

Prayer of the Month • Rainer Maria Rilke

You, Neighbour God

You, God, who lives next door –

If at times, through the long night, I trouble you
with my urgent knocking –

this is why: I hear you breathe so seldom.

I know you're all alone in that room.

If you should be thirsty, there's no one
to get you a glass of water.

I wait listening, always. Just give me a sign!

I'm right here.

As it happens, the wall between us

is very thin. Why couldn't a cry

from one of us

break it down? It would crumble
easily,

it would barely make a sound.

The Book of Hours / Rainer Maria Rilke. 1,6

In the *Book of Hours*, the author searches for and explores an intimate and loving relationship with God. The title is taken from the medieval books of prayers that devout people carried with them and used through the day, at regular 'hours'. Rilke's explorations were private poems, musings, initially unpublished. Written quite quickly, they have a freshness about them. In 'You neighbour God', Rilke imagines an intimate but also absent relationship with God. Although God doesn't speak, the author remains attentive: 'I'm right here'. It is a reversal of what we normally think of as prayer, of God listening out for us. Perhaps God is as reticent as we sometimes are. Despite the absence of a response Rilke expresses a sensitive intimacy.

Rainer Maria Rilke was born in 1875 in Prague, then the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He was an only child. His mother had lost a baby daughter and she brought up the young René (as he was known then) as a girl until he was six. His father was a railroad official, who was also a cadet in the emperor's army. For his son, he decreed military school, at the age of ten. René disliked his five years at the school; teased by the other boys, he sought solitude in the infirmary. He found refuge in poetry, and, when he left military academy threw himself into life as a student, and he gained recognition for his poetry. During a two-month stay in Tuscany in 1897 he was inspired by works by Fra Angelico and Botticelli, which showed him that holiness can be rooted in the body and in human relationship. He fell in love with a thirty-six year old Russian woman, Lou Andreas-Salomé. It was her influence that made him change his name from René to the more masculine-sounding Germanic Rainer. In 1899 he accompanied Lou and her husband to Russia where he was immediately impressed by the deep spirituality there. This caused him to write the poems for the first part of his *Book of Hours*, 'The Book of a Monastic Life'. In 1900, after another and longer sojourn with Lou, Rilke went to stay at Worpswede, an artists' colony near Bremen. Here, he met and married Clara Westhoff, and wrote the poems in the second part of *The Book of Hours*, 'The Book of Pilgrimage'. In 1902 Rilke and Clara decided to change their life, and freed each other to pursue their art. Their daughter, Ruth, was left

with Clara's parents, and Rilke went to Paris, to write a biography of Auguste Rodin. Here, he became Rodin's secretary, but, exhausted by the work, in 1903 he took a train to Viareggio in Italy. It is here that he composed the third and final section of *The Book of Hours*, 'The Book of Poverty and Death', reflecting on the poverty he had encountered in Paris. Here, he treats of death as something positive, to be treated as an ally and companion. Rilke continued to write and publish poetry, often influenced by *The Book of Hours*, as he wrote in 1925 to Witold von Hulewicz, his Polish translator, he saw his *Elegies* as 'a further shaping of those essential [inspirations] which had been given already in *The Book of Hours*.' He died in 1926.

Colin Lunt