial features of man's divided consciousness through the second major symbol of the hero. Rilke's hero is not a figure from history or mythology but a product of his imagination who embodies Rilke's own attitudes toward the problem of how he can affirm death for himself while he still loves. E. L. Stahl provides additional information about Rilke's interest in heroes by noting that "in contrast to the hero, other human beings tarry and are overtaken by death" (Stahl's Rilke, xviii). Rilke's hero, in other words, courts death. Thus, Rilke uses the hero to evoke an affirmative response to death because he highlights the positive, inspirational features of the hero's endeavors--mastery of his world.

Henderson's counterpart for Rilke's personal hero, drawn from the legend of the Carthaginian brothers Philaeni (Henderson's note, 60), involves two men who died heroically, but for a vastly different reason than Rilke's hero. They sacrificed themselves (by consenting to be buried alive in the

sand) in order to secure the territorial advances that they had won for Carthage when they competed in the African desert against their enemies from Cyrene (*Harper's Dictionary*, 1228). While Rilke uses the hero to reflect a personal confrontation with the problem of death, Henderson alludes to a legend that involves a social level, which is conspicuously absent from Rilke's poem. Henderson interpolates another variation as well. Like Rilke, Henderson looks to the hero for a direct, swift approach to death. However, Henderson's "Heroic Song," placed at the very end of the poem, fosters an ambivalent attitude toward heroism. The brothers garner a measure of glory for their altruistic act on behalf of Carthage, but Henderson notes that each runner moves blindly toward "his instant of nothing" (epil., 55) and toward "history the dop-pelgaenger" (epil., 54). Although Henderson interpolates hope through other elements, the reference in the penultimate sentence of the poem to "his instant of nothing" borders on nihilism. However, a redemptive note arises in the epilogue from his allusion to human strife as "incarnate dialectic," a statement which provides some hope because Henderson has affirmed the dialectic earlier in the poem. He strengthens this wan note of hope by adding in the poem's last sentence that the contestants--man versus man *and* man versus history--"grip, grapple, jerk, sway/and fall locking like lovers/down the thunderous cataract of day" (epil., 55). The contending elements have not been reconciled, but the simile linking lovers and heroes indicates that the figure which represents the potential for creativity and continuity--the lover--has something in common with the ill-fated hero who rushes to death. Thus, read in the broader context of Henderson's perception of the relationship between life and death, the symbolism of the hero is not as pessimistic as it might appear, but it still concludes Henderson's work on a much less affirmative note than that on which Rilke ends the *Duineser Elegien*.

Differences also emerge in the way that the two poets use a third symbol--the youthful dead. This image initially evokes a sense of loss at unfulfilled potential. The death of an older person, who has had ample opportunity to fulfill himself in this world, fosters a sense of completion that sharpens the distinction between life and death. The sense of fulfillment and distinction minimizes the urgency for discovering a source of continuity. As Rilke develops a link between death and life, attempting to affirm both, he utilizes the youthful dead to highlight the urgent need and the potential for continuation in death. Once Rilke asserts the continuity between life and death and then refers again to the youthful dead, he heightens the sense of comfort for the

living, because he is pointing out the potential for the youthful dead to fulfill themselves in another realm.

Like his war symbolism in general, Henderson's symbol for the prematurely dead--the young soldiers--is simultaneously more vivid and more troublesome than Rilke's. Despite the supposed justifications of nationalism and other altruistic causes, the young soldiers die deaths that appear senseless and unjustifiable. Henderson's tone contains more indignation than Rilke's, because justification for war deaths is more difficult to muster than for Rilke's unnamed individuals who die for unspecified reasons. Henderson's indignation may also have been intensified by his reading of British war poets such as Wilfred Owen. However, if Henderson is able to succeed in creating a sense of continuity and comfort for the living, his accomplishment is all the more significant, since his symbol has evoked a stronger reaction than Rilke's. For Henderson, the continuity between the youthful dead and the living derives from two sources: love and art. The love alludes to relations between the living and the prematurely dead soldiers. The love that can "reconcile and heal" (6th, 36), though, is sought and recorded, says Henderson, through art (both his own art and Egyptian art). He seeks justification for the dead (both Allies and Germans) and comfort for the living by singing his song--*Elegies for the Dead*, noting that he hopes his song will aid the reconciliation effort (6th,36).

Rilke's treatment of lovers, another of his major symbols, also differs significantly from that of Henderson. Rilke associates several significant issues with them. First he notes the potential of lovers for strength and creativity, but, having highlighted this praiseworthy potential, he calls on the lover to free himself from the beloved (1st elegy). In the triumphant seventh elegy, where he celebrates both life and death, Rilke uses the symbolism of the lover to reinforce his contention that the individual is isolated and cannot share the inner transformation with another--not even the beloved. Rilke calls attention to the glories of both realms (life and death) but notes that even though we want to render our joy visible, we encounter a severe difficulty (quoted above, from pp. 60-61 in Rilke): the joy which we wish to share cannot be communicated to anyone else.

Henderson occasionally refers to lovers, but unlike Rilke, he does not make them a central symbol. He quotes Goethe who says that the gods dispense joy and pain in unstinting measure to their beloved (epigraph, Part I, 17), and links "friends and enemies, haters and lovers" (2nd, 22). But instead of making his point through lover/beloved symbolism, Henderson exploits the analogous ally/enemy symbolism. The distinction between Allied and German forces is obvious, but when he links

the two as allies against the desert, he highlights the positive potential for reconciliation and union that Rilke introduces through his lover/beloved symbolism. In the seventh elegy, Henderson, for instance, describes "Seven Good Germans," whom he says are "seven poor bastards/dead in African deadland" (40), an unusually sympathetic portrait of the enemy. At the end of the sixth elegy, which is for the most part a lament about the meaninglessness of the soldier's sacrifice, Henderson enhances the significance of love when he issues a call for it:

So the words that I have looked for and must
 go on looking for
 are the words of whole love, which can slowly
 gain the power
 to reconcile and heal. Other words would be
 pointless. (36)

In Henderson's poem, love is important, but the symbolism of the lover is not. Moreover, the role of love is not so equivocal as it is in Rilke, for Henderson focuses primarily on love's power to heal, while Rilke focuses on its regenerative powers *and* on the need for the lover to free himself from the dependence inherent in a love relationship.

While both Rilke and Henderson turn to love, they realize its limitations and seek another realm, for which they create symbols; however, they offer contrasting treatments of the other realm. Rilke develops the need for another realm through his symbol of the acrobats in the fifth elegy. He symbolizes the tantalizing other realm, though, with his angels, who are both terrible and wonderful because they affirm man's unfulfilled potential while at the same time reminding him of what he has not accomplished. They vouch for "the recognition of a higher degree of reality in the invisible.--Therefore 'terrible' to us, because we, its lovers and transformers, still depend on the visible" ("im Unsichtbaren einen höheren Rang der Realität zu erkennen.--Daher 'schrecklich für uns, weil wir, seine Liebenden and Verwandter, doch noch am Sichtbaren hängen.--")⁸ The angel, representing poetic inspiration, lifts man toward divinity. However, the angels are not, says Rilke, to be equated with "theological beings" or with the godhead. They signify a stage on the ascent to the divine light (Stahl's Rilke, 19-20).

In order to illustrate his yearnings for another realm, Henderson quotes Hölderlin, who finds himself fascinated with coasts other than those of his homeland (epigraph, 5th, 27). Ironically, when Henderson quotes a German poet (representative of the enemy), he intensifies the ties with the enemy and

implies that the instinct for other realms is widespread. Henderson's symbol for the other realm--the divinity--emerges primarily in the epigraph for Part One and in the eighth elegy. The epigraph, quoting Goethe's statement that the gods give endless joy and pain to their beloved (17), echoes Rilke's paradox concerning man's relation to the angels. However, as Henderson develops his treatment of man's relation to the gods, he modifies the paradox in two ways: he declines to pursue the problem of transforming the visible into the invisible, and he resorts to Egyptian mythology and history in order to represent divinity. In his second elegy, Rilke refers to Winckelmann's "edle Einfalt und stille Größe" ("noble simplicity and quiet grandeur") (see Stahl's *Rilke*, 29) as he contrasts the Greeks and the moderns. Henderson opens his eighth elegy by using the same quotation ironically. He notes that "among the shambles of Karnak/is Vollendung unknown to the restless Greeks/Here, not in Elis and Olympia/are edle Einfalt und still Größe (41). He is particularly interested in the Egyptian art which has quietly preserved the grace of the Egyptian culture. As he describes this civilization, he notes, as Rilke does, that man should take pride in his accomplishment but should be aware also of his shortcomings. Thus, Henderson intermittently contrasts the Egyptian civilization with that of the barbarians (to highlight what has been accomplished) and the gods (to remind man of what he has yet to attain). The Egyptian art conveys a sense of pride and confidence that prompts Henderson to refer to its insolence and its "stylised timeless effrontery" (8th, 43). Despite the risk of hubris involved in the Egyptian attitude, Henderson clearly extols Egypt's magnificent achievement (representative of the positive half of man's potential), as he describes Ra mounting "heavenwards his chosen path" (8th, 43). At the same time, though, he calls attention to the fact that barbaric peoples (representative of man's potential for destructive activity) have repeatedly attempted, to no avail, to obliterate this civilization's achievement. He thus juxtaposes a sense of permanence, derived in part from the Egyptian art which has preserved a record of the culture, with a dramatic sense that time has passed and that man's existence is transient.

Through allusions to Osiris and to the Pharaoh's crook and scourge, Henderson enriches the sense of permanence which he finds in Egyptian culture and encourages the reader to adopt a positive attitude toward death. Osiris, the beneficent deity and ruler of the Kingdom of the Dead, was a symbol of immortality because, as legend has it, even though he was dismembered by his brother (a parallel to the violence of war), his wife reassembled him, and he came to life again. Also of

importance is the fact that, in the cult of Osiris, death is pictured as a kind of sleep.⁹ Osiris' insignia, the crook and the scourge (or flail), could be borne by the reigning Pharaoh. Thus, when Henderson alludes to the King's crook and scourge, he indirectly links Osiris' immortality with a human, the King, thereby indicating human potential for immortality. The crook and the flail fit nicely into Henderson's system, also, because the crook is associated with beneficent guidance of the flock and the flail with punishment, thus symbolizing the duality of the gods' role.¹⁰ Osiris' beneficence and immortality, and the desirability of his kingdom, are significant features of Henderson's mythology, as they complement the poet's contention that death may provide continuity and is not to be feared.

Up to this point, Henderson has described man's relation to the gods in terms very similar to Rilke's. But while Rilke is concerned with transforming the visible into the invisible, Henderson focuses on a different issue: the role of history. The poem is not Marxist, since Henderson does not forecast violent revolution or the realization of a Marxist ideal, but the treatment of history suggests that Marxist thought informs Henderson's perspective, as it did that of so many Scottish and British writers in the 1930's and 1940's. Naturally, then, history is more significant than the divinity. Thus, Ra and Osiris, as Egyptian gods, represent the omnipotent force that controls man's existence--history, which, for Henderson, replaces Rilke's angels. As Rilke contemplates his beloved angels, his moods vacillate between terror and inspiration, negation and affirmation. As Henderson focuses on two eras--the modern world and the ancient Egyptian--his moods also vacillate. For Henderson, however, the Egyptian civilization does not evoke the invisible divinity of Rilke's angels; instead it draws man's attention to history as the invisible, powerful, personified force (the *doppelgaenger*) with which man must contend. Henderson makes this point explicit in the epilogue when he states that "history [is] the *doppelgaenger*/running to meet them [the heroic runners]" (54) and that "history the other/ emerges at last from the heat's trembling mirror" (55). The confrontation involves a dialectic struggle that man cannot win, but Henderson inserts a measure of affirmation, perhaps even glory, for man: he sings a song for the runners which lauds their accomplishments--the "Heroic Song" of the epilogue. The heart of the contrast between the two poets lies here. Henderson's vision is an historical, mythological version of Rilke's poetic world. Henderson acknowledges man's capacity for spirituality (obliquely through references to Osiris in

the eighth elegy), but he focuses far more heavily on history as a secular force which dominates man's existence.

Both Rilke and Henderson make use of the smile as a crucial symbol for man's mastery of the visible, transient world. Stahl notes that Rilke's use of the smile varies as it appears in the second, third, fifth, and sixth elegies. It functions, for example, as a sign of evanescence, an alluring enticement, a "manifestation of personal feeling," and an acknowledgement of the hero's triumphant passage through life" (Stahl's Rilke, xvi-xvii). Henderson's use is not so diverse, but the fact that both Rilke and Henderson allude to Karnak's smile is striking indeed. In the sixth elegy, Rilke refers to Karnak in a simile about heroes and the early-departed dead. He writes: "These go plunging ahead: preceding their own/victorious smile, as the team of horse [sic] in the mildly/moulded reliefs of Karnak the conquering King" ("Diese stürzen dahin: dem eigenen Lacheln/sind sie voran, wie das Rossegespann [sic] in den milden/muldigen Bildern von Karnak dem siegenden König" (54-55). Henderson, in turn, opens his eighth elegy with the following subtitle: "Karnak/Er lächelt über die ganze Welt hinaus" (41) ("Karnak/He smiles out over the while world") [My translation]. The smile, for Henderson, symbolizes Karnak's attitude toward life, which he describes in the eighth elegy. The general subject of the eighth elegy is the triumph of the Egyptian civilization. More specifically, the elegy develops a detailed hypothesis (posed in the form of questions) about the events of one day in the King's life. Henderson masterfully but carefully evokes the power and the quiet control (symbolized by the smile) that the King asserts over his world.

Henderson also uses the smile on a second occasion--the epigraph that introduces the tenth elegy: "'One must die because one knows them, die/of their smile's ineffable blossom, die/of their light hands'" (47). In the elegy itself, "them" means the war dead with whom the living must reconcile themselves. The "dead" smile because they have crossed "this history's/apollyon chasm" (49). Henderson notes, though, that despite the scorn of the "dead" from which men flee, "we lie bound in their inferno/this alliance must be vaunted and affirmed, lest they con/demn us!" (49). By using the smile to juxtapose history and death, Henderson links the two central issues in his work that previously appear to be unrelated: death and history. While both poets seek reconciliation between the living and the dead, Henderson also seeks to reconcile the living with history. Moreover, Henderson seeks to confront death and achieve Rilke's vaunted reconciliation, not in an invisible world within man's mind, but by means of his visible art, which is manifested "here," within history.

Henderson's vision is bound to time and draws upon the richness of man's tradition, whereas Rilke attempts to sever himself from the past (and time) in order to create a timeless, freshly-minted realm: "For my call/is always full of 'Away!'" ("Denn mein/Anruf ist immer voll Hinweg" (Rilke, 7th, 62-65).

A telling but less prominent motif shared by Rilke and Henderson is the passage to death, which again calls attention to distinctive variations between the two poets. Rilke raises the idea of passage and journey by repeatedly referring to motion (from the living to the dead; from external reality to the inner, invisible realm; from this world to the other). More specifically, in the tenth elegy, he presents one of his few narrative sequences, in which his Egyptian Lament leads Rilke's lyric subject¹¹ "through the spacious landscape/of Lamentation" ("durch die weite Landschaft der Klagen") (82-83). The tenth elegy closes with Rilke's lyrical subject climbing alone "to the mountains of Primal Pain" ("in die Berge des Urleids") (84-85) to a realm which promises happiness. Even though Rilke juxtaposes pain and pleasure here, pleasure clearly dominates.

Henderson, too, makes numerous general references to motion (i.e., military vehicles move from one location to another and armies advance, retreat, and pursue one another through the desert). However, as Henderson develops the journey image more specifically, in the tenth elegy and the epilogue, he distinguishes his position from Rilke's. In the tenth elegy men flee sorrow and death, but they are trapped until they find a means to reconcile the living and the dead (49). Then in the epilogue he refines his position once more with a second distinguishing image. The runners of Cyrene race toward an end which involves a dialectic struggle with history, but as the poem closes, the combatants are locked in a struggle which causes theme to fall "down the thunderous cataract of day" (55)--an inversion of the rising motif in Rilke's tenth elegy. Rilke envisions a struggle that affords ascendancy to pleasure, but as these illustrations from *Elegies for the Dead* indicate, Henderson never frees man from the dialectic struggle or permits pleasure to dominate.

Rilke and Henderson share another symbol--sleepers--that is used to revive childhood dreams and memories, but for the most part the similarities dissipate at this point. Rilke's sleeper is the man who releases himself from normal social constraints to dream of the womb and primal Freudian emotional responses. Rilke uses the womb to introduce a primitive, interior world (prefiguration of the *innen Raum*), which the child loves despite its ominous and jungle-like attributes (3rd, 36-39). In the first elegy of Henderson's poem, the sleepers are equated with the dead (as in Egyptian mythology),

but in the second elegy Henderson enriches the symbolism by linking sleep with respite and dreams. The dreams lead to visions of childhood, which, like Rilke's version, include jungles that signify life's struggles. Henderson refers to Eros but does not employ Freudian womb imagery, and he completes the sleep image of the second elegy by speaking of the oneness of the laager, where "friends and enemies, haters and lovers/both sleep and dream" (22). Once again, Rilke and Henderson reinforce the distinction: Rilke's union is within, while Henderson's is without, in the social realm.

A final shared cluster of symbols--"things" such as columns and the Sphinx--solidifies the distinction between the two poets. Rilke recalls man's great cultural feats--the Sphinx, Chartres, music--in order to cite man's capacity, but he immediately presses the point that man is small in comparison to the inapprehensible angel (7th elegy). He also points to "things" as the means for transforming man's external reality into a living, internal reality (9th elegy). Clearly the transformation involves amelioration of the visible thing: these things "want us to change them entirely, within our invisible hearts" ("wollen, wir sollen sie ganz im unsichtbarn Herzen verwandeln" (Rilke, 9th, 76-77). Henderson, on the other hand, revives a sense of awe before the Egyptian accomplishment, saying:

This civilization asserts
its sylised timeless effrontery.
Synthesis is implicit
in Rilke's single column, (die *eine*)
denying fate, the stone mask of Vollendung. (8th, 43)

Henderson uses Rilke's sense of solidity, permanence, and synthesis in art without suggesting the need for an inner transformation of the "thing." In his eighth elegy, Henderson highlights the historical cycles in which barbarian cultures mount assaults against the magnificent, silent Egyptian art, but he finds hope in the fact that the "sun-boat travels through the hours of darkness/and Ra mounts heavenwards his chosen path" (43). Henderson's source of hope is not the individual man who transforms things into his personal vision of artistic magnificence (i.e., the hero). Rather, Henderson derives his hope from the achievements of great civilizations, which will, nevertheless, transcend them and thereby offer intimations of immortality. Henderson's source of hope, while different, makes as much sense as Rilke's. Even though he is not so sanguine as Rilke, Henderson conveys a robust conviction that the dialectic strife is worthy of his time.

Rilke perceives and strives to overcome numerous human problems: the transitory quality of man's existence; man's inability to accept his transience; man's distractedness; his fear of death; his divided consciousness; the subject-object split; and his inability to block out time and the external world in order to achieve a fulfilling existence (Leishman's Rilke, 108). In the ninth and tenth elegies, Rilke realizes that he must no longer regret the transitory (it is a condition to be overcome), and he satirizes the half-life which excludes death (Leishman's Rilke, 112-14). Henderson, in his turn, addresses most of these issues (excepting the subject-object split and the satire of the half-life), but his presentation lacks Rilke's passion and intensity on all but the issues of transience and the divided consciousness. The other issues are not central for Henderson, as they are for Rilke, because Henderson is more concerned with a social and historical perspective.

Rilke's passionate concern for the individual's attitude toward consciousness leads to one final distinction. Henderson does not compensate for his lack of intensity in this one area with equal passion concerning the social-historical arena. His poem simply does not provide an equal measure of intensity. Having finished the *Duineser Elegien*, the reader senses that he has been privy to insights that are the product of an excruciating and exhilarating self-analysis, which yields a tone of extraordinary depth and symbolic richness.

Completion of the *Elegies for the Dead* leaves the reader with the sense that Henderson's symbols, while similar to Rilke's, are less thoroughly developed (especially when compared to symbols such as the lover) and that his approach to Rilke's concerns is the product of a fine, richly cultivated, but more detached intellect. Rilke's poem offers more emotional reverberations and subtle nuance (in the symbols) than Henderson's, but Henderson provides rich allusions--to Egyptian mythology and history in his superb eighth elegy--which, even though less lyrical, are nonetheless impressive. The shift from Rilke's individual and internal conflicts to Henderson's social and historical dialectic creates differences, but the differences need not necessarily (perhaps should not) lead to comparative evaluations in which one work is pronounced superior because of variations in lyrical intensity. Henderson's is a fine work of art that can withstand the rigor of a comparison with Rilke's *Duineser Elegien*. The comparison with Rilke should point out more than the excellence of Henderson's achievement, though; it should also place the poem in a significantly broader context (than that of World

War II documentary poetry and the Scottish Renaissance movement) where it may be more widely appreciated.

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NOTES

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rainer Maria Rilke's "Duineser Elegien,"* ed. E. L. Stahl (Oxford, 1965), p. ix. Stahl's commentary. Subsequent references to Stahl's edition are inserted parenthetically in the text.

² See the reviews and letters at the end of the 1977 edition of Hamish Henderson's *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica* (Edinburgh, 1977), pp. 61-69; George Kitchin, "The Modern Makars," *Scottish Poetry: A Critical Survey*, ed. James Kinsley (London, 1955), pp. 265, 278.

³ Hugh MacDiarmid, ed., *Living Scottish Poets* (London, 1931), p. v. Also see Hugh MacDiarmid, *Selected Essays of Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. Duncan Glen (London, 1969), p. 119.

⁴ John Speirs, *The Scots Literary Tradition: An Essay in Criticism.* (London, 1940), pp. 157-58.

⁵ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, Trans. and ed. J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender (New York, 1939), pp. 60-1. Leishman's commentary. Subsequent references to Leishman's edition are inserted parenthetically in the text. I have drawn all Rilke quotations from the Leishman edition. References include page numbers for both the German original and the English translation. Where appropriate, the elegy number is included.

⁶ Hamish Henderson, *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica* (London, 1948), pp. 11-12. Subsequent references to Henderson are inserted parenthetically in the text. Where appropriate, the elegy number is included.

⁷ *Harper's Dictionary of Classical Literature and Antiquities*, ed. Harry Peck (New York, 1965), p. 458. Subsequent references are inserted parenthetically in the text in the following form: (*Harper's Dictionary*, 458).

⁸ English text from Leishman's Rilke, p. 87; German text from Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe aus Muzot, 1921-26*, ed. Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber (Leipzig, 1935), p. 337.

⁹ Tom Jones, *Ancient Civilization* (Chicago, 1964), pp. 72-73.

¹⁰ *Treasures of Tutankhamun*, ed. Katherine S. Gilbert, et. al. (New York, 1976), pp. 41, 106. The Egyptians de-emphasized the negative aspect of the scourge because they liked Osiris, associating it with the collection of a substance that was made into unguents.

¹¹ Rilke's ambiguous use of pronouns makes it impossible to identify the person precisely. Stahl suggests referring to the "lyric subject" (Stahl's Rilke, p. x).