

# Letters to a Young Writer

## EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

This above all—ask yourself in the stillest hour of your night: must I write? Delve into yourself for a deep answer. And if this should be affirmative, if you may meet this earnest question with a strong and simple “I must,” then build your life according to this necessity.

(Rainer Maria Rilke to Franz Xaver Kappus, February 17, 1903)<sup>1</sup>

Few correspondences have had a greater literary and cultural impact than Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*. Referring to the letters, W. H. Auden called Rilke the literary “Santa Claus of loneliness” and Louise Bogan wrote that “we have in Rilke one of the strongest antidotes to the powers of darkness...he stands as an example of integrity held through and beyond change.”<sup>2</sup> The influence of this brief correspondence (1903–1908) has not lessened over time, but crossed the threshold into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Among the contemporary poets who continue to praise Rilke's letters is Eavan Boland, who proposes that Rilke's “name should be raised whenever one poet writes to another.”<sup>3</sup>

In honor of the forthcoming centennial of the *Letters to a Young Poet*, *Teachers & Writers* magazine has commissioned a series of letters about writing from a wide-range of American authors. The letters of C. D. Wright and Grace Schulman, printed in this issue, mark the debut of the series. Wright's letter situates itself at the very threshold of the writing life when, “against a chorus of prophylactic concern,” a young writer first turns toward poetry. Schulman's letter addresses the relationship between mentorship and the imagination, questioning the right of any writer to presume to guide the nascent mind of another.

Both letters remind us that it is the encompassing and, at the same time, precise nature of Rilke's “you” that is responsible for enduring audience of the *Letters*. The “you” of Rilke's letters is at once a 19-year-old student named Franz Xaver Kappus and everyone. Like Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*, Rilke's words stop somewhere waiting for a “you” that simultaneously is and is not us. From the very first letter, we cannot help but be taken in by the scope and urgency of his address:

You ask whether your verses are good. You ask me. You have asked others before. You send them to magazines. You compare them with other poems and you are disturbed when certain editors reject your efforts [...] I beg you to give up all that. You are looking outward, and that above all you should not do now. [...]

(Rilke to Kappus, February 17, 1903)

Even the most cursory reading of Rilke's *Letters* reveals him exceeding the bounds of mere literary advice. His correspondence with Kappus is a paradigm of human counsel. What makes it so arresting is that each letter emerges out of Rilke's own youthful struggle. After all, the correspondence began when Rilke was not yet 30, when he was still in the midst of creating the poems that would mark a turning point in his career: *The New Poems* (1903–1908). The letters to Kappus are not the polished didacticisms of an emotion-recollected-in-tranquillity or the refined hindsight of a bard, but the urgent imperatives of a poet who is still coming to terms with his own necessities.

You are so young, so before all beginning, and I want to beg you as much as I can, dear sir, to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer. [...] Almost everything serious is difficult, and everything is serious.

(Rilke to Kappus, July 16, 1903)

In such passages, we witness Rilke writing from the very "aspiration and antagonism" that Emerson claimed was the source of all great writing:

We write from aspiration and antagonism, as well as from experience.  
We paint those qualities we least possess.<sup>4</sup>

In forthcoming issues of *Teachers & Writers*, we hope to honor Rilke's generosity and conviction, his patient tutelage, and his respect for writers young and old to construct their lives according to their need to create. In response to the invitation to write a letter for this series, poet and professor Susan Mitchell wrote:

To read Rilke's letters is to suffer what it means to be a poet—to open oneself and keep opening, to make opening one's life work. The first time I read the letters, I forgot a great poet was speaking, the letters are so without ego, so from an innerness that never stops making itself. It was Poetry itself addressing me—that's what I felt then and still feel now.

<sup>1</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, translated by M. D. Herter Norton (W. W. Norton & Co., many editions). The citations of Rilke in Grace Schulman's letter are taken from the following Stephen Mitchell translations: *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke* (Vintage, 1989) and *Letters to a Young Poet* (Random House, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Louise Bogan, cited in Marianne Moore, *Selected Criticism, Prose and Poetry* (Noonday Press, 1955).

<sup>3</sup> Eavan Boland, "Letter to a Young Woman Poet," published in *By Herself: Women Reclaim Poetry* (Graywolf Press, 2000), p. 332.

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Prudence," *Essays: First and Second Series* (Vintage Books, 1990), p. 127.

## C. D. WRIGHT

Dearly Belated,

In the graveyard next to my house, this epitaph:

*Le temps bouleverse tout*  
*La renommée demeure*

I have heard, against a chorus of prophylactic concern, that you are turning toward poetry. Young and confused. Drawn there too. I thought. Why me. I thought. Why not. Everything else I could think to do seemed a homely duty or else an illusion, worse, a lie, a betrayal, mired in money, meetings, or else a mean substitute for a few reams of freedom.

On your way to your future—assuming it is yours to parlay into a shape that may take you an age to discover and which often includes moving in umpteen directions except forward—you have been stayed by poetry. None of the generic terms of art edify the way—style, voice, line, image, form, vision. My presence is not needed to tell you that you must read practically all, everybody, including, no, especially, the ones who consider it their prerogative and their due to vitiate even the *soi disant* open seating on the poetry exchange. Nor am I needed to suggest that the process inevitably entails scratching among the artistic remains of a host of byronically insane types; negotiating among irreconcilable mental claims, and expelling enough print to describe, embellish, evoke worlds without coming anywhere in the vicinity of poetry. Much of your energy could be paid out looking for a starting point. Hence, its perverted fulfillment, beginning without end.

Is it from one's own deficiencies that this stuff issues, gets translated into something implausibly worthy of setting down. If this is your epilogue of love, if this is your license to soar, your fugitive order for chaos, your lonely communal rite—then where better to situate a modest empyrean.

Hope butted against hope. Your utmost, is it not at worst, a self-constructed alternative to caving in. Is it not also greater than the sum of your assets. Even if not mensural.

Meanwhile. Nothing. Meanwhile. Something. Drawn there. Making choices where there were none to be made before. Not talking, walking, knocking, reacting, but taking up residence on this ancient stone wall where the only imperative is to be. Take a wide-angled pan of the fields. Not lift your arm to shield the light. Until the mind begins to fustigate in its casing. Then zoom. Plunge into the neglected garden below among the broken pots and nodding thistle.

And at the end of nearly everything, poetry, the old rose, by its very avowal, refuses to shut its merlot mouth. In the evening, I'll find you, dearly belated, troweling around a word. You won't need me to remind you, gods defecate here.

Approximately forever,  
C. D. Wright

## GRACE SCHULMAN

Dear — — — ,

You ask for a "letter to a young poet" and I hesitate, unconvinced that such counsel is of value. Literature itself reveals that advisors should be doubted, from Shakespeare's Polonius to Ezra Pound's Mr. Nixon, who tells Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, "And give up verse, my boy, / There's nothing in it." I have always believed in Jean-Paul Sartre's conviction that our decisions are self-generated, whether or not they echo our counselors. At the very least, we are responsible for them.

Even at its best, advice can ring hollow. It is all an artist can do to convey the truth of a moment in time, or just how one is changed profoundly by watching a light-spangled leaf, let alone the right course for another's life or work.

Now Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, the basis for your request, does represent advice at its best. Rilke's directives to Franz Xaver Kappus contain truths that are, in a word, indispensable. "Seek the depth of things." "The necessary thing is after all but this: solitude, great inner solitude." Most importantly, when he writes of knowing the world in its fullness, Rilke amplifies the poet's call to praise. Still, those maxims outgrow their form. That is, while Rilke's epistolary observations are informative, they are far more sublimely moving when they appear in his poems. For example, here is the same idea of praise as he presents it so powerfully transformed, some 20 years later, in the great *Sonnets to Orpheus*:

Praising is what matters! He was summoned for that,  
and came to us like the ore from a stone's silence.

We who write are forever learners, even when we presume to instruct. I surmise that Rilke was less interested in elucidating the route to Kappus than he was in defining for himself, in a prose narrative, themes that persisted in his poetry. Like Rilke, Theodore Roethke was a generous advisor, voicing aphorisms such as "It is well to keep in touch with chaos," collected in *Straw for the Fire*. Reading Roethke's great poem, "The Far Field," a journey to the inner self, I gather that those notebook jottings actually are admonitions to himself as a writer, words that bind together the images and ideas in his poems.

As for the term "young poet," it makes no more sense than any other group designation. A poet who continues to be a poet remains young in essential ways. Wise though they are, Rilke's letters to Kappus, written when Rilke himself was a young poet, are more crotchety than the generous correspondence of his later years.

In literary friendships, age is seldom a factor: while age may divide one writer's work from another in theme or tone, fundamental aesthetic values are binding. When I was still in my teens, I grew close to a family friend some forty years my senior. In succeeding years, she made it clear that our friendship could grow only if I addressed her as a colleague. Often she would ask for my sense of a particular line or image in her latest poem. Once she discouraged my callow adulation, wanting me to see her only as she was, and in her reluctance I knew that if I gave her a gilded mask, I would lose the face beneath. After an inward struggle I accepted her terms, and our conversations deepened. In that reciprocal bond I gained from her insights, she from mine.

And you, my friend, who set your store by transforming what moves you into lines that move others, have as much to teach me as I you. You remind me of my own spontaneity, a quality my contemporaries may have but hold in check. I see in you my own joy in reading aloud a draft I've just printed out, and how anything—a conversation, a chance meeting, a gallery visit, a glimpse of new tulips, can bring about a revelation. It happens to me still, and I wish always to remember that it is I, not the event, who have caused the change. And if you should tell me that friends regardless of age share those experiences, I would answer: "Of course. The years between do not matter."

And so, my dear — — —, I cannot provide the keys you ask of me. And perhaps, if you disabuse yourself of the expectation, you will find yourself without a mentor. Alone. Only then can you fall to the bottom of Rilke's rock from which altars are built.

Yours,  
*Grace*