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The Imagery of Nature in Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*

When I first started reading Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, I was influenced by the wisdom, strength and solace contained within its pages. I was no poet or artist, but I was young and struggling in life, embroiled in the battle of an aimless career and existence. Needless to say, the book of letters spoke volumes and affected me deeply even though they collectively formed a pocket-sized book and were addressed to someone else.

What was it that Emily Dickinson said about words?

"A word is dead when it is said, some say. I say it just begins to live that day."

Letter writing, once the only mode of communication, is a dying art and offers ample evidence of the transformative power of words. Letters once received were read, saved, and after a stretch of time, retrieved once more perhaps from a box of similar letters, to be perused and read again. A letter may carry love and friendship, yearning, advice or inspiration.

When Franz Xaver Kappus learns that the poet he admires—Rainer Maria Rilke—had studied at the same military academy where he himself had been sent to train for a reluctant career, he writes to the poet to seek understanding and feedback for his own attempts at poetry. The responses that Rilke sends to this first and many other letters comprise the book *Letters to a Young Poet*, which is a collection of ten letters in lucid, lyrical and enchanting prose. The letters are addressed to Franz Kappus; nonetheless, they seem to

speak to each eager reader who discovers them for the first time, as yet ignorant of the treasures this little book holds.

Intermingled with advice about writing and the importance of aloneness is imagery of nature. Living in a city where the noise of the routine, of survival in an increasingly competitive world is omnipresent, the presence of nature is at all times a welcome respite for me, as it must have been for Rilke. An early morning walk in a park, tree tops that were visible from the balcony of my parents' fourth-floor flat, and the sights and sounds of birds were the few treats of nature I could afford. In reading the *Letters* I found reassurance in the references to nature. In his letters, Rainer Maria Rilke uses several examples from the natural world, advocating that one must return to nature and learn from it. In the Fourth Letter, Rilke advises Mr. Kappus thus, which underlines the significance of nature and the presence of "natural" imagery in the letters: "If you will stay close to nature, to its simplicity, to the small things hardly noticeable, those things can unexpectedly become great and immeasurable."

In the Third Letter, the poet uses the image of a tree to write about what it means to be an artist. He says: "To be an artist means not to compute or count; it means to ripen as the tree, which does not force its sap, but stands unshaken in the storms of spring with no fear that summer might not follow. It will come regardless." Rilke asks artists to be forbearing, to wait patiently for creative inspiration; to be like a mighty tree that does not fear storms but stands waiting for it to be over. The simile used compares an artist to a tree, slowly developing his or her talents over time. Rilke advises that time does not matter when one "lives one's art."

Great art pays tribute to the natural world too. The poet's words in the Fifth Letter serve to highlight how nature inspires art, as he writes to Mr Kappus from Rome:

There is much beauty here because there is much beauty everywhere. Unending streams of lively water flow over the old aqueducts in the large city. They dance in the city squares over white stone bowls and spread themselves out in wide roomy basins. They

rustle by day and raise their voice to the night. Night here is grant, expansive, soft from the winds, and full of stars. And gardens are here, unforgettable avenues lined with trees. And staircases are here, steps conceived by Michelangelo, steps that were modelled after downward gliding waters, broad in their descent, one step giving birth to another, as wave from wave.

The visual and auditory imagery evokes vivid pictures of Rome and its beauty, of nature and art mingling to form a spectacular view. One visualises the personified streams of water dancing – their rustling is music to the ears – or imagine gliding down staircases inspired by “downward gliding waters.” The poetic, lyrical quality of Rilke’s prose holds readers in awe; one reading is not sufficient. One must return to the letters again and be prepared to find more meaning in them.

It is in the Seventh Letter that Rilke states how nature dictates the law of life. In the following excerpt is highlighted the need to model our lives according to the natural law: “But it is clear that we must embrace struggle. Every living thing conforms to it. Everything in nature grows and struggles in its own way, establishing its own identity, insisting on it at all cost, against all resistance. We can be sure of very little, but the need to court struggle is a surety that will not leave us.” It sounds like a cliché to say that in life the easy road is never the best one; to gain something of value, one must conquer obstacles. However, it is the law of nature, according to Rilke. Struggle is inevitable. The fact that something is difficult is all the more reason to do it. It’s not easy to be alone or to love, but one must embrace the struggle because it is difficult.

Nature is omnipresent throughout all the letters and in the tenth letter, which sees Franz Kappus engaged in a military career, it becomes evident how powerful the influence of natural elements can be.

...how tranquil you must be in your lonely fort between empty hills, attacked by great southern winds, as if they mean to devour them in large chunks. The silence must be immense where there is space for such sound and movements. And when one realizes the presence of the distant sea

and its melody is added to all this, perhaps as the innermost tone in this prehistoric harmony, then I can only wish that you trustingly and patiently allow that grand solitude to work in you.

The immense silence reaches beyond the book and envelops the reader. One comprehends then an inner harmony that has begun to take root and we return to the book again, seeking and discovering its infinite abundance once more.