

SONNETS TO ORPHEUS

Rainer Maria Rilke

The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) had been so completely devastated by his experiences in World War I that he was not able to write. While living at the thirteenth-century Château de Muzot in Switzerland, he was deeply moved by the untimely death of his daughter Ruth's childhood friend, Vera Ouckama Knoop. Inspired once again to write, Rilke dedicated the [Sonnets to Orpheus](#) as a Grab-Mal (Grave Marker) for young Vera, and the poetry flowed from him in torrents. He composed twenty-six of the fifty-five sonnets of the Orpheus cycle in the space of three days, February 2-5, 1922, without editing. The rest of these, and his [Duino Elegies](#), he completed during the remainder of that February.



Orpheus with Lyre and Animals, Virgil Solis (1563), illustration for Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, from *Ovid Illustrated*.

Sonnet 1

There rose a tree. Oh growth so great!¹
Oh Orpheus sings! Oh tree, I hear you
now!²
And all is silent, but even in the silence
new beginning, sign and change arose.
Out of the silence animals came from
bed and nest
in the forest, clear and calm;
and it happened that it was neither ruse
nor fear, per se,
that caused them to be silent,
but listening, yelling, screaming, roaring
seemed small in their hearts and where
there was no shelter to receive this,
no refuge of darkest desire
with an entrance with posts that shiver,
you created temples in their ear.

Sonnet 5

Don't build a monument. Let only the
rose
bloom every year in his honor.
For it is Orpheus, his metamorphosis
in this and that. We should not trouble
about other names. Once and always
it is Orpheus, when he sings. He comes
and goes.
Isn't it enough, when he outlasts³ the
bowl of
roses by a day or two?
Oh, that he must leave, so you can
understand!
Though he worries about leaving.
Because his word is mightier than his
presence,
he is already where you cannot follow.
His hands not tied by the lyre's grid.
And he obeys by crossing the line.

(Original translation of Sonnets by Eberhard Ehrich, F.R.C.)

¹ Literal translation: so excessive.

² Literal translation: so tall in our ear.

³ Literal translation: over stays.

