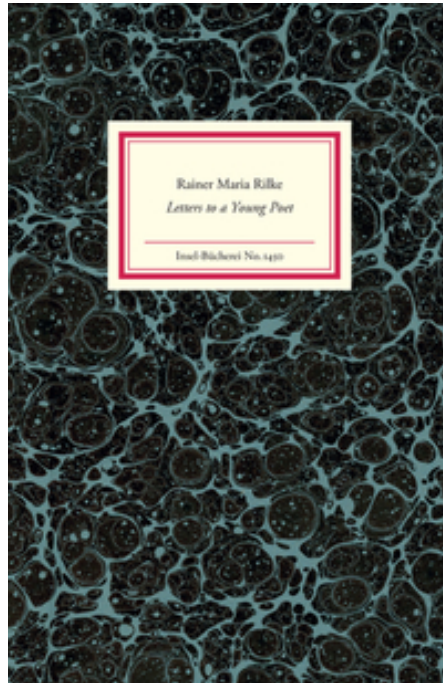


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Rilke, Rainer Maria
Letters to a Young Poet

Mit einem Vorwort und aus dem Deutschen übersetzt von Ulrich Baer

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Rainer Maria Rilke
LETTERS
TO A YOUNG POET

Translated and with an Introduction
by Ulrich Baer

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INTRODUCTION

By Ulrich Baer

»You must change your life,« is the final line of one of Rainer Maria Rilke's great poems, »The Archaic Torso of Apollo«. You must change your life not for a particular reason or to achieve a particular goal, but because life is change, and to change one's life means to be in harmony with life's greatest truth. Rilke wrote the poem in 1908, during the period when he also composed ten letters to a young student named Franz Xaver Kappus. Kappus, whose family came from a German-speaking enclave called Banat in today's Romania, Serbia, and Hungary, was enrolled in the same military academy where Rilke had been an exceedingly miserable young cadet only ten years earlier. In the meantime, Rilke had published four books of poetry to some acclaim, in addition to several plays and some prose works that remain largely unknown outside the German-speaking world. Kappus had written a fan letter to Rilke to ask for advice on his fledgling attempts to become a poet. He had included a sample of his verses. Rilke responded to the letter without knowing Kappus personally, as he responded to many letters written by those who piqued his interest, whether they were baronesses, famous writers, or infatuated students. But instead of coddling the adolescent, in view of his inexperience and need for

affirmation, Rilke did more than just dismiss the student's poems (rather harshly). He chastised the aspiring poet for asking for his elder's critique at all. And instead of ending his response there, and leaving it at one letter, Rilke embarked on a deep and detailed explanation, over the course of ten letters, of why relying on others' opinions and advice is so tempting and also so detrimental in any effort to become who we should be. The opinions of others may provide direction, Rilke acknowledged, but they will distract us from our own, true purpose. This purpose – originally cast in these letters as the question of whether one should strive to be an artist, but soon inclusive of all life decisions – can only be determined by deep and unflinching inner reflection. Instead of providing guidance to an aspiring student on how to write better poems, the letters to Franz Xaver Kappus became a guide to life.

Over a period of six years, Rilke wrote a total of ten letters to Kappus. During this time he also wrote his only novel about a fictional Danish writer eking out his existence in rapidly modernizing Paris, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, published several collections of poetry, and penned many hundreds of letters to other, more famous or established recipients. What makes *Letters to a Young Poet* so special? After Rilke had declined the role of artist-mentor, he proceeded to ask some very basic questions. What should I do? What can I do? What can be my place in the world? In addition to these great philosophical ques-

tions, Rilke also responded to more concrete concerns that beset his adolescent addressee. Can I avoid pain or disappointment? Where can I find joy? How should I love? How should I treat women? Why is love difficult? What career should I pursue? Rilke posed these questions as much to himself as to the recipient. And because he was writing to a student, he did not have to create perfect formulations or impress anyone with well-honed philosophical arguments and ideas adorned with learned quotes and references. Instead, Rilke could answer these questions patiently, sternly, but always in the spirit of someone who is himself unsure of the answers. In the process he perfected the art of letter-writing, on which he would expend such a great deal of his creative energy for the remainder of his life. Ultimately Rilke stipulated for his entire correspondence (of about 15,000 letters, addressed to hundreds of recipients over a period of nearly thirty years) to be published alongside his poetry as a body of work of equal importance.

There is something fresh, unrehearsed and unselfconscious about these letters that makes you think about some basic and age-old questions as if for the first time. In fact, Rilke advised his recipient to resist the all too understandable urge to resolve the questions that haunted him. He urged his reader to examine solitude and pain diligently, rather than avoid these experiences, as we are all naturally inclined to do, due to their obvious unpleasantness. He

encouraged the young cadet, who was enrolled in a military academy which extolled the arch-conservative, repressive values of the Austro-Hungarian empire, to rethink the relation between the sexes in ways that would allow for true equality in love, and to commit to taking both love and sexuality seriously, rather than follow societal conventions that either equate sexuality with the satisfaction of physical urges or repress it as something embarrassing and awkward. Rilke prompted Kappus to examine carefully the grave difference between choosing a profession and following a vocation, and we can deduce (since Kappus's letters did not survive) that the young man experienced enormous pressure to enter an appropriate career. (Ultimately Kappus found a middle ground: he served as an officer in World War I but became a newspaper editor, novelist and screenwriter after the war). Rilke had quickly dispensed with Kappus's early enthusiasm to become a Poet. But instead of dashing the young man's dreams, Rilke exhorted him to take his hopes and aspirations seriously. The increasingly famous poet kept writing to the young man with unflagging urgency, signaling with every word that this young man's life really, truly mattered. It must have been strange for Kappus to receive these responses from a poet he never met. Rilke's probing questions of whether Kappus was truly driven from within and followed an inexplicable inner passion, or whether he was trying to do something to win acclaim, compensation, or

satisfy an image of himself that others had constructed, proved relevant to millions.

In 1929, three years after Rilke's untimely death of leukemia at the age of 51, Rilke's daughter Ruth and her husband, who with Rilke's widow Clara (they had separated when their daughter has been two years old) had inherited Rilke's papers, gathered the ten letters and published them as a slim volume, titled *Letters to a Young Poet*. The letters to Kappus were published as a stand-alone book drawn from Rilke's correspondence for two reasons: These letters provide an exceptionally accessible glimpse into Rilke's unshakeable faith that we can find our proper place in the modern world without relying on religion, ideology, or political belief. In addition, Rilke's heirs hoped that *Letters to a Young Poet* would provide guidance and direction to a generation of young Germans about to be seduced, corrupted, and ultimately either engulfed by or creating the great mass movements of the twentieth century. 1929 was the moment when the two populist movements of communism and fascism were battling for the support of the masses in Europe and around the world. These ideologies promised stability, cohesion, and a shared identity to a generation that had spent their childhood during the Great War of 1914-1918, and was now subject to vast economic, social, and political upheavals. Rilke's heirs intended *Letters to a Young Poet*, which Rilke had clearly written with a larger audience in mind and yet, unlike his poetry

and prose writings, addressed to a *particular* person, to provide a moral compass. The *Letters* propose that introspection can create a foundation on which to develop social and moral relationships in a time of increasing social pressure to conform.

Alas, the *Letters* did not prevent the great political and human catastrophes of the 1930s. But the *Letters* have become Rilke's most widely read book, with translation into dozens of languages, and editions that number in the millions. Quite soon after their original publication *Letters to a Young Poet* guided countless individuals in their efforts to think concretely about their own lives, especially when a deeply contemplated life seemed ever harder to come by with the increasing emphasis on commercial success and social recognition of one's existence in the post-war world. Today, when people feel as compelled to curate an image of their lives as to live authentically, the *Letters* retain their critical importance.

The sovereign, didactic yet solicitous tone of the *Letters* motivates readers to do what can be difficult in contemporary society: to think truly *for themselves* about who they want to be. This charge appeals to many readers far outside of the art world, and *Letters* can be as transformative and useful to an aspiring entrepreneur as to a writer. Rilke proposes a model of the artist as someone who devotes every part of his life to the pursuit of his art. The great German poets before Rilke, Goethe above all, had

charged the artist with understanding the world from all angles, including by assuming non-artistic professional engagements. Other poets had created an aura of regal superiority staked on a kind of eternal wisdom not accessible to all, or cultivated the cliché of the poet as a cursed outsider defying conventions. Rilke did not think of art as compatible with other jobs, and also did not think that poets were special envoys from another realm, whether heaven or hell. He suggested placing all aspects of one's life into the service of one's art, *if* art – or any activity to which one is meaningfully committed – is truly what one must do. But this »if,« – *if* you must write, *if* you must pursue art at the expense of all else – is not resolved by Rilke for Kappus, or for anyone else: it becomes the most personal, intimate question that nobody else can answer but you. But even if you have no inclination of becoming a poet, the advice to align all aspects of your life with the purpose you yourself wish to give it, is profoundly empowering.

Letters to a Young Poet was translated into English in the early 1930s, as the first of several serviceable, if often overly literal translations. The *Letters'* central concern how to live one's life authentically resonated strongly with readers, even if the Rilke they encountered in those English translations sounds a bit formal, more like a tutor to a minor aristocratic family in Victorian England than the unsentimental yet emotionally attuned modernist whose diction is always direct, and who casts his words not to sound

exquisite and poetic but to be clear and to be understood. While some of these translations are admirable, the overall impression of existing English versions remains that of a text written very much in the past. In the original German, however, Rilke sounds stunningly up-to-date even today. In reading the letters you feel the urgency and flow of someone who throws sentence after sentence on the page to a young person who thirsts for advice. In the letters Rilke sometimes abandons an image or a metaphor for another, more immediate formulation in mid-sentence. Many of those images re-appear more fully formed in poems written many years later, and that context then can guide our understanding of what Rilke meant.

The *Letters* distill Rilke's project of a poetics of immanence, in which lived experience affords us more access to knowing ourselves and the world than ideology, belief, or social conventions. This faith in our innate capacity to learn all we need from the world, if we only apply ourselves to perceiving *all* of it without selecting only what is easy, reassuring, and seems good for us, is also found in Rilke's poetry, from the *Book of Hours* (1905) to the *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*, both completed in 1922. The *Letters* lift the curtain on the creative process of a barely established writer who unflinchingly examines solitude, loss, and the true depths of love and sexuality (Rilke's immanence is a deepening of physical experience) in order to become more intelligible to himself.

I had read *Letters to a Young Poet* as a college student but had forgotten much about the slim book by the time my life was upended by the events of September 11th, which I witnessed in close proximity in New York, and by my father's death only a few weeks later. I experienced the great disequilibrium of those months as violent changes imposed on me from the outside, against my will. I felt terribly exposed to the vagaries of the world, which disrupted *my* world that I had worked hard till then to be lasting, stable, and secure. I returned to the passage in *Letters* where Rilke encourages the young poet »to love the questions«. There were so many unsettling questions for me after my father's death, all of which I thought I needed to dispatch by finding answers. Rilke's *Letters* encouraged me stay with the questions instead. Or rather, they taught me how to stay with the questions for which I lacked the answers in any case, and to explore this new sensation of radical helplessness as an opening to a new me. I needed to understand myself better, I realized, to understand the world. *Letters to a Young Poet* further encouraged me to think again what I really wanted to do, rather than what society expected of me. My life changed, in some significant ways, after those events. But with the help of the *Letters* I made the next set of decisions by exploring my connections with others and with loss, rather than having change imposed upon me from without. I responded to the violent upheavals of that fall with a transformation of my own priorities.

I became less afraid of solitude, and less dependent on others' opinions of me.

In producing a new translation that captures the letters' original flow, I have relied for guidance on the first French translation of the *Letters* by Rilke's French editor and translator, Maurice Betz. During the summer of 1925 Betz spent several weeks with Rilke to discuss and verify the first French translation of Rilke's novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. The two writers sat for hours each morning to parse choices Betz had made to let Rilke's German sing in French. When Betz translated *Letters to a Young Poet* five years later, he relied on Rilke's explicit suggestions during those earlier discussions on how to capture his German in another language. My translation takes more of Betz's version rather than existing English variations as a model, since it is closest to what Rilke would have preferred. It is also, perhaps surprisingly given how well Betz knew Rilke's preferences, one of the freer translations. The existing English translations often preserve quite literally what the translators presumably regard as particular Germanic grammatical constructions. The current translation instead captures Rilke's directness and his creative way of altering German syntax and diction, which he had employed not only to instruct, inspire, and illuminate, but to change your life.

LETTERS TO A YOUNG POET

INTRODUCTION

It was late autumn in 1902 when I found myself sitting under very old chestnut trees in the park of the military academy in Vienna, reading a book. I was so immersed in my reading that I hardly noticed when the only non-commissioned teacher among our professors, the well-educated and kind Reverend Horaček, approached me. He took the book from my hands, looked at its cover and shook his head. »Poems by Rainer Maria Rilke?« he said pensively. He opened the book in a few places, glanced at some lines, looked far into the distance and finally nodded. »So the pupil René Rilke has become a poet.«

This is how I learned about the thin and pale boy whose parents had sent him more than fifteen years ago to the military preparatory school in Sankt Pölten to prepare for a career as an officer. Back then Horaček had been school reverend at that institution, and he remembered the student well. He described his former charge as a quiet, serious, extremely talented boy who preferred to keep to himself. The boy had patiently endured the regimen of boarding school life and after four years was promoted along with the other students to the military upper school in Mährisch-Weisskirchen. There it became apparent that his constitution was not sufficiently strong. His parents took him out of school and allowed him to continue his studies at

home, in Prague. How his life developed after that, Horaček couldn't report.

After all of that it is probably understandable that I decided at this very moment to send my attempts at composing poetry to Rainer Maria Rilke, and to ask for his judgment. I wasn't twenty yet and just at the threshold of a profession that I felt was directly the opposite of my inclinations. I hoped that the author of »To Celebrate Myself« would show some understanding, if anyone could understand me at all. And without really having planned on it, I sent a letter alongside my poems. In this letter I opened up so whole-heartedly and without any reserve, as I have never done either before or after to another human being.

Many weeks passed before I received an answer. The heavy letter, closed with a blue wax seal, bore the postmark of Paris. The envelope displayed the same clear, beautiful, and steady handwriting in which its content was written from the first to the last line. This was the beginning of my regular correspondence with Rainer Maria Rilke. It lasted until 1908 before finally drying up because I drifted into areas of life from which the poet's warm, tender, and caring concern had tried to protect me.

But this is not important. Important are only the ten letters that follow here. They are important for an understanding of the world in which Rainer Maria Rilke had lived and created, and they are important also for many

who have yet to grow up and become themselves, today and in the future. Whenever someone of true greatness and originality speaks, the minor ones ought to be silent.

Berlin, June 1929

Franz Xaver Kappus

