

STRANGERS TO OURSELVES

Deanna Kim

In 1902, an Austrian teenager named Franz Xaver Kappus composed a letter addressed to a poet, seeking advice. He was a 19-year-old officer cadet who felt unsure about dedicating the rest of his life to the military. He couldn't decide between a literary career or a career in the Austro-Hungarian army, and wondered if his poetry showed any promise. The man he was writing to was Rainer Maria Rilke, who would later come to be known as one of the greatest German-language poets of his time. Kappus wanted to know if Rilke—who himself had left military school in pursuit of the arts—would advise him to do the same.

Thus began a six-year correspondence between a 19-year-old soldier and a 27-year-old poet who would never meet in real life. Their letters were eventually compiled by Kappus and published as a collection under the title *Letters to a Young Poet*. Though in his letters Rilke refrains from commenting on Kappus's poetry itself, he offers insight and guidance to the young man on themes ranging from atheism to loneliness to love. Perhaps the most visible motif in *Letters to a Young Poet* is Rilke's emphasis on the importance of introspection and individuality. Rainer urges Kappus to develop a rich inner life and to always look inward when reaching decisions. He writes, "[n]o one can advise you or help you—no one. There is only one thing you should do. Go into yourself" (6).

No doubt Rilke spoke from personal experience—it's difficult to imagine anyone whose identity was more oppressed from the start of his youth. Rilke's mother, driven by grief after the death of her daughter, dressed him in girls' clothes and called him by his deceased sister's name. Furthermore, though Rilke had shown signs of literary and artistic talent from childhood, his father—who himself had spent an unsuccessful stint in the military—forcibly sent the ten-year-old boy to a military academy in Austria. Rilke suffered there. Described by one of his officers as a "thin, pale boy" with a shy demeanor, he proved unable to bear the rigors of military education and life

(Rilke 25). After five years, he finally left the academy and gained admission into the University of Munich, where he would study literature, art history, and philosophy. It was from these unlikely conditions that one of the greatest poets of the German language—if not of all time—would emerge.

One wonders: how could anyone so battered by the expectations and desires of others ultimately remain unbroken in his own identity? How some individuals manage—despite the odds—to hold on to their sense of self, while others can't, will perhaps always remain a mystery to us. In confronting this question, it may be best to look to Rilke's writings for some insight. His works are reflective of his deeply introspective nature: he ponders such themes as existentialism, art versus the ordinary, and the despairs of godlessness with extraordinary sensitivity. But above all, Rilke reveals in his writings a profound appreciation for solitude, a conviction that there is a kind of sanctity found in being alone.

Alone, not lonely. Rilke is careful to draw a distinction between the two, noting the dangers of mistaking the presence of others as true fulfillment. In *Letters to a Young Poet*, he writes of people who “los[e] [themselves] for the sake of the other person . . . and lose vast distances and possibilities . . . in exchange for an unfruitful confusion, out of which nothing more can come, nothing but a bit of disgust, disappointment, and poverty” (71). Solitude is essential to growth, Rilke says, because by eliminating the “excessive noise” of the outer world, we become more coherent in our “innermost awareness, awakens, and knowledge” (32, 34). Such clarity is necessary to our survival because it allows us to bear—embrace, even—pain and suffering. Rather than avoid these feelings, Rilke urges Kappus to revere them, to recognize the complex beauty of it all: “[i]f only human beings could more humbly receive this mystery—which the world is filled with,” he writes, “could bear it, endure it, more solemnly, feel how terribly heavy it is, instead of taking it lightly” (37-38).

The problem of avoiding introspection and the gravity of living resurfaces more than a century later in Mark Edmundson's essay “Dwelling in Possibilities.” Edmundson raises the concern that his college students—whether consciously or not—are doing everything in their power to avoid depth. He calls them “surface skimmers” (40). They spread themselves thinly over a variety of activities. They subject themselves to endless external

stimuli, always taking the shortest route possible in all that they do, consequently evading introspection or complexity of thought. Edmundson wonders if all this chasing after possibilities—this insatiable “hunger for speed and space”—stems from an innate fear of closure: a nagging awareness of our own mortality (43). “Do [everything] now,” Edmundson summarizes of his students’ mentality, “for later may be too late” (35).

Edmundson’s students are everything Rilke feared: human beings so encumbered by the noise and anxieties of the world that they may have forgotten how to live. Perhaps Edmundson’s students might benefit from Rilke’s metaphor of the sapling tree, which, even in a storm, stands confident, knowing that the summer will eventually come. “But it comes only to those who are patient,” Rilke writes to Kappus, “who are there as if eternity lay before them, so unconcernedly silent and vast” (24). This confidence in the continuity of life is lost among Edmundson’s students, who, rather than fully experiencing the present, channel all their energies into securing a future. Rilke might say that their condition is symptomatic of a profound lack of inner life and self-knowledge. Having become detached from their own bodies, they have also become detached from the world. They live for the future because they are unable to fully experience the present. Rilke might agree with the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who wrote, “[t]he unhappy person is he who has his ideal, the content of his life, the fullness of his consciousness, his real nature in some way or other outside himself. The unhappy man is always absent from himself, never present to himself” (172). In this respect, Edmundson may be guilty of naïveté when he claims his students’ ceaseless pursuit of the future is indicative of their hope and wonder for the world—perhaps, in reality, they are actually profoundly unhappy human beings.

This inner malaise manifests itself in different ways, but it is most notable in Edmundson’s students’ extreme reliance on the Internet. Edmundson shares the commonly-heard concern that the Internet has enabled and exacerbated mindless consumerism, that it is a poor substitute for human relationships, that it is a distraction in the classroom, and most of all, that it has served to further divorce his students from the present moment. He writes, “[t]he children of the Internet . . . perpetually wish to be someplace else and the laptop reliably helps take them there” (36). But what

is it about the present, about actuality, that is so unappealing? Why do Edmundson's students strive so diligently to avoid their current states of being?

Ultimately, Edmundson believes this is a consequence of a lack of self-knowledge, of personal identity. Having profoundly underdeveloped inner lives, his students instead look outwards in search of gratification and fulfillment. The Internet is just one enabler of that pursuit. Edmundson notes that, by the time his students have come to college, they "have been told who [they] are numberless times"—but they haven't yet had the chance to develop their own identity, to explore their own desires and goals (59). And yet introspection is essential in order to orient ourselves in the world. As Rilke urges Kappus, "[w]hat is happening in your innermost self is worthy of your entire love; somehow you must find a way to work at it, and not lose too much time or too much courage in clarifying your attitude toward people" (56). Over a century later, Edmundson's students are bogged down by the very distractions that Rilke urged Kappus to ignore. Preoccupied by the need to clarify and justify their existence in the eyes of others, they have neglected to nurture their own needs and desires. They are, in essence, strangers to themselves.

This overwhelming lack of selfhood, coupled with the innate pains of being alone—solitude, to Rilke, "vast, heavy, and difficult to bear"—leads to a powerful desire for affirmation from others (54). But in this pursuit, we contort ourselves to fit into narrowly conceived definitions of personhood, inevitably stifling our individuality in the process. In her essay "Generation Why," Zadie Smith grapples with this condition, which visibly manifests on Facebook. The social networking site presents a rather streamlined, cut-and-dried vision of what the world should look like, of how we should present ourselves to the public. It does a poor job of representing the complexity of its users. This watered-down representation of self is a degradation of our personhood, claims Smith, because "life is turned into a database." When this happens, she writes, "[e]verything shrinks. Individual character. Friendships. Language. Sensibility" (Smith). Like Edmundson, Smith sees the Internet as a kind of medium through which we lose a bit of our humanity: "we lose our bodies, our messy feelings, our desires, our fears." We are, in effect, divorced from both the present and ourselves.

This reduction of self is no doubt a consequence of our inherent longing to be liked by others; Smith calls us the “self-conscious generation.” Both she and Edmundson note the irony of websites like Facebook, which promote themselves as fostering human connection when, in reality, they may have the opposite effect. Edmundson points out that students might be “connect[ed]” to people from around the world, but have “displac[ed] the potential community at hand” (36). Again, there is that incessant desire for something better than what surrounds us. But while Edmundson is concerned that his students’ connections may be superficial, Smith seems to wonder why we need so many connections at all. She admits to feeling nostalgic, longing to revive the kind of person she knows “no longer exists . . . [a] private person, a person who is a mystery, to the world and—which is more important—to herself” (Smith). To Smith, there is something almost sacred about individual experience in its “myster[ies].” After all, as Rilke writes to Kappus, “[t]hings aren’t all so tangible and sayable as people would have us believe; most experiences are unsayable, they happen in a space that no word has ever entered . . . ” (4). Thus perhaps Facebook is troubling to Smith not simply because it trivializes our personalities and relationships, but because it exposes a more underlying problem: a continuing devaluation of the complexity of individuality, of introspection, and of self-sufficiency.

Edmundson’s and Smith’s anxieties over the distractions of the world are ultimately not a modern phenomenon: they trace back, over a hundred years earlier, to Rilke’s letters. Why is it that when a boy on the cusp of adulthood wrote to an accomplished poet seeking literary critique, he received a letter about solitude? There is an unmistakably paternal, almost loving tone in Rilke’s letters, even though he was not significantly older than his correspondent. Rilke alludes to his own struggles when he writes to Kappus, “[d]on’t think that the person who is trying to comfort you lives untroubled among his simple and quiet words that now sometimes give you pleasure. His life has much trouble and sadness . . . If it were otherwise, he would never have been able to find those words” (97). Maybe Rilke recognized parts of himself in the boy. One can’t help but wonder if, in his letters to this young stranger, Rilke was trying in some way to comfort them both.

Perhaps his correspondence was never about helping Kappus decide whether or not to become a poet. Rather, Rilke felt an urgency to remind the

young man to never lose sight of his inner world amidst all the distractions he would no doubt face in the outer world. If Kappus were to choose a career in the military, Rilke would not object so long as it was a decision the boy arrived at himself. And, indeed, Kappus did eventually decide to devote himself to the military, serving as an officer in the Austro-Hungarian army for 15 years. By all accounts he lived a happy life—he married his nurse during World War I, and he continued to write, eventually publishing several novels and screenplays with moderate success. But unlike Rilke, Kappus's life is largely forgotten, a fate he seemed to predict a century ago. In his preface to *Letters to a Young Poet*, he writes rather ruefully, “[l]ife drove me into those very areas from which the poet's warm, gentle and touching concern had sought to preserve me” (27). It seems that somewhere in the midst of his life, Kappus lost sight of the “innermost awareness, awakens, and knowledge” that Rilke had urged him always to seek out and maintain (34). Kappus's regrets prove Rilke's ultimate argument: to be truly individual is a strenuous feat.

The 46-year-old Kappus seems to have recognized the magnitude of such a task and the rarity of individuals like Rilke who achieved such clarity through their solitude. The publication of *Letters to a Young Poet*, which occurred decades after their correspondence, indicates that Rilke's letters never truly left Kappus's mind. He may have had his own personal disappointments, as he writes in his preface, “[b]ut that is of no importance. What is important are the ten letters which follow . . . And whenever one who is great and unique speaks, those who are inferior should fall silent” (27). And thus, Rilke's treatises on solitude and introspection left not only a lasting impression on one individual man, but continue to resonate with the rest of the world.

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