

## Introduction

### A GEOGRAPHY OF SOLITUDE

*Letters to a Young Poet* could as easily have been called *Letters from a Young Poet*. Rainer Maria Rilke was only twenty-eight years old when Franz Xaver Kappus first wrote to him in 1902. As the addresses on Rilke's letters indicate, he had no settled home (first he's in Paris, then on the Italian coast, then at an art colony in northern Germany, then in Rome, then in Sweden, then back in Paris). Three years before these letters start, he had married the sculptor Clara Westhoff and fathered a child, but he and his wife rarely lived together, nor did they raise their daughter (they left that task to Clara's parents). Nonetheless, he was not without a sense of family obligation. 'The last two years since my marriage I really have tried to earn, continually, day

INTRODUCTION

by day,' he wrote to a friend in the same week as the second letter to Kappus, confessing that 'not much has come of it' and that it left him feeling 'as if someone had closed the window towards the garden in which my songs live.'

As for those songs, Rilke had clearly dedicated himself to poetry and had been publishing since the early 1890s, but he could not yet be sure that the work would give him sufficient foundation in the world. The letter just cited continues: 'I have written eleven or twelve books and have received almost nothing for them . . .' Some years earlier he had enrolled himself in a business school (an experiment that lasted only a few months), and he periodically dreamed that he might become a schoolteacher or a doctor or more simply 'seek rescue in some quiet handicraft'.

Nor was Rilke entirely free of his parents. Concurrent with the letters he sent to Kappus are letters sent to him by his father, letters in which Josef Rilke expressed concern that his son had failed to find a respectable career and offered to secure him a civil service job in Prague. Just before a visit to his parents in August of 1903, his father wrote to worry about the way that Rilke dressed and to suggest that he

INTRODUCTION

order himself a new suit. In those days when Rilke fell to musing on his ideal poetic career he would find his reveries interrupted by the word 'imprudent' spoken in his father's voice.

As for Rilke's mother, she visited him in Rome a month before the seventh letter to Kappus. 'Every meeting with her is a kind of setback,' he wrote to a friend.

When I have to see this lost, unreal woman who is connected with nothing, who cannot grow old, I feel how even as a child I struggled to get away from her and fear deep within me lest after years and years of running and walking I am still not far enough from her, that somewhere inwardly I still make movements that are the other half of her embittered gestures . . . Then I have a horror of her distraught pieties . . . herself empty as a dress, ghostly and terrible. And that still I am her child; that some scarcely recognizable wallpaper door in this faded wall that doesn't belong to anything was my entrance into the world . . . !

The sympathetic intelligence described here, the kind that leads a man 'inwardly' to complete someone

INTRODUCTION

else's gestures, is a part of Rilke's poetic genius to be sure (how else could he have written the remarkable poem about the panther in the Paris zoo?). At the same time, this ability to identify with others sometimes led Rilke to lose his own bearings. In August 1902, about six months before these letters begin, Rilke had travelled to Paris to write a monograph on the sculptor Auguste Rodin. The trip was a turning point in his life: the older man offered a model of how an artist can ground himself in steady, patient work. Nonetheless, Rilke hated Paris. He felt invisible and alone, surrounded by men and women driven like machines, people 'holding out under the foot of each day that trod on them, like tough beetles'. Their 'burdened lives', he told a friend, threatened to swamp him:

I often had to say aloud to myself that I was not one of them . . . And yet, when I noticed how my clothes were becoming worse and heavier from week to week . . . I was frightened and felt that I would belong irretrievably to the lost if some passer-by merely looked at me and half unconsciously counted me with them.

INTRODUCTION

In great detail he described the morning when he came upon a man suffering from the nervous disease known as St Vitus's Dance. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that Rilke was possessed by what he saw:

No one paid any attention to him; but I, who couldn't keep my eyes off him even for a second, knew how gradually the restlessness was returning, how it became stronger and stronger . . . how it shook at his shoulders, how it clung to his head to tear it out of balance, and how suddenly it quite unexpectedly overcame and broke up his walk.

Feeling 'will-less', Rilke followed the man whose fears, he felt, were 'no longer distinguishable from mine'. Finally he broke away and returned to his rooms, 'exhausted', used up by someone else's malady. He had been on his way to the library but the trip now seemed pointless; there couldn't possibly be a book powerful enough to expel the thing that had taken hold of him.

In sketching this background to the 'young poet' letters, I have been quoting from Rilke's concurrent correspondence with more intimate acquaintances.

## INTRODUCTION

In the Kappus letters, Rilke sometimes hints at his own difficulties (as when he says that his 'life is full of troubles and sadness') but, as might be expected, he never lays them out in any detail. The letters to friends are less reticent, however, and one of their surprises is how often Rilke speaks of being anxious and afraid. Afraid of what? Afraid, I think, that he might never become his own person. In the seventh letter to Kappus, Rilke mentions the way in which most people, faced with the difficulties of sexual love, 'escape into one of the many conventions which like public shelters are set up . . . along this most dangerous of paths.' Clearly, Rilke himself did not wish to take shelter, but the temptation was obviously there – to settle down, to support his wife and child, to buy himself a good suit, to follow a path that no one could call imprudent. As with many young artists, Rilke had a sense of the land to which his gifts might lead him, but he was also anxious that he might never get there. He lived in fear of two false fates: either that he might end up as lost as the ragged poor who had surrounded him in Paris or else that he might succumb to the safe but numbing comforts of convention.

It is in these terms that I understand one of the

INTRODUCTION

great themes laid out in the letters collected here, the idea that poetic practice requires solitude. In the vision Rilke offers, solitude is not merely a state of being alone: it is a territory to be entered and occupied, and Rilke provides for Kappus (and the rest of us) a map of how to accomplish those ends. The first step is the simple recognition that solitude exists. A lack of connection to other people, after all, is not something we are normally eager to seek, acknowledge or welcome. Rilke himself hardly assented to the isolation he felt during his schooling in military academies ('when I was a boy among boys, I was alone among them'), nor did he welcome it when he moved to Paris to write about Rodin ('how alone I was this time among these people, how perpetually disowned by all I met'). In both cases, gloom and fear had overcome him. In Paris, before going to bed at night he used to read the Book of Job for solace: 'It was all true of me, word for word!'

Compare that touch of self-pity with the advice to Kappus: 'We *are* solitary. It is possible to deceive yourself and act as if it were not the case . . . How much better . . . to take it as our starting-point.' I don't at all mean to imply by this juxtaposition that Rilke is being hypocritical. I mean, instead, to point

INTRODUCTION

to the spiritual intelligence that led him to convert solitude from a curse into a blessing. Rather than continue to suffer under his sense of aloneness, Rilke eventually did what he urges Kappus to do: he turned and embraced it. He took isolation to be a given, then entered and inhabited it.

This trick of reversal, of turning negatives into positives, became a regular part of Rilke's working method. Anxiety, fear, sadness, doubt: there is no human emotion that cannot be upended and put into service. Anxiety, he tells Kappus, should be thought of as 'existential anxiety', the kind that God requires of us in order to begin. The desire to flee from solitude can be converted into 'a kind of tool' to make solitude still larger. When doubts arise, simply '*school* them': 'instead of being demolishers they will be among your best workers'.

To enter willingly the land of solitude does not, of course, mean that what follows will be easy. In my own experience, embracing solitude brings on another order of difficulties. When I was young and beginning to write, I used to put myself through periods of ritual retreat. I would cut off the telephone and the mail, unplug the television and the radio, take a short-term vow of silence, pull down the

INTRODUCTION

window shades and settle in to work for three or four days. Often on the first day, much to my chagrin, I would fall into a depression. The whole exercise suddenly seemed pointless; I had my pen in my hand but nothing to say.

Something similar used to happen to Rilke. To take a key example, Rilke was living more or less alone in a medieval castle on the Adriatic coast near Trieste when, in the winter of 1911–12, he began to write the *Duino Elegies*. As the owner of the estate, Marie Taxis, reported, the retreat started badly: ‘A great sadness befell him, and he began to suspect that this winter would . . . fail to produce anything.’ As Rilke himself told his patron: ‘Things must first get bad, worse, worst, beyond what any language can hold. I creep about all day in the thickets of my life, screaming like a wild man and clapping my hands. You would not believe what hair-raising creatures this flushes up.’

It is worth pausing over the mention of ‘sadness’, both because ‘great sadnesses’ figure in the letters to Kappus and because they belong to the geography of solitude. Solitude was for Rilke the necessary enclosure within which he could begin to form an independent identity, a sense of himself free from

INTRODUCTION

the callings of family and convention. Solitude is the alembic of personhood, as the alchemists might have said. And yet its entrances seem to be guarded by feelings that would make most people turn and walk the other way – not just sadness, but anxiety, fear, doubt, premonitions of death, ‘all unsettling, all pain, all depression of spirit . . .’

Rilke’s simple suggestion is that the discipline of art demands a turning towards, rather than away from, such states of mind. They portend necessary labours and must thus be taken seriously. He asks Kappus to imagine that sadness indicates a moment ‘when something new enters into us’ and that we then have duties towards the unfamiliar thing. It may in fact be fate itself, a destiny which, with proper attention, we can absorb and make our own. ‘We have no reason to be mistrustful of our world . . . If it holds terrors they are *our* terrors’ and we should try to love them. They are like the dragons in old myth that, when approached directly, turn out not to be dragons at all but helpless royalty in need of our attentions.

Whatever the exact metaphysics of such encounters, the point is that an exploration of the land of solitude cannot begin until we have accepted

INTRODUCTION

solitude as a fact ('*We are alone!*') and then faced the minatory moods that stand just inside its gates. And what happens then? If acceptance comes and sadness is endured, what follows?

What follows is a change of consciousness in regard particularly to time. The very first of Rilke's letters to Kappus distinguishes between life's 'most inconsequential and slightest hour' and the clearly more desirable 'quietest hour' of the night. This latter is not, I think, an hour at all. It has no knowable dimension. 'All distances, all measurements, alter for the one who becomes solitary,' especially the measurement of time: 'a year has no meaning, and ten years are nothing. To be an artist means: not to calculate and count; to grow and ripen like a tree . . .' Creative life contains its own temporality and the surest way to make it fail is to put it on an external clock. Mechanical time makes haste, as it were, but haste dissolves in solitude. In solitude we feel 'as if eternity lay before' us.

Solitude can also mute the voice of judgement. Kappus included some poems in his first letter and he asked Rilke's opinion of them. Rilke offered one (the poems 'have no identity of their own') but then set out to interrogate evaluation itself: by what



INTRODUCTION

measure do we reckon a poem worthy or unworthy? Not by any measure that the outer world has to offer. Only one rule applies: 'A work of art is good if it has arisen out of necessity.' And how might a poet recognize this 'necessity'? Only by making the 'descent into yourself and into your solitariness'. In that isolated space, the world's criteria drop away. When Rilke writes in the third letter that 'an artist . . . must always remain innocent and unconscious of his greatest virtues', I understand him to mean that questions of good and bad, virtue and vice, are foreign to the absorption of solitary work. As Flannery O'Connor once wrote: 'In art the self becomes self-forgetful in order to meet the demands of the thing seen and the thing being made.' Such has certainly been my own experience; in solitude (after a few days) the mind that weighs the work withdraws and I simply enter my material on its own terms. I may later find that what I have written is junk or that it is gold, but such labels have little currency in the confines of solitude.

After all this has unfolded – after acceptance has arrived, after doubts have become helpers, after evaluation has quietened down and time has opened up – then what happens?

xxx





INTRODUCTION

Then nothing happens. Or, rather, then begins the practice of patience, a virtue in which Rilke had been schooled by Rodin. Rilke eventually published a book about Rodin and there he makes it clear that endurance was a necessary part of the older man's talent: 'There is in Rodin a deep patience which makes him almost anonymous, a quiet, wise forbearance, something of the great patience and kindness of Nature herself, who . . . traverses silently and seriously the long pathway to abundance.' In a letter to Rodin himself, written just after the final letter to Kappus, Rilke spelled out one moral of the master's 'tenacious example': 'ordinary life . . . seems to bid us haste', but patience 'puts us in touch with all that surpasses us'. Practised in the present, patience is the art of courting the future. It belongs to becoming rather than being, to the unfinished rather than the completed. It is not so much suited to heroes as to invalids and convalescents, those who must wait.

The flowering of any creative 'summer' will come, Rilke tells Kappus, 'only to those who are patient, who are simply there in their vast, quiet tranquility, as if eternity lay before them. It is a lesson I learn every day . . . : *patience* is all!' Patience means sitting

INTRODUCTION

with the work even when – especially when – nothing appears to be happening.

The situation in which Rilke wrote the first *Duino Elegy* is again instructive. Marie Taxis later told the story: ‘One morning he received a tedious business letter. Wishing to deal with it right away, he had to sit down and devote himself to figures and other dry matters. Outside a strong bora was blowing . . . ? Descending from the castle to the bastions overlooking the sea, ‘Rilke walked back and forth deep in thought, preoccupied with his answer to the letter. Then all at once . . . it seemed to him as though in the roar of the wind a voice had called out to him: “If I cried out, who could hear me up there among the angelic orders?”’

Having received the first line, Rilke set to work and, by nightfall, the first elegy was on paper. ‘The *Duino Elegies* were not written,’ observes William Gass, ‘they were awaited.’ Awaited in patience of course, though in this case patience had a curious added detail, that ‘tedious business letter’. Should we count such annoyances as belonging to the geography of solitude? I think so. They are the distractions that force attention to wander, the catalysts of not-doing. All art requires effort but effort alone does not make



INTRODUCTION

the work, and distractions (so long as they are contained in solitude) are therefore useful. They are like the palladium atom that lets the carbon atoms bond, never itself becoming part of the new compound. That tedious business letter does not appear in the *Duino Elegies*, but there might be no elegies without it.



Here it should be said that Rilke never tells Kappus that a poet might find distraction useful. The letters to Kappus paint a grand portrait of how a poet works, and it will be worth pausing to interrogate that grandeur. I myself have often been put off by the extremity of Rilke's language. His modifiers are consistently superlatives: there is no deep but the deepest, no quiet but the quietest. Works of art are not just solitary but 'infinitely' so. Rodin did not only teach art but art's 'profundity and eternity'. References to 'purity' abound: irony ought to be 'used purely', feelings ought to be 'pure', sexuality ought to be 'entirely mature and pure'.

There is not much space in Rilke's vision for many of the things that were to happen later in twentieth-century art – for composition practices that rely on chance, for example, or the writing of what Pablo Neruda called 'impure poetry' (poetry 'corroded as

INTRODUCTION

if by acids, steeped in sweat and smoke, reeking of urine . . .'). No, in Rilke we find 'fate' or 'destiny' rather than chance, and the desired ends are all of them highly refined. Approaching his elevated language a century after these letters were written, it is hard to resist offering a psychoanalytic reading. Surely what we have here is not just grandeur but grandiosity, the mind's reflexive response to the fear and anxiety that Rilke so clearly felt.

As plausible as that reading may be, however, it is worth asking if there isn't a way to approach Rilke's extremities on terms that he himself might recognize. In puzzling over that question I have found it helpful to think of words like 'purity', 'infinity' and 'eternity' as placeholders pointing towards all that does not yet exist, but might. They are abstractions of the kind that allow the mind to work with the unknown and the not-yet-real. They correspond to things like surds, irrational numbers and infinitesimals in mathematics, that is to say, to 'numbers' that cannot be expressed in ordinary, finite terms. Albert Einstein once wrote that 'as far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality.' No one would say that mathemat-



INTRODUCTION

icians who work with surds or with the kind of axioms Einstein called ‘free creations of the human mind’ are involved in grandiose responses to their own neuroses. No, they are just doing mathematics. Nor are their unreal placeholders entirely divorced from real experience. Most of modern technology, from suspension bridges to airplanes, would not exist if Newton and Leibnitz had not entertained the idea of infinitesimals.



Let us suppose that the pure, unreal elements of Rilke’s world perform a similar function, albeit in this case a spiritual or aesthetic one. In a 1903 letter, he wrote that an art object must be ‘withdrawn from all chance . . . lifted out of time and given to space . . .’ where it will become ‘lasting, capable of eternity’. I cannot be sure what ‘eternity’ means here, but at the same time I cannot be sure that it has no meaning. In *The Letter from the Young Worker*, included at the end of this volume, the character Rilke has created recalls the iconography of the old churches: ‘Here is the angel, who does not exist, and the devil, who does not exist; and man, who does exist, is in between them and . . . their unreality makes him more real for me.’ Here on earth it may be hard to find some of the things that Rilke mentions



xxxv



INTRODUCTION

in the letters to Kappus – ‘an infinitely tender hand’, for example, or an ‘infinitely solitary’ work of art – but that does not mean the phrases have no function. Perhaps they lead us towards the outer edges of finite hands and finite works of art and, from there, towards imagining what lies beyond, what has not yet come to be. As the Young Worker says,



Isn't our relationship to all the great unknown forces exactly like this? We experience none of them in their purity . . . But isn't it the case with all scholars, explorers and inventors that the assumption that they were dealing with great forces suddenly led to the greatest of all?



In the letters that Rilke wrote to his friends and family during the years that he was writing to Kappus, he rarely mentions that parallel correspondence. An interesting exception is a letter of July 1904 to his wife Clara. She has forwarded one of Kappus's letters and Rilke remarks that the younger man ‘is having a hard time’, that he complains of having used up his strength. Rilke then, in a typical inversion, remarks that ‘the using up of strength is

xxxvi

INTRODUCTION

in a certain sense still an increase of strength . . . : all the strength we give away comes back over us again, experienced and transformed. Thus it is in prayer. And what is there that, truly done, would not be prayer?’

Rilke is speaking of Kappus’s struggles of course, but he could as easily be speaking of his own. After all, in the letters to Kappus he offers up the strength he himself had by then acquired, gives it away such that it might come back transformed. Of note, then, is the way his thoughts turn from donation to prayer, as if to say that a letter, ‘truly done’, is itself a form of invocation. That, in any event, is how I have come to understand the otherwise exaggerated language of these letters. It is surely the case that, from Kappus’s position, the letters are hortatory and sermonizing. But to the degree that Rilke is speaking of and to himself – rehearsing his own trials in regard to poetry, family, sexuality, fear – the letters to a young poet are his prayers.

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