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LETTERS TO A  
YOUNG POET

RAINER MARIA RILKE

TRANSLATION BY M. D. HERTER NORTON



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NEW COLLEGE OF CALIFORNIA (SF)

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Rilke, Rainer Maria,  
1875-1926.  
Letters to a young poet

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RILKE was born in Prague in 1875, the son of a conventional army-officer father and a religious-fanatical mother, who first sent him, most unsuitably, to military school. After that, largely autodidact, he studied philosophy, history, literature, art, in Prague, Munich, Berlin. From his earliest years he wrote verse. In the '90s both *Erste* and *Frühe Gedichte* appeared, short stories, plays. Much of his early work he declined to include in his collected works. In 1899 (which saw the *Cornet*, first version) came the first of two trips to Russia with Lou Andreas-Salomé (*Vom lieben Gott und Anderes*, later to be called *Geschichten vom Lieben Gott*, appeared in December 1900). He married Clara Westhoff in 1901, lived in Worpsswede till the birth of their only child, Ruth, moving to Paris in 1902, Clara to work with Rodin, Rilke to write his monograph on him. Between travels in Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Egypt, Scandinavia, and his prodigious letter-writing, the twelve years with Paris as base were productive: *Stundenbuch*, *Buch der Bilder*, *Neue Gedichte*, *Notebooks of M. L. Brigge*, translations of E. B. Browning, Gide, de Guérin. After the outbreak of World War I he lived mostly in Munich, served briefly in army office work in Vienna, and in 1919 went to Switzerland. Here, in the small stone tower of Muzot, he achieved in 1922 the *Duineser Elegien* and the *Sonette an Orpheus*, followed by poems in French and translations of Valéry and others. He died at Valmont near Glion on December 29, 1926, and is buried beside the little church of Raron overlooking the Rhone Valley.

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*

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*Duino Elegies*

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*Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke*

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

LETTERS  
TO A YOUNG  
POET

*Rainer Maria Rilke*

TRANSLATION BY M. D. HERTER NORTON

REVISED EDITION



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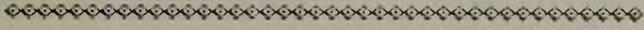
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Translator's Note

How these letters came to be written is told by their recipient in his introduction, and to this there would be nothing to add were it not for the close of the eighth letter: "Do not believe that he who seeks to comfort you lives untroubled among the simple and quiet words that sometimes do you good. His life has much difficulty and sadness. . . . Were it otherwise he would never have been able to find those words." It is evident that a great artist, whatever the immediate conditions disturbing his own life, may be able to clarify for the benefit of another those fundamental truths the conviction of which lies too deep in his consciousness to be reached by external agitations. Though Rilke expresses himself with a wisdom and a kindness that seem to reflect the calm of self-possession, his spirit may have been speaking out of its own need rather than from the security of ends achieved, so that his words indeed reflect desire rather than fulfillment. In what sort this was the

case becomes apparent on perusal of the several volumes of his correspondence. From these, for the most part, the accompanying chronicle of the years 1903–1908 has been prepared. It shows what Rilke was going through in his own relationship to life and work at the period in question (he turned twenty-eight in December, 1903). Perhaps such a record may in a measure explain, too, why sympathy was always so responsive an element of his nature. Certainly—despite low physical vitality that often reduced him to actual ill-health, despite lack of funds and homeless wandering in search of the right places and circumstances for his work, despite all the subjective fret and hindrance because of which some think to see in him a morbidly conditioned fantasy—the legend of the weary poet is dispelled, and in the end we find him always young, always constructive, the eminently positive philosopher of these letters.

*New York, October, 1934*

In revising the text for the present edition the translator is indebted to Herbert Steiner for many helpful criticisms and suggestions.

*Washington, D.C., February, 1954*

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## Introduction



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## Introduction

IT WAS in the late autumn of 1902—I was sitting under some ancient chestnuts in the park of the Military Academy in Wiener-Neustadt, reading. So deeply was I absorbed in my book, I scarcely noticed when the only civilian among our professors, the Academy's learned and kindly Parson Horaček, came to join me. He took the volume from my hand, contemplated the cover, and shook his head. "Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke?" he asked reflectively. He then turned the pages here and there, skimmed a couple of verses, gazed thoughtfully into the distance, and finally nodded. "So our pupil René Rilke has become a poet."

And I learned of the thin, pale boy, whom his parents had sent more than fifteen years ago to the Lower Military School at Sankt-Pölten so that he might later become an officer. Horaček had been chaplain to that institution at the time, and he still remembered his former student perfectly. He described him as a quiet, serious, highly endowed

boy, who liked to keep to himself, patiently endured the compulsions of boarding-school life and after his fourth year moved on with the others into the Military College, which was situated at Mährisch-Weisskirchen. Here indeed it became apparent that his constitution could not stand the strain, for which reason his parents removed him from the school and let him continue his studies at home in Prague. How the course of his life had since shaped itself Horaček could not say.

After all this it is not hard to understand how I determined in that very hour to send my poetic attempts to Rainer Maria Rilke and to ask him for his opinion. Not yet twenty, and close on the threshold of a profession which I felt to be entirely contrary to my inclinations, I hoped to find understanding, if in any one, in the poet who had written *Mir zur Feier*. And without having intended to do so at all, I found myself writing a covering letter in which I unreservedly laid bare my heart as never before and never since to any second human being.

Many weeks passed before a reply came. The blue-sealed letter bore the postmark of Paris, weighed heavy in the hand, and showed on the envelope the same beautiful, clear, sure characters

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in which the text was set down from the first line to the last. With it began my regular correspondence with Rainer Maria Rilke which lasted until 1908 and then gradually petered out because life drove me off into those very regions from which the poet's warm, tender and touching concern had sought to keep me.

But that is not important. Only the ten letters are important that follow here, important for an understanding of the world in which Rainer Maria Rilke lived and worked, and important too for many growing and evolving spirits of today and tomorrow. And where a great and unique man speaks, small men should keep silence.

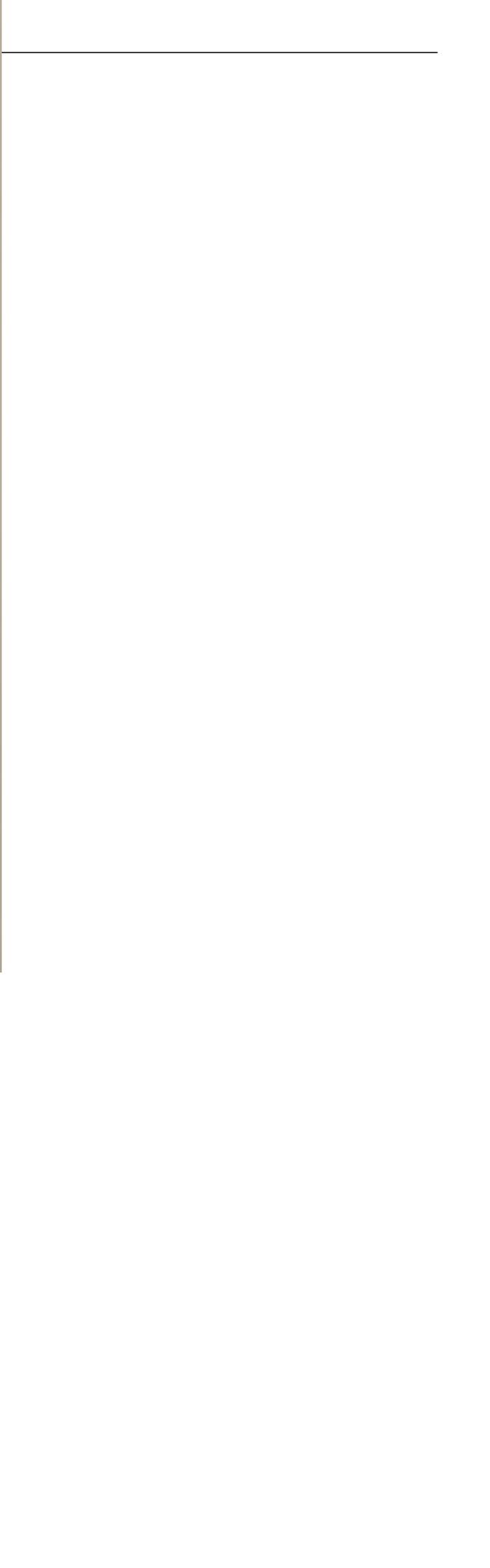
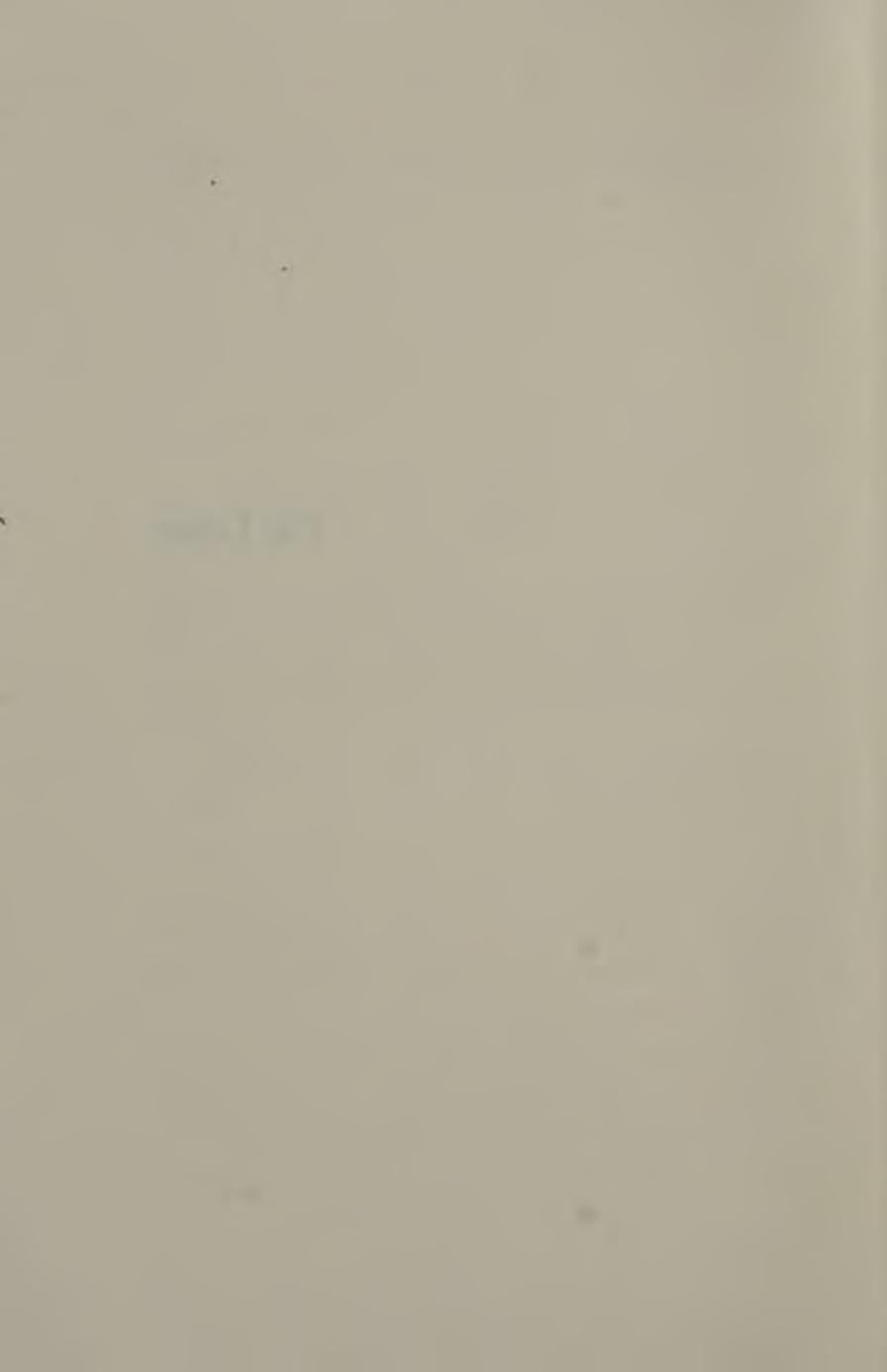
FRANZ XAVER KAPPUS

*Berlin, June 1929*



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## The Letters





beginnings of something personal. I feel this most clearly in the last poem, "My Soul." There something of your own wants to come through to word and melody. And in the lovely poem "To Leopardi" there does perhaps grow up a sort of kinship with that great solitary man. Nevertheless the poems are not yet anything on their own account, nothing independent, even the last and the one to Leopardi. Your kind letter, which accompanied them, does not fail to make clear to me various shortcomings which I felt in reading your verses without however being able specifically to name them.

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. Now (since you have allowed me to advise you) I beg you to give up all that. You are looking outward, and that above all you should not do now. Nobody can counsel and help you, nobody. There is only one single way. Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you write; find out whether it is spreading out its roots in the deepest places of your heart, acknowledge to yourself whether you would have to die if it were denied you to write. 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; your life even into its most indifferent and slightest hour must be a sign of this urge and a testimony to it. Then draw near to Nature. Then try, like some first human being, to say what you see and experience and love and lose. Do not write love-poems; avoid at first those forms that are too facile and commonplace: they are the most difficult, for it takes a great, fully matured power to give something of your own where good and even excellent traditions come to mind in quantity. Therefore save yourself from these general themes and seek those which your own everyday life offers you; describe your sorrows and desires, passing thoughts and the belief in some sort of beauty—describe all these with loving, quiet, humble sincerity, and use, to express yourself, the things in your environment, the images from your dreams, and the objects of your memory. If your daily life seems poor, do not blame it; blame yourself, tell yourself that you are not poet enough to call forth its riches; for to the creator there is no poverty and no poor indifferent

place. And even if you were in some prison the walls of which let none of the sounds of the world come to your senses—would you not then still have your childhood, that precious, kingly possession, that treasure-house of memories? Turn your attention thither. Try to raise the submerged sensations of that ample past; your personality will grow more firm, your solitude will widen and will become a dusky dwelling past which the noise of others goes by far away.— And if out of this turning inward, out of this absorption into your own world *verses* come, then it will not occur to you to ask anyone whether they are good *verses*. Nor will you try to interest magazines in your poems: for you will see in them your fond natural possession, a fragment and a voice of your life. A work of art is good if it has sprung from necessity. In this nature of its origin lies the judgment of it: there is no other. Therefore, my dear sir, I know no advice for you save this: to go into yourself and test the deeps in which your life takes rise; at its source you will find the answer to the question whether you *must* create. Accept it, just as it sounds, without inquiring into it. Perhaps it will turn out that you are called to be an artist. Then take that destiny upon yourself and bear it, its burden and

its greatness, without ever asking what recompense might come from outside. For the creator must be a world for himself and find everything in himself and in Nature to whom he has attached himself.

But perhaps after this descent into yourself and into your inner solitude you will have to give up becoming a poet; (it is enough, as I have said, to feel that one could live without writing: then one must not attempt it at all). But even then this inward searching which I ask of you will not have been in vain. Your life will in any case find its own ways thence, and that they may be good, rich and wide I wish you more than I can say.

What more shall I say to you? Everything seems to me to have its just emphasis; and after all I do only want to advise you to keep growing quietly and seriously throughout your whole development; you cannot disturb it more rudely than by looking outward and expecting from outside replies to questions that only your inmost feeling in your most hushed hour can perhaps answer.

It was a pleasure to me to find in your letter the name of Professor Horaček; I keep for that lovable and learned man a great veneration and a gratitude that endures through the years. Will you, please, tell him how I feel; it is very good of him

still to think of me, and I know how to appreciate it.

The verses which you kindly entrusted to me I am returning at the same time. And I thank you once more for your great and sincere confidence, of which I have tried, through this honest answer given to the best of my knowledge, to make myself a little worthier than, as a stranger, I really am.

Yours faithfully and with all sympathy:

RAINER MARIA RILKE

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