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Stories of God

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STORIES OF GOD

THE BIBLE
THE OLD TESTAMENT
THE NEW TESTAMENT
THE GOSPELS
THE ACTS
THE EPISTLES
THE REVELATION

RAINER MARIA RILKE

In Translations by M. D. HERTER NORTON

Letters to a Young Poet

Sonnets to Orpheus

Wartime Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke

Translations from the Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke

The Lay of the Love and Death of Cornet Christopher Rilke

The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge

Stories of God

Translated by STEPHEN SPENDER and J. B. LEISHMAN

Duino Elegies

Translated by JANE BANNARD GREENE and M. D. HERTER NORTON

Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke

Volume One, 1892-1910 Volume Two, 1910-1926

STORIES OF
GOD



Rainer Maria Rilke

Translation by M. D. Herter Norton



NEW YORK

W · W · NORTON & COMPANY · INC ·

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GOD
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MY FRIEND, I once gave this book into your hands, and you cared for it as no one had yet done. So I have grown accustomed to think that it belongs to you. Suffer me, therefore, not only in your own book but in all the books of this new edition to write your name; to write:

*The STORIES OF GOD belong to
ELLEN KEY*

*RAINER MARIA RILKE
Rome, April 1904*

1870

1871

Received of the Treasurer of the
County of ... the sum of ...
for ...

Witness my hand and seal
this ... day of ...

... ..

...

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Translator's Note



“. . . these youthful fantasies were almost entirely improvised out of an instinct which, if I were to specify it more particularly, I might describe as busied with transferring God from the sphere of rumor into the realm of direct and daily experiencing; the recommending by every means a naïve and lively taking-into-use of God with which I seemed to have been charged since childhood. . . .”

BEYOND this, written twenty years later by a poet who disliked attempting to explain how he had come to write a particular work and usually fell back on the idea of some subconscious or automatic dictation, we know little of the genesis of the *Stories of God*. None of the manuscript material has survived. They obviously come after Rilke's first Munich days, his early experiences of Italy and his first Russian journey in the spring of 1899.

According to other statements of his own, Rilke was fond of this book, the thirteen tales of which he had written down—in a manner so characteristic of his working—at a happy moment somewhere between the 10th and the 21st of November, 1899, in the course of seven consecutive nights. It first appeared just before Christmas 1900, but un-

der a different title, namely *Vom lieben Gott und Anderes/ an Grosse für Kinder erzählt* (*Of God and Other Matters/ told to Grownups for Children*). The roundabout approach implied in the subtitle was meant to cover the embarrassment he always sensed on talking with children, to which he refers in the introductory tale. Though he felt how truly the wide and real world belongs to "young youth", this constraint made spontaneous communication impossible, so that only by some such device as this could he reach those who he knew would understand him if he "tried to say something about God". The little artifice, thus charmingly accounted for, remains an ingredient of the story-telling, but when in the following year Insel-Verlag brought out a second impression of the book it was under the present title, *Geschichten vom lieben Gott*, the subtitle dropped.

In 1904 the publishers expressed a wish to scrap the old format—which Rilke had never liked: "unhandy and unpretty", he called it—in favor of a simpler and more attractive volume; and for this (properly speaking) second edition he revised the text during February and March of that year, in Rome. The alterations were fairly numerous, but slight, involving single words, some phrases, some points of punctuation, but the style of the writing remained unchanged. At Rilke's own request his friend and admirer Ellen Key, the Swedish feminist, had prepared a brief foreword for it. But, though this had already been set by the printer, when Rilke saw it he changed his mind: it tried too hard to interpret, reading thoughts expressed in later letters back into this work of four years ago, offering keys to all its doors, whereas, since everything in it was presentiment,

anticipation both fearful and joyful, it could not endure so much light cast upon it: "it must be alone with itself". The foreword never appeared, therefore; instead there is the dedication to Ellen Key.

Despite his kindly sentiments towards this early work, when the first edition of his *Collected Works* (*Gesammelte Werke*) was being planned in 1925 Rilke wrote his publisher that he did not like the idea of his "youthful pre-prose (which was not yet prose)" being included in the volume with the *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*; unless perhaps the monograph on Rodin followed it, acting as a bridge between the two larger prose works. It came out in Volume IV, with *Prose Fragments* and the *Rodin*. Now, finally, it stands in Volume IV (1961) of the definitive *Complete Works* (*Sämtliche Werke*), together with sundry early stories and plays.

In its second form (1904) the book has never been out of print. It went through twelve impressions in Rilke's lifetime and has been translated into various languages besides English: French, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, Swedish, Polish, Czechish. The present English translation—a revision of its predecessor, in the groundwork of which the translator had the benefit of collaborating with the late Countess Nora Purtscher-Wydenbruck, a niece of that good friend of Rilke's, Princess Marie of Thurn and Taxis—is, of course, based on the text as it now stands in the *Complete Works*.

Even if by his own more mature standards this text represents "pre-prose", it is such characteristic Rilke that in the light of experience the translation has deserved re-

vision in considerable detail. The mode of expression, in itself not unique for the period in any literature—on purpose slightly stilted at times, with its touches of humor, of irony, its stylized whimsy, its biblical turns to rouse an echo of familiar phraseology—must still be kept, quite as much as the poetic qualities of concept and description which are the distinguishing features of a great artist's accomplishment. Translating Rilke means translating not only German—and to begin with, we have no satisfactory way of rendering "*vom lieben Gott*"—but Rilke's very individual German. He sometimes uses odd words; more often he uses words oddly; sometimes he invents words, a process which goes better in German than in English. Nine times out of ten one discovers an acuteness of observation and intent in his peculiar employment of a tense, an adjective, an adverb, a preposition. These items are easily overlooked in the mechanics of translation; one must be constantly on guard, balancing between too-literal adherence to an unusual expression and the expected commonplace, at all costs avoiding indifference to genuine distinctions.

Autobiographical elements will naturally be recognized in the writing by anyone at all familiar with Rilke's works, letters and early diaries. Here and there touches of local color in implied references to customs and conventions of his own young days also occur as part of the background. Whether Rilke's allusions to Renaissance history and art show a thoroughly disciplined knowledge or not; whether, as has been suggested, his fascination with Russia sprang largely from what he himself felt and wanted to recognize in it; whether for all his love and enthusiasm for that

country he makes some mistakes in his Russian or mixes up his heroes or interprets folktales in his own way—these points are not in question here. They have been ably dealt with elsewhere. We take the background material of these stories as it was intended, for its atmospheric value. A few indications relevant to sources and expressions are touched upon in the *Notes* at the end of the volume.

The writer of a foreword may consider it his task to expound upon what he thinks his author means by what he will be saying in the coming pages. A translator's note will be most usefully confined to some more modest comment on the work in hand, but it should certainly convey its perpetrator's apologies for offering something that by the nature of its case can never be wholly satisfactory. For better or worse, the translator's understanding is conveyed in the result of his effort, and interpretations, preliminary or subsequent, seem uncalled-for: though unfortunately at one remove from the original, the reader now takes over and will make his own guesses. This book of stories is the youthful work of a great poet. It should be read and enjoyed "alone with itself".

M.D.H.N.

Whitherton on Shadow Lane
Wilton, Connecticut
November 1962

STORIES OF GOD

By [Faint Name]

[Faint Text]

[Faint, illegible text block]

EXHIBIT TO P. 101

The Tale of the Hands of God



RECENTLY, one morning, I met the lady who lives next door. We exchanged greetings.

"What an autumn!" she exclaimed after a pause, and looked up at the sky. I did the same. The morning was indeed very clear and exquisite for October.

Suddenly I had an idea. "What an autumn!" I cried, waving about a little with my hands. And my neighbor nodded in assent. I watched her thus for a moment. Her good, healthy face bobbed up and down so amiably. It was very bright, only around the lips and at the temples there were little shadowy wrinkles. How could she have got them? And then I asked, all unexpectedly: "And your little girls?"

The wrinkles in her face vanished for a second, but gathered again at once, darker than before. "Well thank God; but——"; my neighbor began to walk on, and I now strode along at her left as is proper.

"You know, they have both reached the age, those children, when they *ask* all day long. 'What'—all day long, and right straight into the night."

"Yes," I murmured, "there is a time . . ."

But she took no notice.

"And not just questions such as: Where does this horse-car go? How many stars are there? And is ten thousand more than many? Quite different things as well! For example: Does God speak Chinese too? and: What does God look like? Always everything about God! But that's something we ourselves don't know about—"

"No, of course—" I agreed, "though we can have our guesses . . ."

"Or about God's hands—what is one to—"

I looked my neighbor full in the face. "Pardon me," said I most politely, "you just said the hands of God, did you not?"

She nodded. I think she was a little surprised.

"Well," I hastened to add, "I happen to know something about those hands. By chance," I remarked quickly, as I saw her eyes grow round, "quite by chance—I— — well", I finished with considerable decision, "I will tell you what I know. If you have a moment, I will accompany you to your house; that will just give me time."

"Gladly," said she, when at last I let her speak, still much astonished, "but wouldn't you like . . .?"

"To tell the children myself? No, dear lady, that wouldn't do, that wouldn't do at all. You see, I promptly get embarrassed when I have to talk with children. That in itself is not bad. But the children might think I was embarrassed because I felt myself telling lies. . . . And as the veracity of my story is very important to me—why, you can repeat it to the children; you will surely do it much

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