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Orchards 52, Orchards 54, Orchards 57: The Doe, and Orchards 59 by Rainer Maria Rilke

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Susanne Petermann
Orchards 52

Rainer Maria Rilke
Vergers 52

The long life of the landscape, the bell,
the pure deliverance of evening—
all this prepares us for the approach
of a kindly, unfamiliar figure...

Our life goes on, strangely suspended
between the faraway bow and the stab of the arrow,
between a world that hesitates to seize the angel
and She whose powerful hand prevents it.

Susanne Petermann
Orchards 54

Rainer Maria Rilke
Vergers 54

In the eyes of animals, I've seen
lasting peace, the impartial
calm of nature
that cannot be shaken.

Every animal knows what fear is;
nevertheless, it moves along,
and on its field of plenty
grazes a presence
that has no taste for elsewhere.

Susanne Petermann
Orchards 57: *The Doe*

Rainer Maria Rilke
Vergers 57: *La Biche*

Doe, the deep, ancient beauty
of forests flows from your eyes,
circles of trust shot through
with utter fear.

The lively grace of your leaping
expresses all these things,
yet nothing can shake
the calm insouciance
on your face.

Susanne Petermann
Orchards 59

Rainer Maria Rilke
Vergers 59

I've said my goodbyes. Since childhood
countless departures have gradually honed me.
But I return, I begin again,
which is what sets my attention free.

All I can do now is fill my gaze.
All I can do, without holding back,
is feel the joy of having loved what reminds me
of all the losses that move us.

The series of fifty-nine poems called *Orchards (Vergers)* was composed in 1924–1925. It was Rainer Maria Rilke’s first literary production written originally in French, published by Gallimard in 1926, the year of his death. Rilke particularly loved a handful of French words he considered untranslatable, at least in sound, rhythm, and spirit. One of them was *verger*, “orchard.” The title poem of the series begins thus:

Perhaps, dear borrowed language, I’ve been
so bold as to write you because
of the rustic name whose unique domain
has taunted me forever: *Vergers*.

The title poem, “29: Orchard,” occurs in the middle of the series, like the fountain at the orchard’s center from which all else flows. In this series, the poet contemplates aspects of nature as well as those of his personal environment demonstrating that, more than being mere symbols for humanity, these represent actual indifferent projections of our being. We can look into them as into a mirror. The last two lines of poem #21 inform us that “...orchard and road are no different / from anything that we are.” The orchard is a container, a kind of hologram for all of life and its seasons, most especially the poignant decline at the turning from summer to autumn. The joy, magic, and perfection of ripe fruit brings immediately to the poet’s mind the end of a happy season. Summer, by definition, betrays us with its bright promises.

I selected this group of four poems from the very end of *Orchards* to emphasize this poignancy. As the end of the series approaches, it becomes more and more obvious that these poems comprise Rilke’s poetic farewell to his beloved world. “I’ve said my goodbyes,” he declares in the last entry. In “Orchards 52,” the poet tells us that the angel of death is both welcoming and firm and that often we feel ambivalent about continuing to struggle through life. A careful reading of “Orchards 54” and “Orchards 57” reveals that true beauty and peace are not possible without darkness and shadow. Over and over an archetypal paradox is shown to us, the fact that growth lies within “the deep, ancient beauty / of forests” seen in the eyes of the doe, and in the push-pull between the fear and peace of a cow or horse grazing in a pasture. Life for Rilke, as he looked back, was a series of “losses that move us” forward.

The difficulty of translating Rilke will cause the heart of any Rilke translator—and there are many, though not of the French poems—to lurch with familiarity, affection, and dread. Rilke in German is notoriously labyrinthine; whether by choice or by inclination, or in the name of lyricism, Rilke sometimes turns the syntactically simpler French language into a Germanic tangle. Still, most of these poems are more straightforward than the German ones, thank goodness. That’s not to say they are easy to translate. They simply present a less ornate doorway

into the same complex, paradoxical ideas as those in Rilke's German poems.

The French language obviously offers a different set of cognates and similarities to English than does German. At times in my translation process, the seemingly simplest word choices did not offer the most poetic translation, nor did they result in a translation I myself could enjoy. To give a specific example, "Orchards 57: The Doe [*La Biche*]", begins, in French:

*Ô la biche: quel bel intérieur
d'anciennes forêts dans tes yeux abonde;
combien de confiance ronde
mêlée à combien de peur.*

Literally: "Oh, the doe: what a beautiful interior / of ancient forests in your eyes abounds; / what round confidence / mixed with such fear." To begin with, there is the *Ô* and the *quel*, followed by two occurrences of *combien*, all of which lend a tone of breathless drama. I acknowledge the romantic style of Rilke's poetic heritage, but there are other ways to convey the urgency of this poem. Personally, I am far more interested in the fact that this poet sees a deer and has instant, serious respect for this being.

Gary Miranda, a translator I admire, gave us a marvelous new version of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* (Tavern Books, Portland, 2013). In his afterword, he says this on the pesky subject of *Ô*: "...a modern American reader has far less tolerance for 'O' than a European reader of Rilke's day, and one has to assume that Rilke would have been sensitive to that fact had he been writing for a modern American audience. So, if you're aiming to approximate the original experience for a modern audience, you're going to have to jettison some of those *O*s. This is just one reason that it's always seemed silly to me to talk about a definitive translation. Definitive for whom?" (pp. 66–67)

There is another "false friend" in Rilke's word *intérieur* which is a simple matter of "interior" or "inside." However, here, as in many of the French poems, I have taken the risk of assuming that the poet used that particular word in service of his rhyme scheme. I do pay attention to rhythm, but attempting to replicate Rilke's rhymes has never been my goal; I am satisfied with resonances such as those between "doe" and "deep," and "forests" and "flows." The more I studied this poem, the more I felt that Rilke was referring to the fearful and beautiful darkness of a Grimms' fairy tale forest, seen reflected in the black eyes of the doe. So, I chose to rearrange these lines a bit, and render the idea of "interior" in the adjective "deep." My hope is that I have transferred the drama of the original to the third and fourth lines of the verse, using the short and emphatic "shot through" and "utter fear."

Rilke wrote more than 300 poems in French in the last four years of his life while living in an ancient tower in Switzerland, his physical condition deteriorating. These poems reveal his intuition that he was seriously ill; doctors diagnosed leukemia only days before his death on December 27, 1926. He was just 51 years old. Many of the French poems were found among his papers and published posthumously.