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Open Letters & Impersonal Forms: Diaries, Letters, and Self-Disclosure in Rilke's Prose

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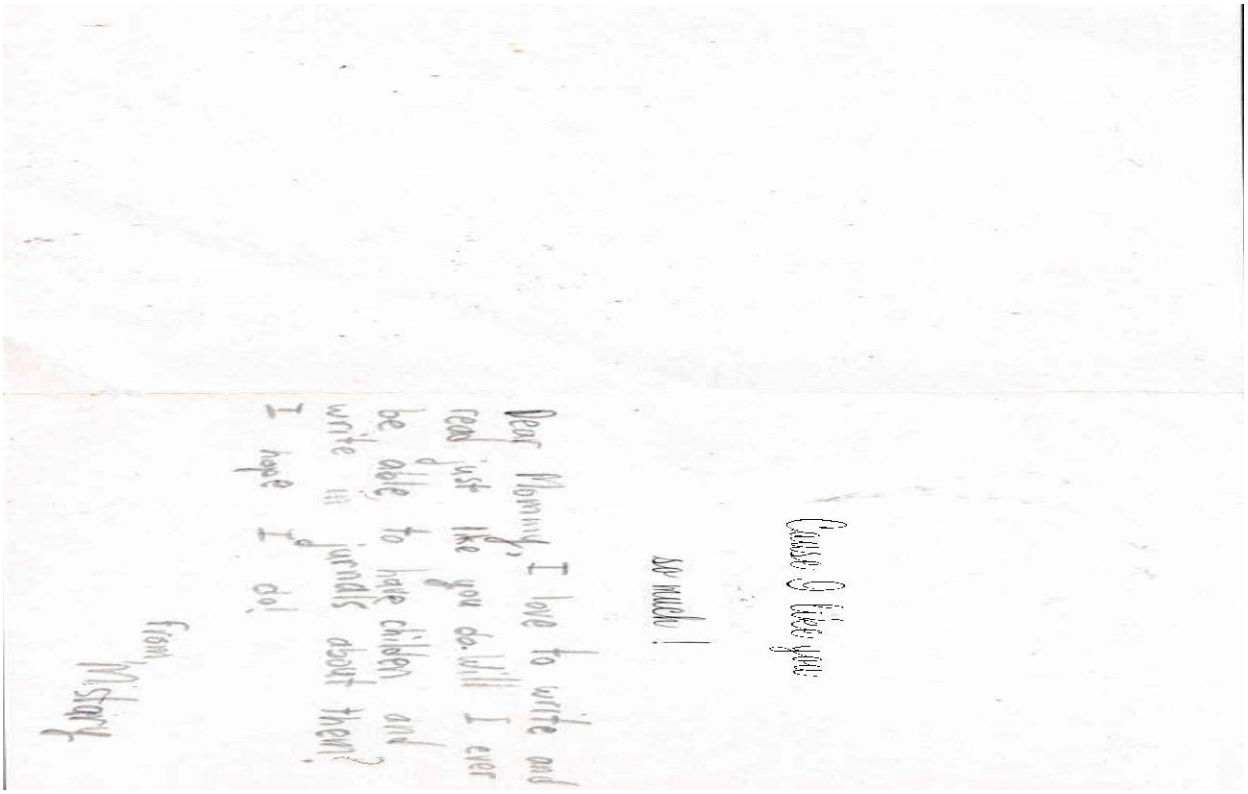

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Table of Contents

I received my first journal as a gift at age ten. It was a gaudy, girly thing I would not have picked out myself, but I found comfort within its covers, never mind the exterior. The book was outfitted with a lock and key, which gave me the sense that its contents belonged exclusively and entirely to me. I strung the silver key on a chain and wore it around my neck. When classmates and the occasional curious adult asked what the key unlocked, I proudly told them it belonged to my journal. (Other questions followed. No, they could not read it. Yes, I was a writer.) My earliest entries were mundane at best, but I guarded the book as if it were a valuable heirloom. A decade later, it is.

As many children do, I mimicked and modeled my behavior after my mother. But more often than trying on too-big high heels or ogling as she applied makeup, I watched my mother read and write. She began keeping a diary during adolescence, and the trend continued into adulthood. After having children, my mother's personal journal-keeping practice evolved to include my sister and me. A pair of a small, cloth-bound notebooks contain accounts of first steps, tantrums, and childhood triumphs. For my parents, I could already tell, writing was more than merely functional. Like sitting down for Shabbat dinner on Friday nights, it was ritualistic, even religious. Individually and apart, we were building a record of our lives. To this day, a notebook accompanies us on family vacations. At campsites and in airports, we pass the pages

around, each adding observations or anecdotes about the trip. Writing's embeddedness, and the example my mother set, made receiving a journal all my own feel like a rite of passage.

Two years later, journaling was already an unshakeable habit. As I prepared for my first significant stint away from home, I returned to writing for solace. After arriving at sleepaway camp, however, my scribblings found an audience for the first time. Separated by distance, and disconnected by design — no technology and no phone calls home — my mother and I began to send each other mail. We spent the weeks exchanging letters, establishing a tradition we have sustained ever since. Journaling had a magically memorializing effect; it made permanent every confession and complaint, no matter how trivial or painful. My entries were uncensored and inelegant, but they were a completely authentic manifestation of myself and my experience. Sending a letter felt almost opposite — I strove for precision, obsessed over semantics, modified my memories (mildly), and considered how each syllable would be received. Where the covers of a journal shielded my writing from unwanted eyes, letters invited a reader in. Sealing an envelope, adding a stamp, and placing a letter in a mailbox required me to relinquish the confidentiality that characterized journal-keeping.

During the next several summers, the number of letters my mother and I exchanged increased with the number of weeks I spent away from home. All the while, I continued to write in a private journal, sometimes filling an entire notebook in the course of a single summer. At camp, as I got older, my age cohort received more privileges, until, eventually, we were allowed to use our cell phones. Yet even after the option of instant communication was reintroduced — the lack that, a few years earlier, initiated my epistolary relationship with my mother — we continued to exchange handwritten mail. I looked forward to our annual correspondence because it consistently yielded something new about myself or my mother. Whether I spoke

more candidly and confessedly about mental health, or she divulged a previously unuttered piece of her past, we were each more honest in writing than in real life. As a preteen and teenager, the tradition came just once a year and ended within a matter of weeks. When I left home for college, however, this dynamic shifted. Now that my mother and I spend the majority of the year apart, letters are no longer a supplement to in-person interaction — they are a substitute.

Letters to a Young Poet (1929) earned a spot on my to-read list years ago. I knew little about the book or its author, but the title alone was enough to pique my interest. Like many of my to-read titles, the book went unread, collecting metaphorical dust on an imaginary shelf. At least, until *Letters* resurfaced in a conversation one year ago. The book was not so much recommended to me as it was insisted upon. The charge came from someone I was newly friendly with (ie, still intimidated by) and who I regarded as a fellow bibliophile. When she described *Letters to a Young Poet* as her favorite book of all time, I took the superlative seriously. Within a few weeks, I had purchased my own copy. (At Shakespeare and Co., of all places, that site of so many bibliophilic pilgrimages, and in Paris, a city where Rilke himself lived and worked for many years.)

As an aspirant writer and a writer of letters, my interest was twofold — *Letters*' form excited me as much as its contents. My epistolary and journal-keeping endeavors are functional and therapeutic, but they are also an exercise in writing. What began as childish mimicry of my mother grew into actual aspirations of a career in writing. For contemporary readers, I imagine that the book of letters provokes nostalgia for something novel, far-off, and imagined. It requires them to recall a time when two people could sustain a relationship entirely via written

correspondence. For me, the letters are reminiscent of my real-life epistolary relationship with my mother.

At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, when Rilke lived and worked, there were fewer methods for communicating across distance and time. Mail was ubiquitous — utterly indispensable — and yet the poet distinguished himself as a particularly notorious letter-writer. The poet maintained extensive epistolary relationships with peers, lovers, and editors, which have been accumulated in archives. In fact, letters constitute Rilke's best-known work, *Letters to a Young Poet*. The book is a collection of letters received by Franz Xaver Kappus, the eponymous young poet, between 1903 and 1908. Kappus was a fan of Rilke and interested in becoming a writer himself. In the course of ten letters, the elder poet imparts wisdom and offers advice, but the exchange is inconsistent with assumptions about the clandestine potential of letters — Rilke remains closemouthed about his own experiences or emotions.

This paper places *Letters* alongside two other works of prose by Rilke — *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910) and *Diaries of a Young Poet* (1997). The first is Rilke's only novel, in which a young man inscribes his thoughts, feelings, and activities in a series of journal entries; the second is a series of private journals which Rilke maintained between 1898 and 1900. *Notebooks*' narrator resembles Rilke in several ways, but the novel's fictiveness impedes upon readers' instinct to treat the story as entirely autobiographical. In his actual diaries, published at the opposite end of the same century, Rilke drafts poetry, recounts his travels, marvels at art, pines after women, and records the minutia of everyday life, but he reveals little about his emotions or mental state. The posthumous publishing of Rilke's *Letters* and *Diaries* is reactive, reflective of the poet's lasting fame. Moreover, these books are a consequence of

collective curiosity about the interior lives of larger-than-life writers. In each case — *Letters, Notebooks,* and *Diaries* — Rilke opts for a literary form that affords him the privacy, communication, or convenience most appropriate for a given subject matter or audience. In each case, writing is performative and a means of self-preservation. Yet a more scrutinizing examination of this trio of texts reveals that the real letters, fictionalized journal entries, and real journal entries each defy the parameters of their form. Under Rilke's pen, they begin to resemble one another in unlikely and ironic ways. While his non-fiction prose eludes reader expectations, Rilke's work of fiction skillfully generates the illusion of self-disclosure. This body of work forces readers to reconsider assumptions about the inheritances of form, the privacy of authors, and the intimacy of epistolary exchange and diary entries.

Dear Reader

In order to proceed, it will be necessary to define letters, the written form at the center of this project, and literature, the larger container to which I believe they belong. Critics have long sought to place bounds on the category of literature. In 1983, influential English theorist Terry Eagleton cautioned readers against subscribing hastily to any definition and offered one of his own. In the opening chapter of *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Eagleton resists Formalist characterizations of literature, which uphold written work "according to whether it is fictional or 'imaginative'" (Eagleton 2). The Formalist school of thought, he goes on, distinguishes literary language from "everyday speech" (Eagleton 2), in an attempt to construct a linguistic hierarchy. "To think of literature as the Formalists do," Eagleton writes, "is to think of all literature as *poetry*" (6). The notion is, at a glance, romantic, but Eagleton quickly calls attention to its shortcomings. Poetry, for example, does not encompass "realist or naturalistic writing which is not linguistically self-conscious or self-exhibiting in any striking way" (Eagleton 6). To exclude

such written work from the larger, looming label of literature would be to exclude letters and journals altogether.

Ultimately, Eagleton is less interested in what exactly literature is, and more interested in how readers interact with it. His introductory chapter cycles through several existent approaches to literary analysis and assesses each of their merits. Ultimately, however, Eagleton distances himself from his predecessors by empowering the individual and centering the reader's experience. According to Eagleton, readers may exercise as much authority over a piece as its author. Because a text's meaning is inherently unfixed, "there is no reading of a work which is not also a 're-writing'" (Eagleton 12). A similar concept reappears in reader-response theory, a school of thought which experienced its heyday in literary criticism during the 1970s. Both approaches underscore the mutually-enriching exchange that occurs between reader and text — a reciprocity that is literalized by epistolary correspondence.

Eagleton, at last, lands on this definition of literature: "any kind of writing which for some reason or another somebody values highly" (9). His description is simple, but deceptively so. It introduces another, grander challenge: determining the meaning of value. The value, or merit, of a piece of literature, he goes on, is socially determined. If not inherently valuable (ie. written by an already-acclaimed author), literature is imbued with value by an unseen, unstandardized set of social criteria. This logic allows us to distinguish between texts — it is the reason that smutty gas station paperback novels are not generally regarded as literature, even if they are pieces of written work. These sorts of books have not been rallied behind; they lack the social relevance and reverence that elevates any written work to Eagleton's status of literature. Even this example, however, can be complicated. Pulp fiction of the 1950s, for example, was

first excluded from this category, but has since seen a resurgence in critical and cultural attention — further evidence of literature's ambiguity.

Eagleton's attitude towards literature favors the category's social determinants over its formal limitations. For this reason, his definition appears more flexible, and is most applicable to this project. Where other critics might only grant Rilke's personal correspondence and diary entries the status of secondary sources, Eagleton's approach places them firmly on the side of literature. While secondary status acknowledges the crucial context they provide, it stops short of treating them as literature on their own terms. By such logic, Rilke's letters and diaries are only literary insofar as they inform his "true" literature. According to the definition Eagleton offers, however, the whole of Rilke's written catalog falls under the overarching category of literature — everything from his poetry to his letters.

As with literature, defining the letter risks reducing it. A letter is often sent from one individual to another, but its audience is not necessarily always singular, as in a letter to an editor or an open letter. A letter traverses time and place, but it is not necessarily always transmitted through the postal service, as in an e-mail. A letter is sent, but it is not necessarily always received, as evidenced by the existence of dead letter offices, where mail amasses if it is unable to be delivered. For all the ways in which the letter evades definition, the form remains an invaluable resource for examining the relationship between writer and reader. It is a real-life tool that is frequently put into literary use and, equally, a literary form that serves a real-life purpose. Letters are largely regarded as dyadic exchanges that take place between one reader and one writer. While this is often the case, a letter's addressee is not always synonymous with its audience. The former refers to the specific person or group to whom a letter writer dedicates their prose — the name or names that typically follow "dear" at the top of the page. A letter's

audience, on the other hand, is far more extensive, encompassing both the addressee(s) and anyone else who might gain access to the message — whether imagined by the author or not. A letter's audience always includes its initial addressee, but the inverse is not necessarily true. The publication of prominent authors' letters, for example, immeasurably multiplies the number of people who can access it.

Janet Gurkin Altman's *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (1973) sets out to identify what distinguishes the letter from other literary forms and what the form allows an author to achieve, as well as the letter's appearance (or appropriation) in other genres. In the book's introductory chapter, Altman coins the titular term and offers this simple description: "the use of the letter's formal properties to create meaning" (4). Like Eagleton, Altman leaves her definition strategically open-ended. Dissimilarly, however, she is interested in the junction where formal and social parameters converge. Altman's epistolar*ity* is antedated by the adjective epistolary, but the author argues that the latter falls short of capturing the letter's essence. As epistolarity's suffix cues, the term refers to the quality or state of being letter-like. Thus, epistolarity is comprehensive without being categorical; it encompasses a broad continuum of formal and social characteristics. Altman's term is also distinguished from its predecessor by part of speech — epistolarity holds its own as a noun, just as letters stand on their own within the literary category.

Epistolarity ultimately identifies the letter as inherently paradoxical. In the book's final chapter, Altman writes, "The letter is unique precisely because it does tend to define itself in terms of polarities such as portrait/mask, presence/absence, bridge/barrier" (186). The letter results from each of these poles, but its existence and transmittance collapses them, too. The portrait/mask image points to the performative nature of writing, and the unique tension

between confessional and curated writing in letters. Altman's presence/absence spectrum, on the other hand, begets the assumption that epistolary correspondents do not occupy the same physical space while they communicate. The letter attempts to traverse this distance, arriving readers at Altman's third and final paradox: bridge/barrier. As the author evidences, the letter is alluring — and easily applicable to other literary forms — because it operates betwixt and between these binaries. As I argue below, epistolarity can be uncovered in all of Rilke's prose, whether or not the work itself is a letter. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, for one, is emblematic of Altman's portrait/mask, while Rilke's *Diaries of a Young Poet* typifies the tension between presence and absence. *Letters to a Young Poet*, lastly, lends itself to the bridge/barrier allegory. These assignments, however, do not exclude the possibility of Altman's other polarities appearing in another text — they do, reliably, emerge simultaneously and complicate accepted understandings.

Where Altman opts for epistolarity, sociologist Liz Stanley employs a different phrase, "letterness," to point to the "porous character of the letter" (241) and its ability to both absorb and permeate other literary forms. As both authors and terms make clear, the qualities of the letter are transferrable. Letters are enough their own literary classification to influence other forms, whether directly or indirectly. Altman demonstrates this possibility in *Epistolarity* by relating the letter to the private journal. "Like the diary writer," Altman writes, "the letter writer is anchored in a present time from which he looks toward both past and future events" (117-118). In both cases, the writer is positioned at a nexus — between time, place, people, and self. A letter writer might capture the present in their note, but by the time it reaches its recipient, the news will already have migrated into the past. The complicated temporal nature of letters appears throughout *Epistolarity*, most often as a means of highlighting the form's flexibility.

Altman and Stanley's terms are also useful in their aptitude at capturing the capacity of the letter to evolve. Like other writers who have taken up this subject, Stanley describes the letter as "ailing." The form's fragility is not a novel concept — anxieties about the letter's deterioration are echoed across scholarship and across time. Writers and thinkers, it seems, have crowded around the letter's deathbed a hundred times, armed with already-written eulogies, and waited for the letter to draw its last breath. Yet the form continues to evade its own demise. Stanley's study pays particular attention to the impact of technology on the originally-handwritten form. As Stanley points out, the letter is uniquely equipped to evolve and adapt in the face of changing trends and rapidly-developing technology. "New digital forms of communication," she writes, "are enabling the expression of epistolary intent in a wide array of ways" (Stanley 252). Epistolary qualities, or letter-ness, can be uncovered in contemporary "proxies," (Stanley 241), including but not limited to telegrams, text messages, emails, and text-based social media platforms. Human instinct for connection and communication elongate letter-writing, whatever it may look like. "Letter-writing," Stanley asserts, "is the form of cultural production that has involved and continues to involve more people than any other" (241). And while letters are written, sent, and received increasingly infrequently, they remain the subject of academic scholarship and continue to capture public curiosity. The letter may be an endangered form, but it is not yet extinct.

Long before Eagleton, Altman, or Stanley's texts were published, Harold Binkley attempted to demonstrate the letter's relationship to another literary form — the essay. In 1926, the same year that Rilke died, and one year into Binkley's stint as a professor of English at the University of Michigan, "Essays and Letter-Writing" was printed in the *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*. He writes that the pair is untied by a desire to

communicate and convey, but distinguished by tone and audience. Where the essay is formal, Binkley argues, the letter is often more casual and conversational because the recipient is presumed to be familiar. He writes that the letter is, essentially, a substitute for conversation between a pair of people separated by distance. In any case, the familiar letter is, at its core, "an expression of moods, mutually understood by reader and writer" (Binkley 347). An essay's aims may differ dramatically, and its audience is often larger, lesser known, and impersonal. Nevertheless, Binkley asserts that the essay is equally self-conscious of its audience as the letter. In fact, "the essay and the familiar letter have three elements in common: informality, spontaneity, and egotism" (Binkley 350). Binkley's paper is more than thematically relevant, however — it also reveals the social conventions that surrounded the letter Rilke penned his correspondence with Kappus. Binkley's ability to relate the letter to another literary form demonstrates its flexibility, while disrupting notions of privacy and ephemerality assumed to be inherent to letters.

When literary critic and professor Caroline Levine asserted that all literary forms are also social forms, she neglected to consider the letter, which I believe preempts her argument — it is inherently and steadfastly both. Levine's, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015), Levine begins by asserting that formalist readings, linked exclusively to the written word, unwilling and uninterested in examining the extra-textual circumstances, are self-sabotagingly shortsighted. What these close readers fail to read, she argues, are the social, political, and cultural circumstances that surround a piece of literature. This distinction — between context and content — underscores *Forms*. In the book's introductory chapter, Levine pays special attention to the unique affordances of each literary form — what they have the potential to achieve, what possibilities might lie latent, and their inherent limitations. "Each

form," she concedes, "can only do so much" (6). Another central tenet of Levine's argument is the portability and flexibility of form. Because forms remain stable across chronology and context, Levine writes, authors, creators, and institutions, she writes, can borrow and discard forms based on their particular needs.

Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" does not make explicit reference to the writing or exchanging of letters, but his meditation on the relationship between writer and reader underscores and, at times, complicates the concept of the letter writer and addressee/audience. The seminal essay, published in English in 1976, appraises literary criticism for its outsized emphasis on authorial intent. Barthes, a French philosopher, posits an alternative approach, asserting that the meaning of literary work is determined by its interaction with the reader rather than *pre*determined by its author. "The author," he writes, "is a modern figure" (Barthes 142) — and a uniquely Western one at that. The so-titled Author is a product of social, intellectual, and economic permeations; Barthes specifically cites increased individualism, positivism, and capitalism. By contrast, in societies with strong oral traditions, "a narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator" (Barthes 142). New literary criticism, he writes, has done little to assuage this inflated emphasis on authorship. Barthes' essay advocates instead for the primacy of the reader. He describes, "Writing is a neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (Barthes 142). Literary meaning is, in short, latent — it does not become activated until placed in the hands of a reader. At this crucial moment, the identity — and therefore, intentions — of the author is overwritten by that of the reader.

In fact, when Barthes employs physical distance and travel as a metaphor for the transference of literature from writer to reader, he unintentionally evokes one of the letter's

defining characteristics. He writes that “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but its destination” (Barthes 148). This statement provokes a question — at what point does a letter become a letter? Is it a letter before it reaches its intended recipient, or is it actualized upon arrival? Because the form’s primary function is communication, its language is less often coded and clandestine, demanding less scrutiny and analysis from readers, obscuring — but not nullifying — the lofty meaning that Barthes touts. Binkley reiterates the casualness of letters, but unlike Barthes, compels readers to take the form seriously and confirms their ability to impart information and argumentation.

Elsewhere in the essay, however, letters complicate Barthes’ beliefs about the dispensability of the writer. As he sketches his disfavored Author, the archetype begins to resemble, more and more, a letter or journal writer. (The content of these forms is presumed to be personal, domestic, and quotidian — in other words, feminine.) Besides physical distance, Barthes describes the temporal distance traversed by a work of literature. The writer and their product exist on a rigid timeline, “divided into a *before* and an *after*” (Barthes 145). Contemporary criticism, Barthes continues, insists on chronology and linearity. As a result, meaning moves unilaterally along this line, seemingly transferred from Author to text. He asserts that “The Author, when believed in, is always conceived as the past of his own book” (145). Altman is also interested in literature’s temporal qualities. “Like the diary writer,” she writes, “the letter writer is anchored in a present time from which he looks toward both past and future events” (Altman 117-118). In both cases, the writer is positioned at a nexus — between time, place, people, and self. A letter writer might capture the present in their note, but by the time it reaches its recipient, the news will already have migrated into the past.

Barthes takes issue with the notion that "The Author is thought to *nourish* the book" (145), acting in service *to* the literature, rather than alongside it. His proposed alternative, "the modern scriptor" is more spontaneous; it "is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing" (Barthes 145). In some ways, the letter writer fulfills both definitions. The letter is equally reliant upon writer and reader in order to be realized. And epistolary, incongruous exchange between individuals is surely colored by their real-life relationship to one another. As Levine comes close to arguing, but does not quite achieve, the letter form is inseparable from the social circumstances that surround it.

Barthes believes that readers imbue literature with their own meaning, retrospectively and reactively, but he fails to consider that the letter elicits a literal talking back. Despite the centrality of response to his argument, Barthes does not include the letter in his understanding of literature, or else willfully ignores its relevance. Altman, however, steps in where Barthes falls short. She writes that the letter, among other literary forms, "is unique in making the reader (narratee) almost as important an agent in the narrative as the writer (narrator)" (Altman 88). Altman and Barthes, it appears, would agree with each other. Barthes argues in favor of the centrality of the reader in literature, while Altman demonstrates that the letter form is especially predisposed to uplift the reader to the level of the writer.

As the essay's title indicates, Barthes believes that the transfer of literature to its reader, especially through analysis, results in the death of the author. In one sense, this idea remains true in written exchange, in which a letter's ownership is transferred from writer to recipient. Because letters' recipients are often singular, these readers become their sole meaning-makers. On the other hand, however, letters complicate Barthes' theory — the form's very appeal lies in the direct, first-person manifestation of a writer's thoughts, feelings, and experiences. While

Barthes argues that literature extinguishes the life of the writer, letters, in fact, extend their senders' literary and literal lives. Such is true of Rainer Maria Rilke, whose legacy can be uncovered in the letters (and letter-like forms) he penned, and in some cases published, in his lifetime. Rilke earned his fame and is canonized as a poet, but *Letters to a Young Poet* has since contributed significantly to his reputation.

Barthes' argument focuses primarily on fiction, sidestepping a crucial literary category — letters and their related forms. Like maintaining a journal, letter-writing is motivated by a desire for self-preservation. It is not a mere record-keeping system, but an attempt at embodiment, a realization of the self through writing. That a letter — unlike a journal — reaches a recipient only reinforces this assumption. Opening, reading, but especially holding onto a letter on the opposite end of a correspondence, validates, preserves, and extends the writer's existence. Barthes concludes his essay with the emphatic, if melodramatic, insistence that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (148). When it comes to epistolarity, however, the author is immortalized by their letters and reborn with every rereading.

Formality and Distance in *Letters to a Young Poet*

For close to a century, aspiring writers, angst-ridden teenagers, and world-roaming artistic souls have cherished *Letters to a Young Poet*. Rilke is canonized as poet, and his lyric work remains highly revered and widely read. Despite Rilke's stature among the reading public, it is undeniably true that prose is the far more mainstream literary form. *Letters* is certainly Rilke's best-known work of prose, but it may also be his best-known work altogether. When struggling to describe this project to friends, parents, and curious peers, I often began by asking,

"Have you heard of *Letters to a Young Poet*?" For the most part, they had, or at least, they pretended to.

Franz Xavier Kappus began communicating with Rilke in 1903, when he was just nineteen years old. The pair were connected by a teacher at the military academy where Rilke had once been a student and where Kappus was then finishing school. The young man's imminent high school graduation placed him at an intimidating crossroads — in adulthood, Kappus could either reluctantly follow a career in the military or pursue writing. One option was creative, the other, practical. Kappus turned to Rilke, who he idolized. By appealing to Rilke for advice, Kappus attempts to assuage some of these fears — and, I think, to displace some decision-making responsibility. This year, like Kappus, I am approaching a juncture in my own life: college graduation. The closer I come to making this sort of choice myself, the more obvious to me that I must write — no matter what that looks like. And if not to make a living, then in order to go on living.

When the pair began communicating, Rilke himself was also a young poet, an irony pointed out by practically every person who has written about *Letters*. Just twenty-six years old, Rilke was working full-time as a poet and managing to support himself and his wife while doing so. But his oeuvre was small, and he had not yet completed what are today his most lauded projects, including the *Duino Elegies*, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, and *Archaic Torso of Apollo*. The majority of Kappus' and Rilke's correspondence was completed by the end of 1903, but they did not exchange their final letters until 1908. Twenty years after that, Rilke would die still a young poet, succumbing to a leukemia at age fifty-one. He had been dead one year when his letters to Kappus were published in 1929.

Though my initial interest in *Letters* was not academic, endeavoring upon this thesis project has transformed my early fascination into an investment that is equal parts intellectual and emotional. While reading and rereading — and yet again, rereading — I have been alternately spellbound and puzzled. At times transfixed and transported back to my revelatory first interaction with *Letters*, I am elsewhere skeptical of Rilke, who writes with supreme self-importance. Despite writing from limited lived experience, Rilke tackles gargantuan topics like love, art, and labor. He is emphatically opposed to criticism, which jeopardizes the "infinitely solitary" quality of art (Rilke, *Letters* 13). His offered alternative is equally intangible: "Only love can grasp them [works of art] and hold them and do them justice" (Rilke, *Letters* 13). This advice runs romantically across the pages of *Letters* and lands delicately upon readers' ears, but it is abstract, inflexible, and impossible to actualize. Didactic moments like "If your everyday life seems to lack material, do not blame it; blame yourself" (Rilke, *Letters* 6) border on condescending. His self-restraint and epigrammatic advice remains resonant, as if young Rilke knew that he would one day be a poet whose letters would be worthy of publication. Rilke doles out wisdom — and it is undeniably wise — but delivers it shrewdly.

In its original publication, *Letters* omits the young poet's side of the correspondence, such that each individual reader embodies the "you" that first referred to Kappus. The collection privileges the musings of the great poet over his younger counterpart. *Letters*' publication was initiated by Kappus, who describes his rationale most succinctly in the final sentence of the book's preface: "Where a great and unique person speaks, the rest of us should be silent" (Rilke, *Letters* 4). If not for this introduction, Kappus' absence from *Letters* would be almost indiscernible. Kappus' deliberate silence and opted-for invisibility is an endorsement of the elder poet. In fact, the preface implies that the inclusion of Kappus' letters would disrupt a

reader's ability to revel in Rilke's greatness. Upholding the letters as "important for the insight they give into the world in which Rainer Maria Rilke lived and worked" (Kappus, *Letters* 4), Kappus appears interested in expanding their audience to meet some noble end. Beyond himself, the original recipient, the letters are "important too for many people engaged in growth and change, today and in the future" (Rilke, *Letters* 4). Evidently, Kappus is interested in longevity and permanence — he defends the letters' publication on the basis of their timelessness. This introduction, and the one-sided correspondence that follows, does not merely prompt readers to identify with Kappus, but to become him. The exclusion of the younger poet's perspective from *Letters* is an apt example of the distinction between audience and addressee. The book collapses addressee and audience, so that each new reader's identity supplants the original recipient. The reader is not a third-party witness, but a participant. With the book's release, correspondence that originated with two individuals and elapsed over several years has become a permanent literary fixture available to innumerable readers. *Letters*' increased accessibility and enduring presence does the opposite of what Barthes expects from literature — the book keeps Rilke alive while maligning Kappus.

It is entirely possible to read, comprehend, and connect with Rilke's letters to Kappus without ever becoming curious about their counterparts. More than merely plausible, it is easy to interact with *Letters* sans Kappus. Most readers do. If not for this project, I may have been content to ignore his contributions. In fact, I almost did. When I discovered that Kappus' letters had been uncovered — and made accessible in English —I hesitated to seek them out. After all, this project is most interested in Rilke — what the poet reveals, and equally, what he does not reveal about himself, in letters and diary entries. Kappus is owed some credit — the letters would not be published today, nor exist at all, without his initiative. Yet, like *Letters* itself, I

was willing to relegate the younger poet to the periphery of my project. Despite my initial dismissal, the younger poet became an outsized presence in my imagination. My own epistolary experience nagged at me, a reminder that the reason I love letter-writing is that it relies upon the participation of two parties. Completing this project without incorporating Kappus' letters, I felt, would not only be an act of academic myopia, but an outright emotional betrayal. In my correspondence with my mother, I am the wannabe writer staring down the barrel of adulthood. I am the young poet. I could not, in good conscience, write about Kappus without hearing from him too.

Like the rest of the reading public, but unlike the original epistolary partners, I arrived at Kappus' letters belatedly. His correspondence was assumed lost or discarded for close to a century. In 2017, however, the young poet's letters were uncovered in the Rilke family archive, where they had resided all along. In 2019, both halves of the now-iconic correspondence were united in publication for the first time. The next year, Damion Searls translated the work into English. Yet their exchange is not restored to its original state. Rather than reuniting the letters in their original, chronological order, Searls maligns Kappus' letters to the back of the book. In a review for the *New Yorker*, Kamran Javadizadeh describes this editorial decision as an afterthought, "almost as though Kappus's letters had been fabricated to complete the constellation begun by Rilke's responses" ("Can Rilke Change Your Life?"). Rather than attempting to resurrect the young poet, the publication of Kappus' letters is simply another means of endorsing Rilke's genius.

Kappus' letters are engaging and enlightening, but the emotion that overwhelmed me most while reading was second-hand embarrassment. In each one, Kappus gushes with gratitude. He does not only begin and conclude his letters with thanks, but peppers his

appreciation throughout. After Rilke's first response in Febraury of 1903, Kappus writes, "You have listened to me and responded in a way that I hardly deserve, which I can hardly live up to" (Kappus, *Letters with Letters* 73). Almost halfway through the letter he professes, "I will faithfully do what you were unbelievably kind enough to tell me to do" (Kappus, *Letters with Letters* 74). And predictably, Kappus concludes by writing, "let me thank you again with all my heart for your letter" (Kappus, *Letters with Letters* 76). These examples of the young poet's espousal come early in their correspondence, but the tone proves consistent. Kappus' letters are relentlessly repetitive and laudatory. When read in combination with Rilke's calculated, philosophic contributions, they begin to feel erratic, even obsessive. Javadizadeh appropriately characterizes the contrast: "Alongside Rilke's gnomic authority, we now hear Kappus's awkward, earnest yearning" ("Can Rilke Change Your Life?"). The young poet's enthusiasm is a dramatic diversion from Rilke's self-restraint. Most painful, though, is that Kappus' vulnerability goes unreciprocated. With access to each end of the correspondence, the metaphorical bridge Rilke and Kappus built appears rickety and unreliable. "What this newly closed circuit reveals," Javadizadeh writes, "is a vast emptiness at its core" ("Can Rilke Change Your Life?").

As established, correspondence is a collaborative project enabled by the engagement of each party. Yet the ephemeral quality of the letter complicates our understanding of ownership. Kappus, for example, became the keeper of Rilke's letters. Though not responsible for writing them, they became his responsibility and fell under his care. The same is true for Rilke. When I describe epistolary correspondence as an exchange, I do not only refer to the transfer of information and ideas — I also mean the very literal, physical movement of a letter into the possession of another person.

From the onset of their correspondence, Rilke leans into the mentor role. His tone is sage, and while he is inquisitive about the younger man, he is also often instructive. “Don’t write love poems,” (Rilke, *Letters* 6) Rilke orders in his first letter to Kappus. This moment is just one of several like it. Nestled in a longer letter about the poet’s writing practice, Rilke’s advice feels romantic, but when isolated, it reads as curt and ungenerous, even gratuitous and passive aggressive. Guidance about writing appears in all ten of the letters Rilke sent to Kappus. Without Kappus’ responses, though, it is unclear whether Rilke is reacting to questions posed by the young poet or writing freely — and unfeelingly — about his own changing curiosities, values, and circumstances.

While the pair communicated, Kappus occasionally included his own poems in the envelopes he mailed to Rilke. This was the case during their very first exchange, though Rilke initially dismisses the young man’s request for criticism. After a brief, breezy greeting, Rilke writes that analyzing art invites grave misunderstandings. Almost immediately, however, Rilke betrays his own stance. On the next page, he writes of Kappus’ poetry, “Your verses have no identity of their own” (Rilke, *Letters* 5). The stingingness of the remark is only ever-so-slightly and ever-so-ungently reduced by the concession that follows: “they do have tacit and concealed hints of something personal” (Rilke, *Letters* 5). Interesting, while evaluating Kappus’ poetry, Rilke is utterly uninterested in literary conventions, nor use of language, nor themes. His concern is not even with the formal qualities of poetry. Instead, he appears entirely preoccupied with the writer’s voice. Rilke’s advice reveals precisely what he values in poetic creation: expression of the self. That the poet asks for authenticity from his correspondent while remaining unreachable himself is difficult to look past. Moreover, I question Rilke’s ability to accurately evaluate how closely Kappus’ poetry comes to an authentic expression of self. In

February 1903, when the letter was sent, the pair had not yet met in real life — they were strangers. Rilke is ultimately unable to affirm whether the verses reveal the real Kappus. What he appears interested in, instead, is whether it *seems as if* the poetry reveals the real Kappus.

Rilke bookends his first letter to Kappus with gratitude, both times thanking the young poet for the trust that his initial letter demonstrated. Acknowledging Kappus' initiative, he writes, "Thank you again for the extent and the warmth of your trust" (Rilke, *Letters* 8). Rilke's reference to trust is coded a reference to the letter form and its inherent intimacy. He goes on: "I have attempted with this sincere reply to make myself a little worthier of it than, as a stranger, I really am" (Rilke, *Letters* 8). By self-identifying as a stranger, Rilke draws attention to all the ways in which he and Kappus are separated — age, distance, experience. Simultaneously, however, Rilke endorses the ability of letters to bring people closer; their correspondence bears the responsibility of bridging those gaps. Bridge/barrier is one of Altman's trio of epistolary polarities. She elaborates, "Given the letter's function as a connector between two distant points, as a bridge between sender and receiver, the epistolary author can choose to emphasize either the distance or the bridge" (Altman 13). Rilke does both. Kappus, on the other hand, opts to emphasize the bridging ability of their letters. "I so cling to your letters. I cannot read them often enough," (Kappus, *Letters with Letters* 83) he professes after receiving Rilke's third letter. "To me," the young man continues, "they are like the gospel of a faraway world, totally separate from the world of people around me now and in the past" (Kappus, *Letters with Letters* 83). For Kappus, the letters are a substitute for in-person interaction; they are a world unto themselves, and one which he would prefer to inhabit over reality.

Communication by letter was ubiquitous during the men's lifetimes, but Kappus nevertheless finds the form infinitely exciting. Each new note appears novel, its ability to

transcend time and place and deliver Rilke to his doorstep does not cease to amaze the young poet. Kappus' captivation with the letter is endearing. For me, the feeling is also familiar. Today, by contrast, the letter has aged and become antiquated, and its appeal lies in its very analog-ness. The features that Kappus recognizes in the form, however, remain true. Even after Rilke's sixth letter, for example, the thrill of their correspondence has not worn off. "When I think that all these unsayable, marvelous, beautiful things you've entrusted to me are meant for me alone" (*Letters with Letters* 105), Kappus tells Rilke, he feels immensely proud. In this statement, Kappus calls attention to two of the letter's most essential affordances — disclosure and singularity. First, Kappus' use of "unsayable" identifies the ability of the letter to contain in writing that which cannot otherwise be articulated. Second, Kappus' gratitude is only made greater by the fact that he is the letters' sole recipient. Nearly a year after their correspondence began, Kappus still writes with disbelief. Whether or not Rilke reciprocates, Kappus wholeheartedly endorses the intimacy of the letter.

During the second half of the book, as the time between letters increases and Rilke's responses become sluggish, Kappus imagines that he might someday traverse the bridge that their correspondence has built. In July of 1904, Kappus tells Rilke, "the more I realize how little I deserve all your love and concern, the greater my gratitude" (Kappus, *Letters with Letters* 112). By this point in the correspondence, the refrain is familiar. Kappus' groveling tone has even grown grating and banal. Still, the young poet persists, "I wish I could tell you in person someday" (Kappus, *Letters with Letters* 112). This reference to reality bursts the letters' illusion of insularity. While Rilke appears content to keep their correspondence asynchronous, Kappus aspires to actualize their epistolary relationship. The pair would eventually meet, crossing paths

just twice — first, at a reading in 1907, before their correspondence ended, and for a second time in 1926, by chance, months before Rilke's death.

Altman's bridge/barrier duality appears throughout *Letters*, neither fully reconciled nor realized by the end of their correspondence. It is constantly conjured by Rilke, who often begins his letters to Kappus with a brief description of his whereabouts or disposition. For example, he writes on July 16th, 1903, "About ten days ago I left Paris, ailing and very weary, and traveled to these great northern plains whose vastness and quiet sky are supposed to return my health to me" (Rilke, *Letters* 17). Rilke situates himself in a given time and place, tentatively revealing his emotional (or in this case, physical) state to his younger correspondent. For Kappus and subsequent readers, these are sentences where we grasp for the poet's personality, practically strangling the sentence until some trace of himself seeps out. Ironically, the opposite is true for Kappus, who willfully offers himself to Rilke and whom Rilke praises for leaving evidence of personality in their letters. Around the halfway point of their correspondence, Rilke writes to the young poet, "[yours] was the kind of letter one reads again, coming across it among one's papers, and I recognized you in it as if I were in your presence" (Rilke, *Letters* 17). It is a rare moment of esteem in *Letters*, and Rilke's compliment seems genuine. The ability to appear, on paper, as one does in real life, is an impressive undertaking — and one that Kappus evidently succeeded at, at least by Rilke's standards. Further, Rilke's assessment of Kappus' authorial voice indicates that the letter lives on, even after Kappus lets go of it.

At the end of November 1903, Kappus makes a dramatic confession: he divulges that he has twice attempted suicide. The staggering admission is couched in a longer, lamenting paragraph, but there is nothing couth or coded about it. "Two and a half years ago," he writes, "I was twice tempted to put an end to myself" (Kappus, *Letters with Letters* 103). In the lengthy

lead-in that precedes this statement, Kappus builds tentatively into an exceptionally vulnerable story. The meandering prose makes it appear as if Kappus was unsure if he was ready to admit it until he had the strength to put the words down on paper. The confession also clarifies that for Kappus, Rilke is his sole addressee: "I can say it to you," he begins the sentence which mentions suicide (Kappus, *Letters with Letters* 103). The next paragraph reveals Kappus' uncertainty while reinforcing his singular reverence of Rilke: "Who else is there that I could entrust with my most secret fears, oppressive nightmares and thoughts, if not you" (Kappus, *Letters with Letters* 103). When the elder poet responds, one month later, his tone is chilly, unreflective of the earlier vulnerability. "Almost everyone has moments when they would happily exchange [solitude] for some sort of company," he writes, "be it ever so banal or trivial" (Rilke, *Letters* 26). In the absence of Kappus' letters, this moment is easily overlooked as a universal thought. With their added context, however, Rilke's writerly wisdom ceases to be captivating. Javadizadeh admonishes the elder poet's reaction, writing, "Rilke's advice can sound astonishingly unfeeling, even reckless, in its dogmatic insistence" ("Can Rilke Change Your Life?"). Rilke's sage, all-knowing tone — which has compelled generations of readers — has been exposed as dismissive, even dangerously ambivalent, in light of Kappus' side of the correspondence.

In a letter dated May 14th, 1904, Rilke evaluates a sonnet sent to him by Kappus, which he has transcribed by hand into his response. Rilke's reaction is uncharacteristically warm. He writes, "I have copied out your sonnet because I found that it had beauty and simplicity and native form in which it unfolds with such quiet propriety" (Rilke, *Letters* 31). The poet's praise continues: "It is the best of the verses of yours I have been permitted to read" (Rilke, *Letters* 31). Rilke is acutely aware of the privilege of being invited to read another person's writing —

especially a poem, which by Rilke's standards, ought to be the utmost expression of the self. The elder poet goes on to explain his rationale for rewriting the sonnet himself: "I know that it is important and a whole new experience to come across a work of one's own in a foreign hand" (Rilke, *Letters* 31). Rilke does little to divulge why he knows such a sensation to be true, or how it may have influenced his own writing practice. Instead, he transitions rapidly into an imperative and takes a pedantic tone that has by then become familiar to readers of *Letters* and presumably, to Kappus. "Read the lines as if they were unknown to you," Rilke advises, "and you will feel in your inmost self how very much they are yours" (Rilke, *Letters* 31). The demand is strange, but it effectively illustrates Rilke's belief that writing is a manifestation of an author's selfhood — for the poet, the two concepts are closely linked.

Elsewhere, Rilke's responses appear to be motivated more by obligation than by want, resulting in an awkward asymmetry — where Kappus is eager, Rilke appears indentured to their epistolary exchange. The letters' lopsidedness calls attention to the power dynamic that characterizes the pair's correspondence. While this phenomenon is less evident in the original *Letters* than its reissue, it is possible to uncover. In the fall of 1904, Rilke writes to Kappus from Sweden after a period of silence. He apologizes for his absence and explains that he was occupied largely by travel and partially by other engagements, both of which impeded his ability to write. After catching up on correspondence, Rilke explains — or perhaps more accurately, complains — "even today writing is not going to be easy because I have had to write a good number of letters already and my hand is tired" (Rilke, *Letters* 45). The elder poet's response seems reluctant and compulsory. He goes on: "If I had someone to dictate to I'd have plenty to say, but as it is you'll have to make do with just a few words in return for your long letter" (Rilke, *Letters* 45). If Rilke's desire is to reassure his recipient, he has failed to do so.

When Rilke raises the possibility of having his speech transcribed into a letter, I shudder — introducing another person to their correspondence threatens its established intimacy. The possibility unsettles me as a fundamental misunderstanding of what the dyadic letter is — or ought to be. As established in this paper's introduction, the form is as self-defying as it is self-determined. Though all letters need not be a strict one-to-one exchange, Rilke and Kappus have established an insularity that would risk becoming obstructed by another party. That Rilke would entertain this idea at all makes me doubt the esteem in which he purports to hold Kappus and makes evident that the older poet is uninterested in being vulnerable with his recipient. Moreover, the elder poet reduces their epistolary exchange to something terse and transactional. By contrast, the younger poet's eagerness to communicate with Rilke is evidenced by the length of his letters and speediness of his responses.

Rilke avoids writing from the first-person in large portions of *Letters*. Over the course of their correspondence, a near-formulaic pattern appears: Rilke begins with a brief, introductory paragraph — brushing off a belated response, making mundane reference to his health or the weather, and informing Kappus of the city from which he is writing. In their second-ever exchange, for example, Rilke begins:

> You must forgive me, my dear Sir, for only attending to your letter of 24 February today: the whole time I have been under the weather, not ill exactly but oppressed by an influenza-like feebleness which has made me incapable of anything. And in the end, when all else had failed, I traveled down to this southern coast, whose beneficial effects have helped me in the past. But I'm still not well again, writing is difficult, and so you must take these few lines as if there were more of them. (Rilke, *Letters* 9)

Rilke's description of his whereabouts and wellbeing is brief, and even the seeming severity of his health condition is dismissed as rapidly as it is introduced. This structure and shortness persists all the way until Rilke's final letter to Kappus. In its first paragraph, the elder poet conjures up another explanation that, with some prodding, more closely resembles an excuse: "I really wanted to write you this in time for Christmas Eve," he begins, "but what with the work that has been occupying me variously and without interruption this winter the old festival came up so quickly that I hardly had time enough to make the most necessary purchases, much less to write a letter" (Rilke, *Letters* 45). While Kappus' letters to Rilke are repetitive, each one is infused with authenticity. Rilke's letters, by contrast, vary in subject matter and tone, but prove to be more formulaic. After an acknowledgement of Kappus and often, an admission of his belatedness, as above, Rilke meditates meanderingly on literature, love, and life itself.

In these latter parts of the letters, the "I" disappears. Rilke's tone is instructive, relegating himself to the fringes of his own work. In their very first exchange, for example, Rilke writes curtly to Kappus, "Go into yourself" (Rilke, *Letters* 6). As he elaborates, Rilke calls upon the aspiring writer to articulate just why it is that he writes. The letter goes on, "Examine the reason that bids you to write; check whether it reaches its roots into the deepest region of your heart, admit to yourself whether you would die if it should be denied you to write" (Rilke, *Letters* 6). The expression is undeniably inspiring, but it is tinged with subtle skepticism, as if Kappus must first justify his authorial impulses and prove himself a worthy correspondent of the elder poet.

Rilke's final letter to Kappus is uncharacteristically kind, but it is unflinchingly final. After a four-year pause in correspondence, the elder poet contacts his young counterpart during Christmastime. His letter is correspondingly nostalgic. It does not yield new revelations about

Rilke, but it does demonstrate his attentiveness to his pen pal. In the page-long letter, Rilke reminisces on their epistolary relationship and bids Kappus a bittersweet goodbye. Where previous notes were signed "Yours, Rainer Maria Rilke," this one leaves Kappus with a more affectionate, "Ever yours" (Rilke, *Letters* 48). The appended adverb binds two poets to one another, once and for all, even as their correspondence comes to an end.

True to form, Rilke's letters to Kappus transcend distance and time. They are so effective, in fact, that contemporary readers have the sensation that Rilke is speaking directly to them, no matter how much time has passed since they were first written. Eagleton is again useful here. He writes, "Some texts are born literary, some achieve literariness, and some have literariness thrust upon them" (Eagleton 8-9). Clearly, Rilke's correspondence with Kappus was not born literary, but his letters accumulated literariness as his career advanced. Searls echoes this conviction: "[The letters] have always come not just from a relatable young struggling artist, but from someone with Rilke's immense mature authority behind them" (153). The *Duino Elegies* (1923) made him an "Olympian author" (Searls 153), so that by the time *Letters* was published, their attribution to Rilke was the source of their gravity. Although written before Rilke achieved any mainstream fame, the letters were released afterwards. As a result, the body of work acquires meaning retroactively — in the social context of Rilke's status, as anticipated by Eagleton. And much like Altman's bridge/barrier conviction, it is as if Rilke is writing from two places at once. Kappus' half of the correspondence, however, remains un-literary. Ultimately, Kappus did not become a poet. What writing he did produce — including his letters to Rilke — is unremembered. (More grievous than unremembered, they are unremarkable.) The more time I spend with *Letters*, the more evident Rilke's condescension becomes, and the more

glaringly disregarded Kappus' voice feels. The young poet, to whom the collection is addressed, endorses the intimate and self-disclosing potential of the letter form, while Rilke resists it.

Traces of the Self in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*

While Rilke's nonfiction is descriptive, it is rarely introspective. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910) is a remarkable alternative — in it, the poet reveals more about himself than he does his other, arguably more personal, works of prose. *Notebooks* is the only text in this trio that was published during Rilke's lifetime; written between 1904 and 1910, it coincides closely with Rilke's correspondence with Kappus. Also noteworthy is that *Notebooks* is his oeuvre's sole work of fiction, though this label becomes blurry upon closer examination. The novel, formatted in a series of private journal entries, is semi-autobiographical. The text not only lifts content from Rilke's real life, but also borrows language directly from his letters (Hulse xviii). *Notebooks*' eponymous narrator writes from a dismal Paris apartment, a city where Rilke spent a significant amount of his career. Brigge, unlike Rilke, is an emphatic, even erratic, narrator. His storytelling is visceral, oscillating violently between self-loathing and wonder at the world. Brigge aspires to be a writer, the very occupation in which Rilke was finding his footing. Both young men grieve a dead father and grapple with shifting familial relationships. The novel is littered with events, locations, emotions, and entire sentences extracted from Rilke's personal writings. The book's original title, *The Journal of My Other Self*, captures Brigge's internal strife and the first-person nature of the narrative. If we read the personal pronoun as referring to Rilke, however, the retired title also illuminates the way the famous poet may have embedded himself in the work — it could have just as easily been called *Diary of a Young Poet*.

My analysis of *Notebooks* is concerned, in part, with the information that lies between its covers — what details it reveals and what insight it imparts. The novel's journal structure immediately invokes intimacy and primes readers to accept its narrator's voice as personal, perspectival truth. A result of the biographical similarities between narrator and author, readers have the sensation of entering Rilke's, not only Brigge's, private, previously-unseen world. How close *Notebooks* comes to the truth remains unknowable, but Rilke gives readers the impression of vulnerability and self-disclosure. The novel is successful in creating the sensation of self-expression, the very thing that Rilke occasionally praised Kappus for doing. Illusion or not, the fictitious *Notebooks* appears more expressive, confessional, and connected to the author's experience than Rilke's nonfiction work.

In *Notebooks*, twenty-eight-year-old Malte Laurids Brigge documents his coming-of-age extensively in a series of diary entries. The young man is a passionate poet who struggles to find success and stability in the occupation, and hails from an aristocratic Danish family. At the outset of the novel, he has recently relocated to France. His family's status, seemingly bygone by the time readers encounter Brigge, does little for the narrator in Paris, where he rents a dismal apartment and ogles at the city's impoverished population. An archetypal late-nineteenth century flaneur, Brigge spends much of his time wandering the streets of the metropolis. The young man appears horrified by his surroundings, but he dedicates so many pages of careful prose to its description that readers understand that he is also fascinated by the city's seediness. Unlike Rilke's self-presentation, Brigge is self-conscious, obsessed with the qualities that distinguish him from Paris' poorer population.

Like Brigge, Rilke is adamantly attached to his identity as a writer, spent a significant portion of his career in Paris, and grappled with shifting familial relationships, including the

loss of a father. The undeniable similarities between author and protagonist prompt me to reconsider Barthes' argument. Where the French philosopher advocates for the annihilation of the writer in service of the reader, *Notebooks* makes the two nearly indistinguishable. Where Rilke's nonfiction resists reflection and self-disclosure, *Notebooks* asks to be read autobiographically.

Though widely acknowledged as a novel, Notebooks stubbornly resists categorization. As Michael Hulse points out in the book's introduction, Rilke lived and died by poetry — "[it] was the stuff of life to him" (xiv). As a result, "it is astonishing to think of him writing a novel at all, even an anti-novel such as *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*" (Hulse xiv). Here, Hulse rightly identifies *Notebooks* as a departure from Rilke's oeuvre, which was otherwise, principally, poetry. In order to meet the novel on Rilke's terms, Hulse offers this possibility: "it may be aptest to think of the work as a long prose poem" (xiv). This observation recalls the flexibility of form. The novel lacks a clear narrative arc, linear plot, or cast of characters. *Notebooks* is thematically existentialist and emblematic of modernist literature. Brigge's tone is saturated with fear, and the text is preoccupied with ideas including death, choice, and imagination. The narrator poses grand, unanswerable questions about life, meaning, and legacy that remain unresolved in the pages of the book — though not for lack of trying.

Brigge's meticulous journaling is a means of self-preservation. For the diarist, as for Rilke and Kappus, writing is also a system of record-keeping. In an early entry, Brigge writes, "For some time yet, I shall still be able to write all of these things down or say them. But a day will come when my hand will be far away from me, and, when I command it to write, the words it writes will be ones I do not intend" (Rilke, *Notebooks* 34). Throughout the novel, Brigge is plagued by a fear of death, which he implies occurs twice. For Brigge, a person's physical,

bodily demise will be preceded by another type of death — when one can no longer write. The narrator finds solace in his ability, at least temporarily, to continue writing: “Though I am full of fear, I am yet like a man in the presence of greatness, and I recall that I often used to have this sensation within me before I began to write. But this time it is I who shall be written. I am the impression that will be transformed” (Rilke, *Notebooks* 34-35). In the face of nothingness, keeping a journal grants Brigge a sense of *something*ness.

Brigge’s voice is volatile, characterized by obsessive introspection and unanswerable rhetorical questions. Take, for example, the final lines of a passage he pens. This section of the novel takes the shape of a drafted letter, unassumingly nestled among the narrator’s journal entries. The metamorphosis of form is cued by an easy-to-miss asterisk; like all of the book’s marginal notes, this one was included intentionally by Rilke, not an editor. Neither Brigge nor Rilke identify the letter’s addressee but a reference to a doctor and difficulty of travel imply that the subject is bedridden and ill — most likely Brigge’s father. The young man begins by describing an affecting experience with a piece of art — “I wept. I wept…” (Rilke, *Notebooks* 47) — then admits that he feels changed by Paris, in good ways and bad. Brigge has embarked upon “A new life full of new meanings” (Rilke, *Notebooks* 47), but as he shares with both the letter’s addressee and the novel’s audience, the newness is destabilizing. He both marvels at and recoils from the feeling, writing, “I am a beginner in the circumstances of my own life” (Rilke, *Notebooks* 47). Brigge’s forthcoming descriptions of his emotions lead readers to believe that the note’s intended recipient is an intimate acquaintance — elicited, in large part by the letter from. Alternatively, it is equally possible that the addressee *is* close to Brigge, but his willing self-disclosure is a result of the fact that this letter would never be sent — indicated by its appearance in the pages of a private diary. The tension between forms is provocative,

demonstrating the ways in which letters and journals both coalesce and diverge. This section of the novel is an apt example of Altman's portrait/mask paradox. The letter enables Brigge to paint an image of himself as captivated and introspective, while simultaneously donning a mask and presenting himself strategically to the unidentified addressee. This concurrence is enabled by the embedding of a letter within a journal; the coexistence of the otherwise-polar portrait and mask is traceable to Rilke's disruption of form.

Brigge's drafted letter also reaches across distance; he indicates that the note's intended recipient is unable — or unwilling — to visit him in Paris. He does not explicitly divulge the nature of their relationship, but leaves this clue in the first couple of sentences: "I am trying to write to you, although really there is nothing to say after a necessary parting. I am trying nonetheless" (Rilke, *Notebooks* 46). Despite the apparent necessity of their separation, Brigge appears hopeful that the addressee might travel to see him. By the end of the letter-entry, though, Brigge makes it clear that this note will not be sent. In the final lines, he laments, "My God, if only some of this could be shared," (Rilke, *Notebooks* 47). (Sharing, I believe, is a reference to sending the letter.) Then, as if thinking out loud, the diarist immediately retracts his wish, wondering, "But would it then *be*, would it *be*?" (Rilke, *Notebooks* 47). Rather than leaving readers — or the imaginary recipient of the letter — to wonder, Brigge answers his own question. "No," he writes decisively, "it is only at the price of solitude" (Rilke, *Notebooks* 47). This series of sentences induces whiplash, each transition making a rapid series of contradictions and concessions. Thematically, this passage speaks to the desire for recognition and risks an author invites by distributing their work. Brigge seems to believe that relinquishing his writing to the world jeopardizes its fundamental integrity. This fear is especially apparent in the repeated refrain "Would it *be*?," (Rilke, *Notebooks* 47) which links writing intimately and

inextricably with sheer existence. In the above passage, Brigge appears to be actively working through his thoughts and feelings as he transcribes the hybrid letter-journal entry. This sort of processing is not just indicative of the form, but elicited by it.

Notebooks lacks a linear narrative; it swirls and spirals disorientingly, then concludes hastily, as if, like a true journal, it was never meant to see the light of day. In any actual diary, though, the ending is imposed upon the writer. Physical features of a notebook — namely the number of pages — predetermine when the record-keeping will end. Rilke's fictional journal sidesteps this prescription. In my experience, reaching the back cover of a notebook is a triumph. Its finality is also intimidating. In my personal journaling practice, I often fret over my final entry. So determined I am to use up all of the notebook's pages, I attempt to calculate how much I will write and how many pages I ought to reserve in order to achieve that seamless, serendipitous ending. I'm prone to over-extending or else, stopping myself short, when I reach this point. Worst of all, I've occasionally torn out a blank page at the back of a journal to orchestrate the illusion of finality. Though the opposite is true, Rilke expertly mimics this real-life experience in *Notebooks*, as if the novel's ending was dictated by uncontrollable, outside forces.

In *Notebooks*, Rilke approaches a new literary frontier: fiction. The novel, whose structure mimics a diary, proves to be the most self-disclosing piece of prose in this project. The work's fictiveness or distance from reality, evidently, does not exclude it from being emotionally expressive. Rilke embeds his experience in the book, using Brigge as a semi-surrogate for himself. The real-life parallels are difficult to overlook or underwrite, especially because *Letters* leaves readers searching for more of the poet's personality. However truthful *Notebooks* is, the novel is at the very least successful in creating the illusion of intimacy. As

translator Michael Hulse writes in the book's introduction, "Though the *Notebooks* is a work with autobiographical dimensions, its gaze is consistently on other people, other things, other experiences" (xix). In doing so, *Notebooks* effectively illustrates Altman's portrait/mask paradox. The journal form refracts observations outside of the self, revealing just as much about Brigge as his surroundings. In turn, *Notebooks* grants readers a rare glimpse into Rilke himself.

Authorial Voice, Influence, and Absence in *Diaries of a Young Poet*

Rilke's *Diaries of a Young Poet* (1997), the only existent collection of his personal journals, was released decades after his death in an effort to satiate readers' curiosity about the innerworkings of the poet's mind. Its success in doing so is contestable — whether Rilke's journal entries are an accurate expression of his mind is ultimately unknowable. Public fascination, however, is sustained by the unrelenting popularity of his oft-referenced and oft-taught poetry, as well as fascination with *Letters*, by then a literary fixture. While Rilke's poetry and *Letters* might jockey for the desirable position as the pinnacle of his work, *Diaries* is undeniably secondary — and not necessarily literary by Eagleton's standards. Their publication can be easily traced to the popularity of Rilke's other projects. Though unable to determine the authenticity of Rilke's journal entries, readers can meaningfully assess whether *Diaries* generates the *impression* of expressiveness and knowability. The book's form is a useful starting place — far more than a letter, a diary or journal evokes privacy. The form primes readers to believe that the speaker is writing with unabridged honesty, an assumption that is reinforced by fictionalized and actual dairies alike. Eloquent or inelegant, graceful or gritty, sympathetic or scathing, the diary is upheld as the least self-conscious literary form.

Since receiving my first journal, I have filled a great many notebooks with rants and rambles and secrets and snide remarks and confessions and confusions. I have put things into

writing before I had the strength to utter them aloud, and I shudder at the image of someone sifting through those pages. Still, I cannot shake the sensation that my journals might one day be uncovered. I harbor the hope that I might one day have a career borne out of writing, and that, like Rilke, my journals will become the source of intrigue and attention, meticulously mined for whatever crystals of insight they might reveal. My foolish impression that this might one day be the case comes from a real tendency — that of publishers to excavate the archives of famous dead writers for unpublished material that might be transformed into profit.

To have access to anything remotely resembling a diary from the poet is remarkable in itself; as *Diaries*' introduction points out, Rilke was resistant to publishing any work that was remotely autobiographical. As established, he had a poetic penchant towards description, and his letters always reached a responsive recipient. The diary, which asks its author to turn inward, may have unnaturally or uncomfortably contorted Rilke — and his writing. It is worth noting that journals serve different purposes for different journal-keepers, but Rilke's employment of the form in *Notebooks* indicates that he at least understood its capacity for self-disclosure and confidence. *Diaries* has become a valuable resource for readers and researchers alike, but the fact that the text was published at all compromises Rilke's wishes during his lifetime and complicates our notion of the diary as wholly — and holy — private.

The book is divided into three sections — "The Florence Diary," "The Schmargendorf Diary," and "The Worpswede Diary" — each titled derived from the location where Rilke was living at the time. In the course writing each, Rilke gradually, tentatively embraces the form. As translators Edward Snow and Michael Winkler co-write in *Diaries*' introduction, keeping a journal required the poet to "overcome, at least, initially, strong misgivings about the (conventional) diary as a literary genre" (x). Most notably, Rilke struggled to reign in the

"apparent randomness of its material and about the unpolished spontaneity of its style" (Snow and Winkler x). For a poet as preoccupied with precision as Rilke, the diary challenged his authorial desire for exactness and refinement. In order to navigate this new form, Rilke relied upon a convention he was already comfortable with — observation. Rilke describes art and urbanity at length, seemingly evading any and all mention of his innermost thoughts and feelings. *Diaries*, for all its descriptiveness, is oddly impersonal. Despite diligent first-person accounts, Rilke appears to be on the periphery of his own journal entries. As Snow and Winkler aptly identify, Rilke's entries are "other-oriented" (ix). Like his perceptive object poems, Rilke's diaries are preoccupied by experiences and perspectives that are not the author's own.

As outlined in the book's introduction, Rilke was encouraged — or rather, instructed — to begin keeping a diary by Lou Andreas-Salomé. Rilke had been recently acquainted with Salomé, a Russian-German philosopher who by then had already successfully published several books and essays. The young poet was instantly infatuated with the woman fourteen years his senior. Salomé received exquisite love letters from her young admirer, and despite her initial rejection of his attention, they became romantically involved. Salomé reacted unfavorably to the journal entries Rilke dedicated to her, though not much is known about the intricacies of this exchange (Snow and Winkler xi). The pair remained close and continued to correspond after romantically disentangling. And despite his fundamental objection to the form and initial rejection of it, puzzlingly, Rilke continued to keep a journal. After being released from Salomé's assignment, Rilke's dedication to the diary indicates that the form allowed him to do something he could not achieve in poetry or written correspondence, though exactly what or why eludes me.

When Rilke left for Florence in 1898, he began to fill the pages of a diary at the older writer's behest. Rilke recorded his observations about the city, its culture, and early Renaissance art. Among ongoing observations about art are briefly personal mentions of memory, identity, and communication, though they are less central. Equally peripheral to *Diaries* is the poet himself. The diary, it seems, should be the most introspective and un-self-conscious of the forms that will this paper is interested in. In a journal, unlike a letter or novel, the writer's only imagined audience is themself. For Rilke, however, that was not the case — in "The Florence Diary," Salomé is frequently referred to as "You," consuming so much space that she is practically a character. This structure also means that the entries Rilke penned from Florence resemble letters. Salomé, who Rilke admired fiercely, is both addressee and imagined audience. Her presence looms over the pages and might account for the poet's polished, precise prose. What Salomé's disembodied surveillance does not assuage is the entries uncanny impersonal-ness.

Altman argues that writer and recipient identities are elastic in epistolary discourse. Works we deem most epistolary, she writes, are those "in which *I* becomes defined relative to the *you* whom he addresses" (Altman 118). The existing, extra-epistolary dynamic between writer and recipient inevitably finds its way into their communication. Though *Epistolarity*'s focus is exclusively upon letters, this idea is also keenly relevant to Rilke's *Diaries,* in which Rilke's I depends on the journal's you. (This phenomenon is not singular to Rilke — Anne Frank famously named her diary Kitty and formatted each entry like a letter. A diarist's addressee is not necessarily always themselves — there exists a tradition of writers who imagine their journal as a separate person.) Rilke's entries are at once a documentation of his real life and a reflection of the evolving and altered dynamics of his relationships. As the

inconstant “you” evidences, Rilke’s diaries are not entirely reactive or retrospective. Instead of strictly shaped by it, the diaries maneuvers around reality.

“The Florence Diary” is where Rilke’s diary-keeping practice begins. Written entirely in present tense, the section resists the retrospection that is typically associated with the genre. As a result, Rilke’s entries lack hindsight. Personal reflection is notably absent; instead, he monologues about ancient art and the artist’s experience. Throughout these pages, Rilke theorizes about creativity, especially the separation between creator and creation. An artist, he believes, might achieve beauty, but will never “raise so much beauty out of himself that it will cover him over completely” (Rilke, *Diaries* 15). Some part of the artistic self can always be uncovered — no matter the amount of beauty, “A part of himself will always gaze out from behind it” (Rilke, *Diaries* 15). Elsewhere, Rilke draws a stronger distinction between art and artist: “In [the artist] there is no room for his past; and so he gives it a separate, independent existence in works of art” (Rilke, *Diaries* 17). If art is a personal reckoning, then it is also a personal pursuit. Rilke writes, “Know then that the artist creates for himself — only for himself” (*Diaries* 17). He cautions readers against interacting with such art, advising, “They are not for you. Do not touch them, and regard them with awe” (Rilke, *Diaries* 17). Interaction, it appears, will only blemish and bruise. Here, Rilke’s use of a lower-case “you” contrasts sharply with the nominalized “You” which becomes synonymous with Lou Andreas-Salomé. Rilke’s musings about art, while insightful and interesting, are wildly impersonal. Diligent readers might rightfully imagine that these impersonal meditations are, in fact, Rilke’s instruments of introspection. This assumption is supported by rare moments in which Rilke writes from the first-person perspective. “Often I have such a great longing for myself” (*Diaries* 18), Rilke writes after describing the artist’s inward retreat. The transition makes a stark distinction

between the diary-writer and the character he has constructed. Rilke's artist is enlightened, elevated, not even entirely human — "The artist will not for all time endure alongside the man," he speculates, "The artist is the eternity that juts into our days" (*Diaries* 18).

"The Florence Diary" was started and completed five years before Rilke took up correspondence with Kappus, but a brief description of artists accruing inspiration from one another alludes to the relationship that would eventually develop. Whether interacting with a more or less accomplished counterpart, an artist's own practice may be compromised. "If he takes from one who is greater," Rilke writes, "he will lose himself" (*Diaries* 21). The alternative is no better — "if he inclines toward the manner of one who is narrower, he will profane himself and rob his heart of its purity" (Rilke, *Diaries* 21). When Kappus contacted Rilke for the first time, his status as an artist was entirely aspirational. Nevertheless, his identification as a writer was staunch — even stubborn. Most importantly, Rilke's delineation of one who is "greater" and another who is "narrower" rings with prophetic accuracy.

The diaries occasionally overlap with Rilke and Salomé's in-person encounters, such that the poet no longer feels obligated to transcribe his thoughts. "Whatever else I might have written here," he records in November 1899, is nullified — "now I've told You in person, which I had much rather do anyway" (Rilke, *Diaries* 92). Rilke's expressed preference for face-to-face communication indicates that the diary was not a substitute for interaction, but a supplement to it. It is only when Salomé recedes from Rilke's life, however, that the journal form — at last — begins to feel more familiar. After leaving Florence, Italy, Rilke resumes his record-keeping in Schmargendorf, Germany, a neighborhood in Berlin. The entries written from Schmargendorf span roughly two years, beginning in July 1898 and ending in September 1900, when Rilke wrote almost daily. In spite of his unraveling relationship with Salomé, Rilke maintains the

diary. Early Schmargendorf entries divulge the frustration and betrayal Rilke felt following Salomé's rejection. The first Schmargendorf entry demands, "Do you know what is happening here?" (Rilke, *Diaries* 81). In the sentence that follows, Rilke responds to his own rhetorical question: "These pages are streets down which Your words were supposed to go" (*Diaries* 81).

While earlier sections are tinged with Rilke's self-conscious awareness of Salomé, "The Schmargendorf Diary" marks a shift. Around this time, the poet sheds the "You" that had been synonymous with Salomé. As Salomé's once-outsized presence in Rilke's real-life wanes, she is accordingly absent from Rilke's journal entries. During this period, Rilke meets Clara Westhoff, the German sculptor who would later become his wife. The poet's description of their earliest encounter rivals even the most enchanting of romantic comedy monologues, which is why I have opted to include it here in full. In the diary entry following their first meeting, he writes:

> The whole house flattered her, everything became more stylish, seemed to adjust to her, and when upstairs during the music she leaned back in my large leather chair, she was the mistress of the house among us. Every time I looked at her this evening she was beautiful in a different way. Especially in her listening, when that aspect of her face that is sometimes too strong is bound up in something unknown. Then the rhythm of restrained, listening life imprints itself on her figure, softly as among the folds. (Rilke, *Diaries* 155)

Any reader will readily recognize the feeling that Rilke gracefully describes — the obsessive, all-consuming crush. However odic and affected his language is, the sentiment is achingly familiar. Rilke's entries, at long last, begin to resemble something much closer to a traditional, for-my-eyes-only journal.

This section of *Diaries* is scattered with poetry and short fiction stories along with personal anecdotes and everyday documentation. Besides this change in form, "The Schmargendorf Diary" also begins to explore themes and ideas that feel far more accessible and authentic. Rilke's admissions of homesickness, grumblings about parties, and obsessive observations about his crush are alarmingly, endearingly, human — whether read at the time of Rilke's writing at the turn of the nineteenth century, after its posthumous publication a hundred later, or from present day.

Rilke's attitude towards the form evolves with each section, but *Dairies*' overall impersonality is stubbornly consistent. By Rilke's final entries, written from Worpswede, readers begin to recognize the poet's personality. In an account dated December 13, 1900, Rilke describes embarrassment: "It is an infinite humiliation to enroll here the names of the last several days" (Rilke, *Diaries* 267). Following a string of daily entries, Rilke has neglected to write for nearly a week. Despite the fact that there is no one to bear witness to his inattention or inconsistency — certainly no Salomé any longer — the poet appears ashamed. The confession is rare both for its emotional vulnerability and semantic straightforwardness. Here, author and addressee are one in the same. Rilke's commentary is for no one's sake but his own, yet he includes this dialogic disclaimer. Altogether, *Diaries* enables readers to chart Rilke's development during these years, tracking his movement across Europe and revealing his literary, artistic, and personal preoccupations at any given time. Yet "The Schmargendorf Diary" is most enlightening. Rilke is no longer evident in mere mentions of time and place; the poet has embedded himself each written entry, seemingly shedding his earlier aversion to vulnerability.

Like Kappus' contributions to the correspondence, Rilke's *Diaries* has not yet attained literary status. The book remains supplementary to the more widely recognized work in his catalog. Even the title, which riffs on *Letters to a Young Poet*, is an indication of its secondary-ness. *Diaries* enables readers and researchers to chart Rilke's development, tracking his movement across Europe and revealing his literary, artistic, and personal preoccupations at any given time. Yet "The Schmargendorf Diary" is most enlightening — Rilke has been abandoned, left alone with himself, an audience of one. Without Salomé looming over the work, Rilke tentatively sheds his earlier aversion to vulnerability. Altman's presence/absence paradox is apparent within and outside of Rilke's entries — at times, Salomé is an undeniable presence, while elsewhere, she is absent from both the prose and the poet's real life. Rilke himself is occasionally challenging to identify in his own writing. While *Diaries* does not prove as self-disclosing as *Notebooks,* nor as engaging as *Letters,* the book is an indispensable part of this project because it provides a real-life counterpart to Rilke's fictional journal.

Yours Truly

I spent the fall semester of my senior year reading and rereading Rilke's prose. During the stubbornly-snowy spring, with writing well-underway, I encountered Rilke on other terms — his poetry. In spite of the ever-growing number of hours I spent with Rilke's prose, I had almost entirely evaded his poetry. (It is not the purpose nor the preoccupation of this paper, and far smarter scholars have tackled the topic for far longer.) But in an attempt to stretch myself during my final undergraduate semester, I had opted into a poetry course. While completing this project, I have also maintained my personal journal- and letter-writing process outside of the classroom. For the most part, I delighted in the alignment of my academic and actual life. At times, though, I found myself fatigued by the incessant intellectualization. It was not the close-

reading that was tedious, necessarily, nor the daunting length of the paper. (Though this was certainly sometimes the case.) What frustrated me was my inadequacy in capturing the specialness of letter-writing and journal-keeping. Occasionally, journaling also found its way into the thesis-writing process. During the fall, I was tasked with recording my weekly reading progress and reflecting briefly on that week's work. My advisor and I referred to these assignments as "reading journals," though they only bore some of the hallmarks of a private journal. At every turn, it seemed, the work I was contributing to my thesis had some bearing on my real life. Now that the undertaking is completed, I will continue the practices that led me to this project in the first place — writing letters and keeping a journal.

Letters may be my preferred mode of communication, but they are far from the most common or convenient. Other people my age are often startled when they discover my propensity for the form, and my roommates joke that my mother and I single-handedly uphold the United States Postal Service. Their shock originates, I suspect, from their own unfamiliarity with writing letters, a negligence enabled by the fact that other channels of transmission are plentiful — whether instant message, email, social media messengers, or cell phone calls. (Recently, a professor who requested that students include an envelope with their final essay had to draw a diagram of the placement of address and stamps on the whiteboard.) Besides ease of access, this variety has also been ever-accessible — at least during my lifetime. Even as technology evolves, the rapid communication it enables is taken for granted by members of my generation. For me and my mother, much of the letter's appeal lies in its antiquated analog-ness. When our tradition was born, letters were the only way to bypass technical limitations like space and time.

I embarked upon this project, in part, because I thought that I might make a case for the letter. I imagined taking up pen and sword and advocating for the immortality of the ephemeral form. My imagined, unrealized project would categorically declare that letters are synonymous with literature, and in fact, that they have a transformative, transcendent, near-magical quality. I began with Letters because of its ubiquity and recognition. What Rilke's prose revealed, however, was unusual and unexpected. The triangulation of works of prose by Rainer Maria Rilke — *Letters to a Young Poet*, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, and *Diaries of a Young Poet* — yields interrelated, unexpected, and at times ironic revelations about the self-disclosing potential of different literary forms. This paper has been preoccupied by the impression of intimacy and expression generated. Rilke's dyadic letters, fictionalized journal entries, and private diaries are successful in doing so to varying degrees. *Notebooks*, the poet's lone work of fiction, subverts expectations by providing the greatest insight into his innerworkings.

Each book also has a distinct audience or addressee. Where Rilke narrates his diary entries with unflinching, near-obsessive admiration for Salomé, for example, the poet does not afford Kappus even a fraction of that reverence. In every letter, Rilke remains tight-lipped about his own goals, fears, and feelings. He seems to avoid talking about himself intentionally, allowing his counseling to be a refraction of his personality instead. Rilke's aversion to the personal is as jarring in his letters as it is in his diary entries. Though he favors seemingly intimate forms — the letter and the journal — Kappus and contemporary readers glean little insight about Rilke's true character. They may gain a wealth of knowledge about life and art and writing, but his precocious, poetic waxing is a flimsy substitute for true substance.

This paper has been invested in the experience of reading Rilke's prose — not only what the work can tell readers, but how it feels. It has also been interested in literature writ large — what is included or excluded from the category — and writing — especially its inherently performative nature. All writing bears traces of its author, though this fact is more true in fiction and most true in forms like letters and diaries. Yet as Rilke's prose evidences, self-disclosure and self-censorship are intricately connected. The intimacy that readers anticipate from the poet's *Letters* and *Diaries* goes undelivered. In a piece for the *New York Times Style Magazine,* Megan O'Grady also illustrates the relationship between self-censorship and self-disclosure in epistolary forms: "Only in our letters are we able to frame our cleverest selves, to pose both the questions and answers, to make ourselves known as we wish to be known" ("What Do Letters Reveal?"). What is unsaid in writing, it seems, is equally important as what is said.

Later, O'Grady echoes Liz Stanley's conviction that letters are porous. She opts for this description: "Letters are leaky in all sorts of ways," susceptible to social circumstances, technological advancement, and changing attitudes ("What Do Letters Reveal?"). While the letter becomes increasingly obsolete, she writes, it has only absorbed more meaning. As I have also argued, letters exchanged today "tend to have a gravity about them due in no small part to their near obsolescence of form" ("What Do Letters Reveal?"). This appeal is compounded by the publication of letter collections, which O'Grady believes are especially valuable "for the pleasure of seeing other, humanizing sides of our literary heroes" ("What Do Letters Reveal?"). The piece, published one month into a global pandemic, makes a compelling case for letter-writing, a practice briefly revived by the imposed isolation. Despite O'Grady's stance on letter collections writ large, *Letters to a Young Poet* does little to humanize Rilke. I believe the book's

appeal lies instead in its ability to reveal other sides of ourselves. *Diaries*, especially, attempts to make fathomable Rilke's unfathomable genius.

As early as 1908, people expressed anxiety over the loss of formal epistolary conventions and individual privacy. A brief essay published in the *Irish Monthly* asserted definitively that "the days of letter writing as an art are over" (Wynne 429). The letter seems to have died several deaths, each one more mundane and less dramatic than the last. Still, the form persists. Long-form written exchange is hardly anyone's first choice for communicating, yet the letter continues to appear in literature. Stubbornly or profoundly, letters live on. Popular contemporary fiction of the past five years, like Elif Batuman's *Either/Or* (2022) and Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021) include email exchanges between characters, a delineation of the physical letter. Outside of literature, letters and letter-like forms lend themselves to films as plot devices. Nora Ephron's *You've Got Mail* (1998) relies upon a series of anonymous emails exchanged between the romantic comedy's leading couple. The same month that I complete this project, a film called *Wicked Little Letters* will enter theaters. *Letters to a Young Poet* itself appears in contemporary popular culture. Pop star Lady Gaga has a quote from the book, in its original German, tattooed on her arm. The collection appears a couple times throughout *Gossip Girl*, the teen drama of the early aughts — in an early episode, one precocious teenager chastises another for not having read the book. These examples evidence an enduring curiosity about the form, even as it fades from everyday use.

Javadizadeh, writing in 2021, describes the thrill of receiving a piece of handwritten mail:

> To hold a letter addressed to you and see your own name in another's hand is to feel an unsettling kind of pleasure. Even before you've opened the envelope,

> your identity has been refracted through someone else's. The invitation is both estranging and thrilling: Could you become the person whose name you read there? ("Can Rilke Change Your Life?")

Kappus would surely agree with this sentiment — in one letter, he confesses that he cherishes Rilke's letters above any other possession. They are "dearer and more valuable than anything I have, even your books, which belong to anyone who wants them" (Kappus, *Letters with Letters* 105). Here, Kappus articulates the dyadic, deeply personal nature of letters by deeming Rilke's widely-published work impersonal. Occasionally, though, these literary forms appear simultaneously. In "The Schmargendorf Diary," for example, Rilke employs the image of a letter in a simile. Describing *George's Death* by Richard Beer-Hofmann, he writes, "I hold it like a letter" (Rilke, *Diaries* 122) — that is to say, carefully. The book's physical qualities, including typeface, paper, and scent, generate "the feeling of seeming confided, addressed to us and to many" (Rilke, *Dairies* 122). As this paper has done, Rilke references epistolarity in order to highlight the precious and self-disclosing nature of fiction. Where Barthes calls for the death of the author in favor of the reader, letters offer an alternative in which both are possible. Published collections, moreover, preserve once-confidential correspondence and make permanent the lives of authors. In each of my primary texts, but especially in *Notebooks*, Rilke appears invested in self-preservation. Sealed in an envelope, in transit, in Rilke's hands, and on Rilke's desk, the letter responds to Brigge's "Would it be?" lament. The letter continues to be.

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