

The Aesthetics of Silence and Moments of Being: Emotional Self-Preservation and the Refusal of Critique in Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*

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Received: 08 Sep 2026; Received in revised form: 05 Oct 2026; Accepted: 10 Oct 2026; Available online: 15 Oct 2026
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Abstract— Silence is often interpreted as blank, meaningless, absent, and hollow, but in many ways, it can hold meanings deeper than words can suggest. Today's moments are saturated with constant connectivity and sensory overload; the overflow of information from different social media platforms is blurring people's own thoughts and authenticity. This paper re-examines solitude as a necessary space in the formation of self through a close reading of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* (1875-1926). Drawing upon Susan Sontag's *Aesthetics of Silence*, the study seeks to find how Rilke destabilizes and refuses the standard criticism of a work of art through his letters to Kappus, emphasising inwardness, reflection, and understanding of the self and a writer's own understanding of his creative process. Even though silence can be seen as a patriarchal erasure, repression, and absence of self-knowledge or opinion, this is the most crucial and sophisticated psychological space for a person to find themselves, to form their selfhood, to make choices and create decisions, and to meet the unspoken possibility of the language. Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* frames a total rejection of literary critique not merely as advice but as a crucial strategy of emotional self-preservation. The text provides a path to be true to one's own self and cultivate an inviolable sanctuary of silence where creation remains the ultimate necessary process and self-discovery rejects outside opinion and market logic to form an embodied mind in the process of becoming.



Keywords— Solitude, Being, emotional awareness, existentialism, selfhood.

The contemporary world is marked by an unprecedented intensity of noise, such as digital, social, and psychological, that leaves little room for introspection and often crowds our own minds. In such a situation, solitude is often misunderstood as loneliness, a condition to be avoided rather than embraced. The modern individual, constantly engaged with external stimuli, risks becoming estranged from the self, leading to a fragmented and inauthentic mode of existence that makes them drift from their own core self, often leaving them feeling stuck and not good enough, with an ease of being. The ease of being one with oneself is hard to find in recent times; many of the people are dealing with constant anxiety and depression, with an urgency of getting there- there is a rush inside that is so loud and noisy. The rise of digital culture and the attention economy have

further intensified this condition, where constant visibility replaces inner reflection. This digital culture harms the minds of those who are in this rush of getting there, attaining something on an urgent basis, but stuck in a vicious loop, unable to progress from there. Against this backdrop, reflective literature emerges as a crucial space for rethinking the value of inwardness and silence. Texts such as *Letters to a Young Poet* offer profound meditations on the necessity of solitude not as withdrawal from life but as an essential condition for self-formation. Because without a calm solitude and stillness of the mind, one can go nowhere. It is really important to bring stability to our mind before we move on to something because it makes us balanced by giving us a free space to think and choose better. Hence, drawing upon existential concerns with authenticity, being,

and self-awareness, this paper argues that solitude functions as a generative space in which the individual confronts and constructs the self. This silence is not devoid of meaning; rather, it is something incomprehensible that words fail to suggest.

In *The Letters to a Young Poet*, Kappus corresponds to Rilke by asking whether his poems are 'good' or up to the mark, searching for a wiser guide in him who can validate his writings or clearly show his strengths and weaknesses. Whilst Rilke frames the total rejection of literary critique by reiterating the fact that a work of art should not seek external validation; rather, it should look for its aesthetic and authentic process of creation and bringing that creation to life. Evaluation of art, on the other hand, to Rilke, is a corrupting force that threatens an artist's integrity to his art. That is why he helps Kappus to find his own answer by saying that nobody can help anyone.

"There is only one single way. Go into yourself."
(p. 4)

Rilke, instead of validating Kappus, asks him to look inward, examine his own self, search for his creation's own root, and patiently look for his own internal workings and the gradual process of creating the art and becoming the self rather than seeking external validation. He urges him to look at his own art as an entity that has existence of its own while giving it space and grace. Instead of letting Kappus rely on him for validation, he guides him in ways to look for answers, to wait for the writings to ripen, to enjoy the process of creation by protecting it from outside judgments. Rilke believes,

"Things are not all as graspable and sayable as on the whole we are led to believe; most events are unsayable, occur in a space that no word has ever penetrated..." (P. 3).

Kappus is brought back to the most essential question by Rilke to "dig down into yourself for a deep answer." Rilke is urging him to submerge into his own world. Rilke emphasizes that any work of art has meaning and is great that has arisen out of necessity, because there are inner workings of the mind; there are some instinctual urges that do not rest until it comes out through some form. Therefore, going into ourselves has been strongly advised by Rilke. Rilke here is acting as a spiritual guide that is helping Kappus to respect his own creativity, and helping everyone understand the creatively stimulating feeling of a creative person while creating any work of art.

He says, "Works of art are infinitely solitary, and nothing is less likely to reach them than criticism. Only love can grasp them and hold them and do them justice." (P, 12)

Rilke is turning Kappus towards nature and by living with an open heart till everything grows easy and

more unified. He is asking us to be patient and wait with the questions in our heart that are still unsolvable. He is urging us to sit with the questions and love them and live them. He says, "Live the questions for now. Perhaps then you will gradually, without noticing it, live your way into the answer, one distant day in the future." (P.17)

In spite of immediately reacting or responding to the thoughts or questions, Rilke is helping Kappus to learn composure and ease with his own mind. He shows a pure, hopeful way by grounding Kappus within himself by saying that "Perhaps you do carry yourself the possibility of forming and creating, as a particularly happy and pure way of living. School yourself for it, but take what comes with complete trust." (P, 17)

Rilke asks, "Do not be distracted by surfaces; it is in the depths that all laws obtain." (P, 20). Rilke is like a guiding light, helping Kappus spend time with himself comfortably and learn to love his solitude.

"...love your solitude and bear the pain it causes you with melody wrought with lament...take pleasure in your growth, in which no one can accompany you, and be kind-hearted towards those you leave behind." (p. 21) Rilke is even asking Kappus to show understanding for the older ones who fear precisely the solitude in which the person trusts.

Love is treated by Rilke as such a strength that it helps even the readers of his letters gain utmost strength and positivity. He is asking Kappus to believe in a love that is stored up for us like an inheritance, and trust that in this love there is strength and blessing so large that we need not feel the urge to step outside of it. He is treating love as an ever-grounding force that helps us keep going, believing in a greater, positive force.

Most importantly, Rilke is helping Kappus to find a home in solitude, to rely on himself in every possible way; because for Rilke, even in foreign circumstances, it will hold a home for us who have an inner sanctuary; and from there one may find the paths they need. He is helping everyone see solitude as a very necessary space for self-discovery and self-reliance. Rilke is again bringing back focus to nature, as to how nature can become a healing aura, helping us with the beauty it has in abundance. He is saying that solitude is not easy to bear, and everyone would like to exchange it for some form of company for "the illusion of some slight correspondence with whoever happens to come across, however unworthy" (p. 26). But he is urging Kappus to be in solitude; however hard it may be to bear, it is going into ourselves and not meeting anyone for hours that we must arrive at. He is helping us to meet our inner life by showing us the world we carry within us, and says that what goes and touches us in our innermost corner is worth all our

love; and this is what one must arrive at, minding one's own business and not validating one's own attitude to other people.

He is helping Kappus in his becoming and his coming to terms with the changes within himself and around him. Just like the bees collect honey, we must fetch the sweetness of everything and build ourselves, the ones to come. Rilke is helping in building the more formed self from the loneliness, grief, dissatisfaction, silence, solitude, and love and day-to-day experiences. He is saying that we must take every positive thing from everything we encounter and build ourselves or the person we are about to become. Rilke is essentially telling Kappus not to be frightened while becoming, because it is slow growth, and it takes time. It is in our greatest despairs and helplessness that we transform into better and wiser people. When we may feel that we are stuck in this vicious loop, actually everything is helping us in becoming.

Rilke says that many a time we want to escape from reality, the difficult situations, and may want to follow conventions because that has been the easier way. But he says, "we must hold to the heavy, the difficult (p. 33). It is because difficulty helps us to grow. He says, "It is good to be alone, for solitude is difficult; that something is difficult should be one more reason to do it." For Rilke, solitude is not about being alone; rather, it is the state where we are comfortable sitting without thoughts, with fears, with uncertainty, without anyone validating our own thoughts or needing reactions and comfort from the outside.

In *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rilke conceptualizes becoming not as a process of overcoming suffering but as the capacity to remain receptive to experiences whose meaning has not yet become fully available to consciousness. His injunction to accepting our reality as wholeheartedly as possible suggests that grief, anxiety, uncertainty, and solitude must be accommodated within the self rather than immediately suppressed, rationalized, or transformed into objects of judgement. This receptivity has an embodied dimension: the subject must develop the capacity to endure the affective and somatic discomfort accompanying periods of inward transformation. Read through the framework of an aesthetics of silence, such endurance also involves a suspension of critique. Silence becomes more than an absence of speech; it constitutes a protective interval in which experience is permitted to exist without the pressure of immediate explanation, evaluation, or resolution. Rilke's refusal to offer the young poet definitive answers thus creates a space in which uncertainty itself becomes formative. By withholding premature judgement, the individual is able to remain with experiences that might otherwise be dismissed as weakness, confusion,

or failure, allowing them to acquire significance gradually. In this sense, emotional self-preservation does not depend upon eliminating pain but upon creating an inward space capable of containing it. The body becomes the site in which this unfinished experience is held, while silence protects it from premature interpretation. Becoming, therefore, emerges as an embodied process of sustained receptivity: the self does not master suffering through immediate understanding but learns to inhabit its uncertainty until a transformed relation to the self and to experience becomes possible.

Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* reveals silence as an active mode of emotional self-preservation rather than a mere withdrawal from expression. His emphasis on solitude, inwardness, patience, and the acceptance of uncertainty creates a space in which the self can encounter experiences without the immediate demand to explain, resolve, or judge them. Periods of heightened inwardness become significant precisely because they interrupt habitual ways of understanding the self and expose the individual to experiences that are difficult to articulate. Such moments need not produce immediate insight; their significance lies in allowing the individual to remain present to what is emotionally unresolved. Rilke's refusal of premature answers or definitive interpretations is therefore central to the aesthetic of silence that emerges from the letters. Silence protects the experience from being reduced too quickly to failure, weakness, or pathology and permits it to retain its complexity until its meaning can emerge organically. Emotional self-preservation, in this sense, does not signify avoidance of pain but the creation of an inward space in which pain, uncertainty, solitude, and vulnerability can be endured without being immediately overcome. The self-preservation itself by allowing itself to remain unfinished. Rilke's letters consequently suggest that some of the most transformative experiences occur in precisely those intervals when nothing appears to be resolved: in silence, in solitude, and in moments when consciousness becomes intensely aware of its own interior life. The aesthetics of silence thus becomes an aesthetics of preservation, giving the individual the necessary space to inhabit difficult experience before translating it into knowledge, art, or meaning. What emerges from these moments is not certainty but a deeper capacity to remain with oneself, and it is this capacity that makes transformation possible.

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