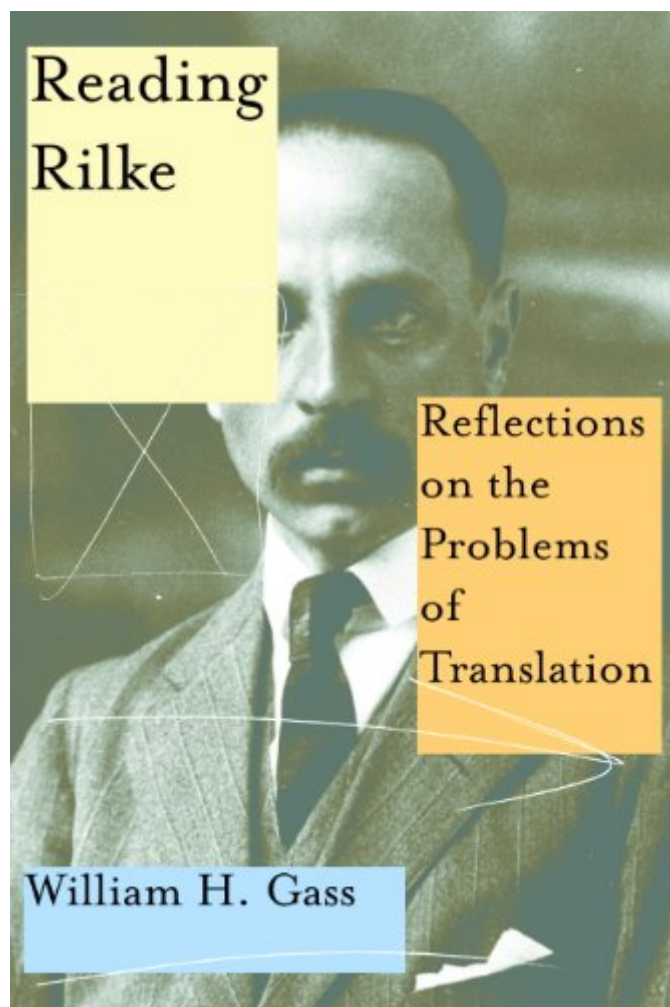


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Reading Rilke: Reflections On The Problems Of Translation



Synopsis

The greatly admired essayist, novelist, and philosopher, author of *Cartesian Sonata*, *Finding a Form*, and *The Tunnel*, reflects on the art of translation and on Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies* -- and gives us his own translation of Rilke's masterwork. After nearly a lifetime of reading Rilke in English, William Gass undertook the task of translating Rilke's writing in order to see if he could, in that way, get closer to the work he so deeply admired. With Gass's own background in philosophy, it seemed natural to begin with the *Duino Elegies*, the poems in which Rilke's ideas are most fully expressed and which as a group are important not only as one of the supreme poetic achievements of the West but also because of the way in which they came to be written -- in a storm of inspiration. Gass examines the genesis of the ideas that inform the *Elegies* and discusses previous translations. He writes, as well, about Rilke the man: his character, his relationships, his life. Finally, his extraordinary translation of the *Duino Elegies* offers us the experience of reading Rilke with a new and fuller understanding.

Book Information

File Size: 2569 KB

Print Length: 258 pages

Publisher: Knopf; 1st edition (August 7, 2013)

Publication Date: August 7, 2013

Sold by:Â Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B00DXKJ6KY

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #763,919 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #102

inÂ Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Reference > Words, Language & Grammar > Translating #279

inÂ Books > Literature & Fiction > Poetry > Regional & Cultural > European > German #371

inÂ Books > Reference > Words, Language & Grammar > Translating

Customer Reviews

It may seem odd that a book about translating Rainer Maria Rilke would be a good place to start

encountering the poet. But Rilke is not only a brilliant poet, one of the greatest of the twentieth century, he is also difficult to approach. I read him on and off for ten years before I could see beyond what I thought was pretentious esthetic posturing. (Now, like so many others, I see Rilke as one of the great meditators on art and life, someone who reveals us to ourselves with a depth and clarity that few -- if any -- can equal.) Here, in sum, is why this book is so wonderful. William Gass has read, and struggled with, and been guided by, Rainer Maria Rilke all his life. In many ways, he tells us, he has been closer to Rilke than any other human being. And now, after a half century of that intimate relationship, he tells us who this literary 'friend' is, what his life has been, what he has gone through, what he has achieved -- and why we should care. There can be no more important book for any of us to write: 'this is what I cared most about in my life, this is what I learned from that caring.' This is what William H. Gass, a major American novelist, does in his book:-- He provides a brilliant short biography of Rilke-- He explicates, effortlessly, some of his shorter lyrics, so that the reader can understand what Rilke does and what is at stake in his poems.-- He teaches us, through a long but not boring chapter on translation, just how complex and apt Rilke's language is. That is not small accomplishment, since Rilke seems to sing so effortlessly that it is easy to overlook how much is going on in each phrase.

This is the kind of book that rarely appears these days, a meditative cycle of free-form essays that adopts its own poetic approach, here to the densely metaphorical and sometimes mysterious imagery of Rainer Maria Rilke, the most important poet writing in German in the 20th century and perhaps even more, an artist's artist, and a figure whose influence has only increased in recent years. This ever-widening attention to Rilke is reflected in Gass's fascinating and trenchant discussion of side-by-side excerpts from nearly two dozen translations of Rilke's masterpiece *The Duino Elegies*, the book's centerpiece and a most useful guide for the non-expert attempting to penetrate Rilke's powerful use of German, a language that non-German-speakers don't immediately identify with poetic utterance. In that alone, Gass's book will be a revelation, taking the reader into lines, words and images with a translator's critical and aesthetic eye and ear, elucidating why Gass himself makes the choices he does. In fact the book appears to be a kind of gloss, an extended set of notes with related ideas that allowed Gass to arrive at his own translation of the *Elegies*, a translation that appears at the end of this volume. It is a plus that Gass's own version of the *Elegies* hardly offers the final word on the matter - although he is transparent in discussing his own sometimes idiosyncratic choices and solutions, you feel that the results are sometimes artificial, unmusical, and enjambed for meaning. But we only bring that level of critical insight because of

Gass's own discussion, and in that vein the book is really very generous: rather than closing the door to others, Gass's study invites further efforts.

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