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P R E F A C E

The ten letters that form this beautiful little book are some of the most famous letters ever written. The reason they have proven so popular over the years is that they are the work of a great soul, and they illuminate that soul; an expansive and inspiring spirit pervades them, and we are left in awe in the face of his words.

Though they were written specifically to a young poet, Rilke's words apply to everyone — especially to those who are attempting to do anything creative in their lives.

The only thing I need to add by way of introduction is the words of Franz Kappus, the young poet who

received these letters: “When a truly great and unique spirit speaks, the lesser ones must be silent.”

Marc Allen



FOREWORD

All of us who labor in the arts know that it can be a lonely existence. We often find ourselves living a life of solitary dreams, disconnected from others, and driven by a vision that no one else seems to value or share. On some days, this can become overwhelming. We then thirst for a single voice of understanding that will reach into our solitary lives and reassure us that the path we have chosen is worthy, and that the rewards it offers are worth the loneliness it entails.

For almost a hundred years, the voice that has reached out to the aspiring artist with the most clarity and consolation is that of Rainer Maria Rilke. And the place where his voice speaks most clearly is in the tran-

scendently insightful small volume *Letters to a Young Poet*.

It is a deceptively simple book. It consists of ten short letters, written over a five-year period to an aspiring young poet named Franz Xaver Kappus. The letters range freely over a variety of subjects, from the dangers of an ironic worldview to the value of faith and the close link between physical and creative ecstasy. But, always, they come back to the fundamental theme of the aloneness of the creative spirit, and the demands it makes upon the lives of those who labor in its service.

How is it that such a slim book, written so many years ago in a time so very different from our own, still speaks to us with such authority today? It is easy to point to Rilke's personal genius. And, to be sure, that plays a part. But if we look past this obvious source, we see that these letters are also the result of a unique conjunction of circumstances that created an almost magical alchemy of thought and feeling. And it is in this magical alchemy that their enduring significance lies.

The three circumstances that came together to create this alchemy were Rilke's background, his age when he wrote the letters, and the great, looming shadow of the sculptor Auguste Rodin. Rilke came from a background that made him deeply sympathetic to the struggles of anyone striving to be an artist. His father had been a career military man and had sent his son off

to a military boarding school with the intention of training him to be an officer. Rilke, weak of constitution and romantic in temperament, was ill suited to the physical rigors and severe discipline at the school, and was subjected to numerous cruelties by his classmates and teachers. Still, he remained there for five formative years of his early adolescence before, humiliated and physically and spiritually exhausted, he was allowed to return to his native Prague to continue his studies at home. During these five trying years he found his greatest solace and self-expression in the act of writing poetry. It was his only means of shaping what he called the “damnation” of those years into something of meaning and beauty.

So, when young Franz Kappus wrote him from that same military academy a dozen years later, asking for advice on how to go about living the life of an artist, it touched a chord so deep in Rilke that he could not do otherwise than to write from the most honest place in his heart about the travails and loneliness of the artist’s life in a difficult and unsympathetic world.

Rilke’s age at the time he wrote the letters also had a deep effect on their enduring power. Because of their depth of sentiment and sense of wise detachment, readers often assume they are the work of an older man looking back on the struggles of his youth. But, in

fact, these letters were written between Rilke's twenty-eighth and thirty-third years — years in which he was struggling to find himself artistically, embarking on a marriage, traveling, and meeting life with that freshness that only offers itself to us in the years of early adulthood. He was a grown man in full command of his intellectual powers, but he was also a young man alive with the passions of youthful discovery. And this gives his insights about life, love, and art an immediacy and authenticity that can only come from one in whom the very same emotions are alive and present.

But it is the great, overarching shadow of the French sculptor Auguste Rodin that in the last analysis may prove to be the leavening agent that lifts Rilke's insights from the profound observations of a sensitive and talented young man to the status of timeless utterances about the mysteries of life and the creative process.

In 1902, the year before the first of these letters to Franz Kappus, Rilke had come to Paris with the intention of writing a monograph on Rodin. His wife, Clara, a sculptor, was to study with the master, and it was an opportunity for Rilke to observe first hand the workings of genius, which he so desperately wanted to find in himself.

Rodin was everything Rilke was not — confident, robust, sensual, an older man who was secure in his

artistic identity and accomplished in his artistic voice. He was an elemental presence, with a chiseled brow, a laborer's broad physique, and piercing eyes that seemed to see through the artifice and brittle surface of anyone on whom he chose to focus his attention. He was also a man of few words who worked with unceasing diligence, and thought, felt, and spoke not through his words but through the creations of his hands. As Rilke himself said, Rodin lived inside his art; he did not have to constantly seek it and court it from amongst the intrusive distractions of daily affairs.

Contrasted to this was Rilke, the fragile, often sickly young man of delicate sensibilities and uncertain artistic direction, who suffered long periods of artistic aridity and terrifying self-doubt. Slim, slight, easily led astray from his artistic tasks, he lived in constant fear of days when all inspiration failed him and he was left with nothing but "dead words ...corpse heavy."

How could he not stand in the presence of Rodin without seeing before him the embodiment of all he desired to be as an artist, as well as a mirror of all his own artistic deficiencies and insecurities? And, in fact, this is exactly what happened. In the person of Rodin, Rilke found the model for the artistic authority he wished to possess. And in the letters to young Franz Kappus, he appropriates this air of authority, which he

wears like a mantle over the doubts and insecurities that the letters themselves address. He becomes, at once, the wise and resolved artist he dreams of being, while carrying within himself the visceral knowledge of all the struggles the young artist experiences. He manages to claim, in the way only the greatest artists can, the moral authority of that which he observes, while keeping the emotional authenticity of his own feelings.

When young Kappus reaches out to him from within the very halls of the military academy that had only ten years before almost destroyed his own creative spirit, Rilke finds the perfect opportunity to speak with absolute conviction and the deepest passion about the demons and dreams that confront a young artist struggling in an indifferent and uncaring world. He, in effect, writes from the best part of his own artistic vision to the most fragile part of his own artistic self. We, as readers, can only look on in awe as this brilliant young spirit lays bare the artistic life with a perfect understanding of its deepest desolations and its most exalted ecstasies.

Later in his life, Rilke was to write a beautiful verse on the Archaic Torso of Apollo. Standing before the headless Greek sculpture, so radiant with life despite its fragmentary form, he concludes, "For here, there is no place that does not see you. You must change your

life.” When any of us, struggling with the dreams and demons of the artistic life, reads these ten brilliant letters on the life of the creative artist, the same shudder of recognition passes through us that passed through Rilke as he stood before the torso of Apollo. We know that from where Rilke writes, there is no place that does not see us. We must change our lives.

Kent Nerburn
Bemidji, Minnesota
January 2000



LETTERS TO A
YOUNG
POET



INTRODUCTION

It was in the late fall of 1902. I was sitting under ancient chestnut trees, in the park of the Military Academy in the new section of Vienna, reading a book. I was so engrossed in the words that I hardly noticed when the learned and beloved chaplain of the academy, the only non-officer on the staff, Professor Horaček, seated himself beside me. He took the volume from my hands, gazed at the cover, and shook his head. “Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke?” he asked thoughtfully. He skimmed the pages, stopping now and then to scan a few verses and gaze pensively into the distance. Finally, with a nod, he said, “Well, René Rilke, my student, has turned into a poet after all.”

It was then I learned about the thin, pale boy who had been sent by his parents, more than fifteen years ago, to the Military Academy to become a commissioned officer. At that time Horaček had been chaplain there. He still remembered the former student clearly. He described him as a quiet, serious, highly gifted young man, who liked to keep to himself and who patiently endured the stress of dormitory life. After the fourth year he moved ahead with the others to the military academy in Mahrlich-Weisskirchen. There, however, he apparently lacked the necessary endurance for the regimen, so his parents took him out of the school and allowed him to continue his studies at home in Prague. How the events of his life unfolded after that, Professor Horaček could not say.

After our talk, I decided to send Rainer Maria Rilke my poetic attempts and to ask him for his judgment. I was hardly twenty, not quite at the threshold of a career against which I felt an inner revolt. I hoped to receive solace and understanding, if from anyone, from the author of the book *In Celebration of Myself*. Without actually intending it, I found myself writing letters to accompany my verses. In them I revealed my innermost self unreservedly as never before and never since to another person.

Many weeks passed before an answer to the first

letter came. The blue seal revealed the postmark from Paris. It weighed heavy in my hand and revealed on the envelope the same clear, beautiful, and confident handwriting as that in the contents of the letter, from the first line to the last. Thus began my regular correspondence with Rainer Maria Rilke, which lasted until 1908. Gradually it became less frequent and finally stopped because life forced me off into paths from which the poet's gentle, warm, and touching concern would have liked to protect me.

But that is unimportant. Important alone are the ten letters — important for the understanding of the world in which Rainer Maria Rilke lived and worked, important also for the many who are growing and evolving now and shall in the future. When a truly great and unique spirit speaks, the lesser ones must be silent.

Franz Xaver Kappus

Berlin, June 1929