Fremde

A Reimagination of the Correspondence Between Rainer Maria Rilke and Franz Werfel

An Honors Creative Project (HONRS 499)

by

Melissa-Rae Thomas

Thesis Advisor
Dr. Ron Warner

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

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Abstract

Rainer Maria Rilke and Franz Werfel, two of the most prominent German-language authors of the early twentieth century, corresponded via four letters and one personal meeting. The meeting was largely unsuccessful, and afterwards each author referred to the experience as fremd, the German word meaning foreign or strange. My creative project is a "reimagination" of the correspondence and interaction between the two authors. It relies on primary sources, including some of the letters, but I took liberties to imagine particular emotions and reactions that the two authors had. The final project is a story that brings the interaction between these two authors to life.
Acknowledgements

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The Process of Reimagining

It cast a spell on me. The powerful bridge, the cobblestone streets, the morning fog, the tall lampposts. They all conspired with the city to cast a spell on me. I went there once, just as an idle sightseer—and then I had to return, and later it called again, and again I returned. Something about the city made it impossible to ever fully escape its majesty, to erase it from my memory. Paris, Rome, Venice, and Vienna left indelible marks on my memory, but it was only Prague that left a permanent mark on my imagination.

Prague seems to have a soul. It calls to its visitors from every corner, beckons them down the narrow alleyways, calls them into the ancient castle. Once they visit, they can never see the world quite the same way again.

Again I say: it cast a spell on me, and I think that spell was cast before I even set foot into the country. I have always loved classical music, and my favorite piece is called "The Moldau," incidentally by a Czech composer. Few Americans have heard of Smetana, the Czech composer who composed this piece, but to the Czechs he is a symbol of their culture. When I visited an opera hall, a Czech friend proudly pointed to a bust of Smetana and proclaimed that this great composer was Czech. The Czechs seem to have a great deal of pride in all of their national artists.

That is, they seem to have a great deal of pride in all of their national artists who spoke Czech. Dr. Ron Warner, my German professor and my thesis advisor, returned from a visit to Prague absolutely shocked that very few of the citizens had heard of an author who most of the western world would consider the country's most revered
author: Franz Kafka. Dr. Warner talked with many German speaking citizens, and very few had even heard of Kafka. I later asked several of my Czech friends if they knew of Kafka, and they seemed to recall a vague memory from their high school days. Sure, Kafka's face decorates the windows of kitschy souvenir shops, but the native Czechs breeze by these windows without a second glance.

After brainstorming with Dr. Warner, I decided that I would investigate this phenomenon for my thesis topic. Why, in a country where the citizens tend to be so proud of their national artists, does Kafka remain virtually unknown? I dove into the topic with all the energy I could muster. I checked out more books from the library than I could count, determined to get to know this man not only through his biographies, but also through his works.

After a reading nothing but Kafka short stories for a week, I felt a little insane. I was beginning to understand the meaning of the word Kafkaesque, and I was getting no closer to understanding who Kafka was. The fact that I attempted to understand Kafka's works shows my naïveté on the subject. Teetering on the brink of irrecoverable insanity, I decided to search the Internet for journal articles about Kafka and Prague. After digging through mountains of irrelevant articles, I stumbled upon one that compared the writing styles of Kafka, Werfel, and Rilke. I vaguely remembered reading a poem by Rilke in my German class, but I still knew very little about them. Eager for an escape from my Kafkaesque world, I turned to biographies about Werfel and Rilke. At that time, I did not know whether I was looking at these articles to rest my mind from the maze of Kafka's world or whether I was looking for something in particular.
To my dismay, the Ball State library contained shamefully few works about Werfel. I found only one very short biography, and it was in German. Without knowing what I was doing, I started reading the biography and found myself more interested in the journeys that Werfel had experienced than I had been in the cavernous enigmas of Kafka’s world.

I started to develop an idea to change my thesis: rather than writing a research paper exploring why Czechs do not recognize Kafka, I would write something more creative. After reading only a very few works by Werfel, I knew that any research paper could not do justice to these creative minds. Their works were so colorful that writing a bland research paper seemed, in a way, sacrilegious. I decided to write a type of “fictional biography” about Kafka, Werfel, and/or Rilke. I started reading the biography of Werfel just for enjoyment, hoping that somewhere in the complicated German I would find a spark that would ignite a thesis idea.

In addition to reading the biography, I started to read Werfel and Rilke’s works. Their poems were just as difficult for me to understand as Kafka’s works, but I found solace in Werfel’s short stories. Some of the stories were amazingly beautiful, and others were strangely prophetic. I found myself falling in love with his writing, and I determined that he would become a vital part of whatever thesis I ended up writing.

Although I had read almost the entire biography, my mind kept returning to a few isolated pages that depicted Werfel’s brief correspondence with Rilke. Rilke, the older author, had found Werfel’s works in a bookstore and was absolutely enthralled by the talent that he found in them. He wrote one letter to Werfel in admiration. Werfel’s reply was polite, and Rilke sent another letter, this time requesting a meeting in person.
Werfel's reply did not mention the possibility of a meeting but was equally polite. In the third letter, Rilke suggested that the two meet at a premiere in Hellerau. The two met in Hellerau, but the meeting seemed to be unsuccessful. Although certainly neither knew how the other described the event, both used the same word in private correspondence to describe the other: *fremd*, the German word for foreign or strange. After they met, Rilke sent one final letter to Werfel, again praising his works.

As I envisioned these two authors in my mind, I could not stop wondering why each used the same word to describe the other. In addition, I imagined the course of the correspondence like a perfect bookend: the first letter praised Werfel from a distance, the second two proposed personal meetings, and the fourth returned to praise from a distance. The whole affair seemed like a mystery to me. I wondered why Rilke wrote Werfel in the first place. How did Werfel feel when he received the letter? What happened when they met? Why was their meeting a failure? Why did Rilke decide to return to a position of formality in his fourth letter?

I wanted to find the letters that they had written to each other and use the letters as a starting point to "reimagine" their relationship. I had only written one similar piece that used primary sources to reimagine a historical event, and I had written that piece in Honors 199 my freshman year. Writing that piece had been one of the most creatively satisfying experiences I had at Ball State; I loved reading correspondence and imagining the authors as they bent over the parchment with their ink and quill. In addition, the blanks between the letters can provide plenty of room for creative enhancement and storytelling.
I found that my best way to locate applicable sources was to reread the same sources that Lore B. Foltin had cited in her biography of Werfel. Ball State had a few of these letters in its library, but unfortunately they were in English and omitted the parts that related to the correspondence between Werfel and Rilke. Very quickly I learned the advantages of interlibrary loan, although even via this medium I had few options. Some of her sources had been obtained directly through Werfel's survivors, and they still have not been published. Still undeterred, I thought I could contact Foltin in the hopes that she could guide me to the documents. The lack of documents about Werfel led me to believe that she might be willing to help a poor undergraduate who wanted to broaden the range of literature about this great poet. A Google search for her name, however, returned only memorial scholarships. Alas, that path was also a dead end (no pun intended).

Within days, most of my interlibrary loan requests had been fulfilled. I had the letters that Rilke had written to his friend, the princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis. I found the years that related to Rilke's correspondence with Werfel and began to read. Prior to this thesis, I felt that I had a good grasp on the German language. Alas, I had never attempted to read Rilke's works. His letters read like complicated prose, and one sentence can consume half a page. I waded through the letters, at times frustrated, at times intrigued, until I found the several letters mentioning Werfel. "I've hit the jackpot!" I thought. I knew that one letter in particular contained Rilke's impressions of Werfel after they had met, and I flipped the pages, eagerly searching for this letter. Not finding it, I became frustrated and turned to Foltin's biography to find the date of the letter:
October 21. Thankfully, the letters were in chronological order, so I simply flipped through the pages until I found the correct date.

“Eureka!” I shouted. That Eureka, however, was followed by an exclamation less joyous when I read the date more closely and realized that it said “Octobre” instead of “Oktober.” Yes, this letter—this one letter, the only one I really wanted from the entire correspondence, was in French. Sadly, my four days in France did little to make me fluent in French, so I turned to the trusty Altavista translation service. If I thought Rilke’s letters were difficult to translate from German to English, translating them from French to English via the not-so-reliable Altavista service proved to be exponentially more difficult.

Thankfully, Dr. Warner was able to ask the French graduate assistants to help me with the translation. I owe a million thanks to Aurelie Charbonnel and Audrey Bazard for their help with translating this maze of French into English.

At last, I had all of the correspondence between Rilke and Marie, but I was still missing an article that I thought could be most helpful. Eduard Goldstücker had written an article analyzing the very correspondence that I wanted to reimagine. All I knew was that the article was about 40 pages long and that it had appeared in the Germanistica Pragensia. I had requested the article from interlibrary loan, but day after day the status page said “Request sent.” Just when I had given up hope, the article arrived. I halted the presses (which at that time were still rattling noisily in my head) and stopped to read the entire article: 40 pages of scholarly German research—interesting, but not exactly my dream idea of a leisurely read.
The Goldstücker article proved to be much more valuable than I had ever imagined, however, and it is to this article that I owe much of the history that made up my reimagination. The article contained all four letters that Rilke wrote to Werfel, as well as some correspondence between Rilke and his friends. Goldstücker hypothesized that Rilke wrote the letters to Werfel because he felt a sense of kinship stemming from the fact that they had the same birth city.

Now that I had the four letters that Rilke wrote to Werfel, I was ready to begin. My reimagination, as I like to call it, is based primarily on primary sources that I was able to find. Many of these sources were from the Goldstücker article, although I also used Foltin's biography and the letters that Rilke and Marie wrote to each other. I took some liberty in describing emotions, but the skeleton of the story is grounded in fact.

I felt like a sleuth as I read and reread Goldstücker's article and the original letters. I tried to piece together what I felt had happened to find out why the correspondence occurred in the first place and why it failed so quickly. Some of the most profound realizations came from Goldstücker's article, as he discussed the relationship that the city of Prague played in their relationship. Both authors had come from Prague, but both belonged to the German-speaking sect. They were a minority in Prague—strangers to most of the population. Czechs considered them Germans, and Germans considered them Czechs.

Without even meaning to, I had stumbled upon the answer to my original thesis question: namely, why don't Czechs recognize Kafka as one of their own? I did not find the answer, however, in any biography about Kafka. I found this answer in letters written between two of Kafka's countrymen. Czechs do not recognize Kafka as one of
their own for the same reason that they did not recognize Werfel and Rilke. Simply put, Kafka is a Fremde, a stranger. He spoke German and wrote in German. Although most Czechs of his day understood German, their language was Czech. True, very little was written in Czech in those days—but that did not change the fact that Kafka was a German Czech.

My hope in developing a creative project rather than a research-based thesis is that the beauty of these “minor” authors will be discovered by people besides my thesis advisor and the honors college. After spending so much time reading Werfel’s works and the letters that Rilke wrote to Werfel and his other friends, I am driven to share the beauty of these authors’ works with the English-speaking student world. Although I know that all honors theses are made available for everyone at Ball State, I have definite doubts that any student who was not already interested in Rilke and Werfel would be willing to touch a 30-page research paper about them.

Although I don’t have false hope that thousands of Ball State students will flock to the shelves to read my reimagination of the correspondence between Rilke and Werfel, I hope that at least one or two will feel intrigued. By translating these letters from German into English, I am hoping that I have made them more accessible to students besides German majors.

I embarked on this mission to find out why Czechs do not know about Kafka. I ended this mission with the hope of introducing other Czech authors to a scholastic population that knows only about Kafka. The four letters that Rilke wrote to Werfel are but a tiny introduction to the plethora of works available, and I hope that they will intrigue others to delve deeper into the works of these great authors.
I feel that this experience has been even more rewarding than I ever expected it to be. By allowing my curiosity to drive my thesis, I was able to discover two authors that I had previously all but ignored. I felt that I could better understand the bond between all three authors, and I felt that my imagination was reawakened by reading their works and reading their correspondence. I hope that any who read this reimagination will find it as rewarding as I found the process.
January, 1927

As Franz Werfel absorbed the news that Rainer Maria Rilke had died, he was assaulted by a parade of emotions. He mourned the loss of one of the greatest German language authors of their time, and he reflected on the influence that Rilke’s talent had made on his own early works. All at once, he felt himself drawn back into that brief period of time, thirteen years ago, when he had personal contact with Rilke. Surely he should write something in Rilke’s memory, but what should he—what could he write? Their brief acquaintance was so unusual, so saturated with a mixture of admiration and awkwardness, that he wasn’t sure how to express it in a manner fitting to the memory of this master of German poetry.

Clearly, any memorial piece should at least mention Rilke’s communication with Werfel—after all, the established master of poetry took time to distinguish the younger, budding talent with not just one, but four enthusiastic letters. Yet even so many years later, after so much had changed in Werfel’s life and in the lives of people all around him, Werfel found he could not look at the situation through eyes of objectivity. Something about Rilke still seemed so strange, so fremd.

Yes, fremd—that was the most appropriate word to describe his impression of Rilke—not only Rilke, but the entire air that seemed to surround him. Rilke’s acquaintances, his social sphere, even his opinions about the most important elements of life were strange to Werfel, set the two apart from each other. Yet somehow it was
just this very feeling of strangeness, of *Fremdheit*, that drew the two authors to each other in the first place.

*September, 1910*

Seventeen years earlier, Rainer Maria Rilke wove his way through the streets of 1910 Paris, a stranger in a strange world. When he returned to his own living quarters, he felt consumed by the loneliness and tried to escape the seclusion by writing a letter to a friend. As he struggled through the lines of the letter, he began to realize that even he had changed, that he had become a stranger to himself. Later that evening, he turned to the one friend who he knew would always understand—his journal.

11 September 1910

So, people come here to live—I would sooner believe that things die here. I have been out. I saw: *les misérables*. I saw a man who staggered and sank to the ground. The people gathered around him, and that spared me from seeing the rest. I saw a pregnant woman. She hustled laboriously along a tall, warm wall that she touched sometimes as if to convince herself that it was still there. Yes, it was still there. And behind it? I looked at my map: *Maison d’Accouchement*. Good. They would excuse her—she can do that. Further on, Saint-Jacques, a big building with a dome. The map showed Val-de-grâce, the military hospital. I actually didn’t need to know that, but it doesn’t hurt. The alleys began to smell from all sides. It smelled, as much as I could tell, like iodine, like the grease from French fries, like fear. All cities smell in the
summer. Then I saw a stark building; it wasn’t on the map, but above the door was still legible: hotel. Next to the entrance were the prices. I read them. It was not expensive.

And besides these? A child in a stationary stroller: the child was chubby, greenish, and had a pronounced rash on its forehead. It was apparently healing and did not hurt. The child slept; its mouth was open and breathed in iodine, French fries, fear. That was just how it was. The main thing was that people lived. That was the main thing.

I can’t stand to sleep next to the open window. Electric trains rush loudly through my room. Cars drive back and forth underneath me. A door closes. Somewhere a windowpane smashes down; I hear the laughter of the shards of glass, the giggles of the little splinters. And then—suddenly—thudding, locked-in noise from the other side, inside the house. Someone goes up the stairs. A woman screams: “I keep quiet—why don’t you?” The electric trains run around very excitedly, away over me, away over everything. Someone calls. People run, overtake each other. A dog barks. What a relief: a dog. Around morning a rooster even crows, and that is the epitome of wholesomeness. Then I fall asleep immediately.

Those are the sounds. But there is something here that is worse: the silence. I think that sometimes in large fires a moment of such tension occurs that the streams of water drop away, the firemen stop scrambling, no one moves. Silently a black cornice slides down from above, and a high wall, with the fire rising up behind it, sinks down without a sound. Everything stands there with tense shoulders, foreheads wrinkled over their eyes, and waits for the horrible crash.
I wrote a letter today, and I just realized that I have only been here for three weeks. Three weeks anywhere else—in the country for example—could be like a day, but here they are years.

I don't want to write any more letters. How can I tell someone that I am changing? If I am changing, then I am not staying the same person who I was, and I am something else than what I was before—so it is clear that no one knows me now. I am a stranger to them. And to strangers—to people who don't know me—I cannot possibly write. ¹

November, 1913

As Rilke reread these fading words, he reflected on his recent but short acquaintanceship with the young Franz Werfel. Why, he asked himself, had he chosen to do exactly what he recognized as dangerous—why had he written a letter to a complete stranger, believing that the letter would be accepted as anything but a vain attempt at flattery? How had he fooled himself into thinking that this young, headstrong poet would somehow feel endeared to an old man, a washed-up talent like himself?

No, you must be fair, he tried to reason with himself. Werfel was still young. A brilliant artist, yes—but a young man. No one could have changed that. And you DID see something in his works—something that spoke to you, that made you feel that you knew this young man, that you had something in common.

¹ Adapted and translated from “Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge.”
Yes, of course you saw something in common! The antagonistic voice spoke up. You were from the same city—from Prague, that oppressive city where you never felt at home, although you spent your youth there! And you’ve spent all of your days trying to escape that ghost. It’s time to admit it to yourself: you have never had a home. Not in Prague, where you spent your youth, not in Germany, not in Paris where you were truly a foreigner—nowhere. And you thought that this young Franz Werfel would understand—after all, he was also from Prague, trying to escape the same ghosts. Surely he would understand, and you could finally find a sense of belonging. But that’s not what happened, is it? No, you only found more loneliness, more disappointed expectations.

Finally Rilke regained control of his conscience and silenced the battling voices, yet he could not shake the antagonistic voice from his mind. Had it merely been the connection to Prague that made him feel that Werfel was not a stranger, ein Fremder, but rather a kindred spirit, a fellow artist from Prague who would understand Rilke’s unique loneliness? It is true, thought Rilke. This oppressive loneliness has not been helped by leaving Prague. I should have been able to feel like I belonged—at least in my native city—but even there I was a foreigner, ein Fremder. Surely Werfel had felt the same way!

For both Rilke and Werfel stemmed from a unique but small section of Prague—the ghettos hidden around the city that sheltered people who would, indeed, never completely belong. The people who called themselves Czech, yet were, in the eyes of the majority, German. They went to different schools, shared poetry and coffee in different cafés, and spoke German instead of the vernacular Czech. To the large
majority—the other 93% of Prague citizens—these people were *cizinci*—foreigners, *Fremde*.

And though Rilke and Werfel came from different ghettos—Rilke from the upper ghettos, Werfel from the Jewish ghettos—it cannot be doubted that they both shared a feeling of isolation, a unique feeling of homelessness that they tried to flee by leaving the only city that they could conceivably call home. Yet the power of that mysterious city cannot be escaped even by a casual visitor, let alone by one whose very being has been molded by the city. The power oozes from the narrow alleyways, wraps around the lampposts in the early morning fog, and quietly whispers in the dimly lit cafés. It calls to its children when they try to escape it, and its call makes them uneasy and lonely in their new homes.

For years the power of the city had been calling to Rilke, making him lonely even when surrounded by friends. He sought comfort in the lines of his poetry and in the intricate labyrinth of his prose. Even this lone companion, however, had seemed to abandon him, and he felt aged and oppressed by his loneliness. His spirit surged with emotions, but his talent betrayed him and ceased to allow him to shape those emotions into art.

Then, almost out of nowhere, something had appeared that seemed to give new hope to Rilke. After an absence of two years, he returned to Germany in 1913 and discovered a new poet—a poet whose works seemed to weave those same restless emotions into wonderful works of art. Surprised and delighted, he allowed these new works to consume him. Amazed, he flipped through the pages, finding some of his loneliness slip away in exchange for feelings of comfort, of happiness. *Who is this*
young poet who seems to express my own private thoughts so eloquently, so beautifully?

After buying the editions, Rilke had returned home and found himself absorbed, feeling a sense of companionship that he had long since been missing. In his enthusiasm, he found paper and a quill and began to write to this young poet—he must, this instant, tell the poet about the void he has filled. But no, Rilke thought. I must not seem so eager. Surely this brilliant artist finds himself buried under praise from enough strangers already. Tearing up the letter, Rilke thought with disgust that he not only failed to put his emotions into poems—he couldn’t even manage to write letters anymore. Clearly, he thought, I have become a stranger, even to myself.

Yet as the days and weeks passed, Rilke had found himself ever more enchanted by the young poet’s gift. “I read his works almost daily. This adolescent is—I can’t say anything less—a great poet,” he wrote to his friends, trying to quench his urge to write a personal letter to the poet. The magnificence of Werfel’s works shortly became too much for Rilke to resist, however, and a letter had escaped from him and shaped itself into words.

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2 Roughly adopted from a letter to Katharina Kippenberg on August 8. This letter and the following letters were mentioned in an article in Germanistica Pragensia by Eduard Goldstücker (1960).
Ostseebad Heiligendamm
14 August, 1913

For close to three weeks, dear Franz Werfel, I have been reading your books (of which I was previously unaware because I was living away from home), and almost since the first hour in the bookstore when I marveled over the book “we are,” I have been disputing within myself the urge to write you: because eventually, everyone who is honest with themselves might find such letters redundant.

But now, however, it happens that a letter breaks through because I understand more and more how little that which I would write to you has to do with unsolicited approval or even praise. How you are simply the person to whom I am most eager to express my most prolific and heartfelt experiences. It must be that in your works a certain success shines through, the incidence of which I have awaited (regardless whether it comes from myself or from someone else); otherwise I would not have known how so much tranquility could appear inside me, so much enlightenment, repose, and carefree observation. But one other thing was clear to me: that I have indeed never been able to be aware of and observe the coming to light of a poet: the elder and contemporary poets were always there as if they had always been there, and one would approach the clouds, tangled up in the literary gods one was concerned with—now it is splendid for the long-since grown up, how you develop so purely and with all the splendor of your rise impact the world and bring the world to the day.

It would be a happy occasion for me if you were to feel the same and cherish me as much as I you while reading your works on a daily basis.

Rainer Maria Rilke

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3 Translated from the first letter that Rilke wrote to Werfel. This letter and the following letters from Rilke to Werfel were published in an article in Germanistica Pragensia by Eduard Goldstücker.
August, 1913

As Werfel finished reading the letter, he felt a strong rush of emotion, though he was not sure whether he felt honored or threatened. Yes, of course he felt honored that such a famous poet—indeed, the most famous of his time, had recognized him! Yet at the same time, questions raced through his mind, plaguing him with uncertainty and skepticism.

_How did he come about my books? I know that I have not sent any examples of my writing to him! Why did he write me a personal letter? Surely if he was so impressed, he could have easily published a review in a magazine and avoided the awkwardness of writing a letter to a complete stranger! But still it is amazing that he is directly praising “We are!” Such an honor!_

_But...what does he want out of me? He mentions that he has been awaiting a certain success. Does he think that I can continue his work as an artist? Does he want to take me under his wing, make himself the teacher, me the apprentice?_

This latter question made Werfel indignant to the very core. _Does Rilke think that his style will still continue, that we aren't even now entering into a new era of literature? He thinks that I can finish the work he began, learn from him, and build upon what he has already done? Indeed—I am honored—but Rilke must not understand me correctly. For I am not continuing from this line of poets, those he mentions—the older and contemporary poets—my generation is beginning a new era, and I will be the leader of that era just as Rilke was the leader of the most recent era._
As he would again struggle thirteen years later, Werfel critically considered what to write. *He hopes that I will cherish him as he cherishes me.* Of course I will—but he is long since established, and everyone who reads German literature cherishes him already. *To think that I wouldn’t already cherish him—indeed, that is an unbelievable thought!*

When the initial excitement of receiving a letter from such a great master had subsided, Werfel was able to formulate an appropriate response. *Surely he recognized some affinity in my works, he thinks we have something in common—I will acknowledge that. Yet at the same time I will not mention the thought of him becoming a teacher for me—yes, that is an appropriate way to handle this. I can acknowledge that we have something in common, that I am honored, yet not give him unreasonable hope that I will become his apprentice. For indeed, we do have things in common, but I still am not sure what I should do. I am torn by confusion and admiration!*

Still filled with a mixture of confusion and delight at having received a letter from the revered poet, Werfel signed his name to the letter with a sense of satisfaction and apprehension. Would he receive another letter from Rilke? And if he did, what would that letter contain—and how would he respond to further suggestions of a teacher/apprentice relationship? At the same time, Werfel was excited and intrigued at the possibility of beginning a friendship with Rilke. Uttering a soft sigh, Werfel sealed the letter, wondering what string of events this simple letter would set in motion.
Rather than feeling relieved by finally surrendering to the urge to contact Werfel, Rilke found himself even more consumed by a desire to read the works of this young talent. What’s more, he embarked on a mission: to introduce the works of this young poet to his friends. In letters he mentioned the talent, in person he read from the books and recited poems from memory. Not only was he overjoyed; he was also astonished by the enthusiastic response his friends gave him. For the first time in months—no, indeed, in years—he felt himself surrounded by people again. They hung on his every word; they couldn’t wait to hear another line from the book he was reading. Again, his antagonistic side spoke up. *They aren’t entranced by you—no, they’re entranced by this other poet.*

Ah, yes, Rilke thought. They *are* entranced by this other poet—but was it not I who first introduced him to them? I am their link, their connection to this talent, and they are indebted to me for introducing them to this source of such pure joy! They belong to me again, they are again my *friends* as they sit around listening to the words of this young poet.

Rilke’s anticipation grew as he awaited an answer from Werfel. As soon as he received the response, he was filled with an almost inexplicable joy. Could it be possible that he had connected to this young poet? A young poet who could carry on his own work now that his imagination seemed to be fruitless? *Don’t get too excited...the response was fairly vague—yes, it was polite, but it didn’t show a great deal of interest. Yet...the interest is still there!*

Rilke found himself trying to devise ways that he and this young Werfel could meet, could share their artistic viewpoints and ideas. Yes, he knew now—they should
meet in person. He felt a connection, and surely Werfel felt something similar. But how could he suggest such a meeting without seeming presumptuous? *If I suggest something casually—that I will be in a certain city, perhaps we could meet there...this would not show too much eagerness—no, I would not have to go out of my way at all. I will indeed be traveling frequently—I can perchance be in the same area as this young poet. And hopefully Werfel will understand, will want to meet with me, to share our viewpoints, to diminish our loneliness.*
Berlin, Hospiz des Westens,
Margurgerstrasse 4
21 August 1913

My Friend,

I travel and read here and there your beautiful verses to my friends and must not even always read because, despite my short memory, I know “Father and Son” by heart and can say it wherever it assumes power over me. And next I will also be so far with “Chapel of Ladies.” The people all wish for your books; with the grownups, “We Are;” with the children, “The Friend of the World.” My little daughter ordered it quite urgently for herself yesterday.

Your good letter, from which I learned of so many connections that I did not know about, did not reach me in Heiligendamm, “where there are tennis tournaments,” but rather here (what isn’t here in Berlin, I might ask). I will still be traveling often during the next few weeks—here only shortly, then Silesia, then Munich, and Leipzig is on the program for part of October—will you be there?

Your

R.M. Rilke
Even Werfel was surprised at his own reaction when he opened yet another letter from the great poetic master. He was again honored and apprehensive—honored that Rilke would suggest they meet in person, but apprehensive that he would expect Werfel to become an apprentice. Not sure how to respond, Werfel recovered the first letter he had received and examined it. Perhaps by referring to the first letter in more detail—indeed by sympathizing with Rilke, by acknowledging in greater detail his generosity—Werfel could avoid directly commenting on the suggestion that they meet.

My dear Rilke, he began. Again I am honored by your acknowledgement. To receive recognition from such an established master is certainly a wonderful privilege for me and makes me extremely happy. I feel that you will understand when I confess that I sometimes view my own works with an unpleasant feeling, similar to the way one would later view his untruthfulness. The fact that you are endeared to my poems comforts me like an ancient belief that you expressed in your first letter—that one would approach the clouds, tangled up in the literary gods one was concerned with. I cannot express how your recognition fills me with a greater courage, a will to continue building upon the poems that I have written so far. Yours, Franz Werfel.4

Indeed, this response contained little more information than what Werfel allowed in the first letter, but so must it remain. Unless Werfel openly expressed his fears, his apprehension, in truth his unwillingness to become an apprentice of the older poet, he would be forced to give evasive answers—answers that calmed the older poet, made him feel appreciated, yet did not allow him to glean false hope of becoming a teacher.

4 Re-imagined using clues from Lore B. Foltin's book, Franz Werfel. Unlike Goldstücker, she had access to Werfel's replies to Rilke and contains hints of their contents in her biography of Werfel.
Werfel’s letter had the desired effect on the poetic master, as Rilke felt a mixture of disappointment and joy as he read Werfel’s response. This letter definitely seemed more personal, implying an even deeper connection between the two. Yet it did not even reference Rilke’s idea to meet in Leipzig. Clearly Werfel purposely neglected this idea, but why? Rilke instantly decided that he would not falter in his desire to meet Werfel—he must pursue a meeting, and this time more specifically.

Such luck had presented itself that the day immediately preceding, several of Rilke’s friends had invited him to attend a premier in Hellerau. The premier would take place on October 5—as it was now September, the date seemed most advantageous, and Rilke was excited at the thought of meeting Werfel among friends. Yes, Rilke thought, meeting him in this situation will be much less threatening—both for young Werfel and for myself. He can attend the premiere for the simple joy of attending a premiere, and we can meet each other in a situation that will certainly not be threatening.

Without hesitating a moment longer, Rilke formulated his response to Werfel. Because Rilke had been traveling, he knew that Werfel must have been waiting for two weeks, possibly even longer; the letter had not reached Rilke as quickly as might be desired. Time seemed to press ever more upon them, and Rilke’s enthusiasm for Werfel’s works had not waned. In fact, receiving such a sympathetic response from Werfel encouraged him.
My dear Franz Werfel,

No one—no one—knows better the multiple departures from one’s own accomplishments—thus I recently understood your letter completely, but greatness cannot help but pass through us, cannot help but stumble through us: we are, like the big riverbeds in the desert, made from the power of the stream that does not belong to us.

Dear one, it stays always the same for me—I read your books, and always other people are there again who listen to me, and how they listen to me, with all the listening power of their lives.

What a joy it was to find the beautiful new poem in the Rundschau magazine.

I decided just today to go to the Claudel-Premiere in Hellerau with several local friends; if I’m not mistaken, the premier will be on the 5th of October; will we see one another there? It could happen that I can come from Hellerau to Leipzig and stay for a few weeks there. I would promise myself that the most heartfelt part of the trip would be for me to see you often; what would be more natural, since your works have become a part of my heart for an entire season, have become a heavenly influence and inner world.

Your

R.M. Rilke
As Rilke eagerly anticipated Werfel’s response, however, he felt a new emotion surge up within him, reaching to the innermost depths of his fears. He felt a terrible feeling of unalterable momentum, similar to a child who has begun a long sprint to the end of a dock, only to look into the water below and wonder what unpleasant surprises lurked in the dark blue pool. For as Rilke immersed himself ever deeper in Werfel’s lines of poetry, he began to notice characteristics that spoke to him like warnings whispered from a dark alleyway.

In Rilke’s world, mankind was only an object, a frivolity to be left behind like one casts aside an old toy upon reaching adulthood. Nature was the supreme power, superceding the merely superficial powers of mankind. Indeed, these beliefs had brought Rilke loneliness, the same loneliness that he attempted to escape through his poetry. Rilke saw his loneliness as a divine type of loneliness, however: loneliness out of choice, resulting from the realization that nature is supreme. This same realization made Rilke feel that he was not the voice of mere mankind, but rather of something cosmically greater.

As Rilke learned more of Werfel’s poems by heart, reciting them to himself and to his friends, he began to notice that Werfel assigned more importance to mankind than Rilke felt appropriate. “You are right about Werfel; although he is lonely, he seems to still thrive on the common man—more than on nature,” Rilke wrote to a friend. Yet Rilke could not cast aside the admiration for this poet so easily. Telling himself that Werfel’s ideas stemmed from a naive and youthful outlook of the world, Rilke searched even more for those elements that he felt linked his fate with that of the young poet. For after all—Rilke had already invited Werfel to the premiere, had already begun the race

5 Written to Eva Cassirer, as detailed in Goldstücker’s article.
to the end of the dock, and though he thought he saw serpents swirling in the water below him, he had too much momentum to slow his fall.

And so it happened that the two poets met at the premiere a mere two weeks after Werfel received the letter from Rilke. Rilke’s continued interest had spawned a corresponding curiosity in Werfel. As he had felt from the very first letter, Werfel wanted to know what characteristic exuded from his works that attracted Rilke to him. Having already tried to politely cast aside the suggestion of a personal meeting, Werfel felt that the best way to alleviate his curiosity and to satisfy Rilke’s interest was to meet at the premiere in Hellerau.

As Werfel stepped into the ballroom following the premiere, he felt immediately out of place. The baronesses and princesses maneuvered delicately through the crowd, seeming almost to float. The men who hung on their every words seemed entranced—yet they somehow seemed to belong even as they followed the baronesses around the room with their eyes. Two of the most elegant women seemed spellbound by a serious looking man who hovered, almost aloof, in the corner.

Suddenly, to Werfel’s surprise, this man removed himself from his shelter in the corner and slowly walked towards the young poet. *This, this is Rilke?* Werfel thought to himself. On one side was the baroness Sidonie Nádherný, on the other the beautiful Lou Andreas-Salomé. As Rilke introduced himself to Werfel, the world seemed to spin, sounds became akin to the dim buzzing of bees, and Werfel could barely concentrate to hear the introductions.

Gradually the sounds became more distinguished, and Werfel was aware that not only Rilke, but also his two companions were praising Werfel, asking him how he
Thomas enjoyed Claudel's premiere, seeming truly interested in him. Never before had Werfel met with such distinguished people and heard them praise his works! It was exciting, but at the same time Werfel felt uncomfortable. For some reason the praise felt undeserved.

Later that night, when the sounds of the ballroom had faded and Werfel sat contemplatively in his room, he reviewed the events of the evening in his mind. Truly, much of the evening was a blur, but Werfel attempted to place the pieces together as one labors over a difficult puzzle. His reaction upon seeing Rilke was completely unlike any that he had anticipated. Despite the praise that Rilke had showered on him, Werfel still found that he felt somehow unworthy of the attention.

As Werfel allowed his sight to lose focus and the lights blurred into a vague cloud, he realized that this uncomfortable feeling had nothing to do with meeting the author. No, this uncomfortable feeling had begun as soon as he entered the room and saw the baronesses and princesses floating gracefully among each other, their elegant dresses seeming to blend into the background. Indeed the entire atmosphere was stifling, uncomfortable, foreign—*fremd*.

For almost the entire evening, Werfel had felt as if someone had displaced him in a strange environment, one where people flattered him, tried to make him one of their own, greeted him with smiles. Yet beneath the surface—as the colors swirled into one, the sounds became a vague din, and the smells became almost suffocating as they blended together—Werfel had a sense that he was still all alone, although he was surrounded by people. He had found himself in a different sphere, one in which he didn't understand the physics, could not recognize the sounds, and did not know how to
relax. Eventually Werfel fell into a light sleep, and his dreams were haunted with dread about the days to come yet sparkled with the dim possibility that he would feel more comfortable the next day.

Werfel kept his eyes shut for several minutes when he awoke the next morning, hoping that they would open to the comfortable surroundings of his own room, telling him that the awkwardness, the strangeness of the night before had been but a dream. To his dismay, his eyes betrayed him by opening upon a strange room in a strange city, and even his ears conspired to allow a barrage of unusual noises and boisterous exclamations into his head. Alas, he had attended the premiere, had felt himself bumbling awkwardly among the high society. Slowly inching his way out of bed, he tried to paint the possibilities of the coming days in a positive light but nevertheless returned to the dread of associating with *Fremde*, strangers he did not understand.

To Werfel's relief, the next few days passed with much greater speed than he had anticipated. In the company of Rilke—sometimes alone, sometimes accompanied by Lou Andreas-Salomé or the baroness Sidonie Nádherny—the time seemed to soar as they discussed life, politics, and their poetry. Although Werfel found that he could relate better to Rilke than he had first dreaded after the premiere in Hellerau, something foreign, something *fremd* remained between the two.

As Werfel strolled next to the great poet, listening to him describe his feelings about the most important subjects, he was struck by the even the most simple differences. Unlike the Bohemian German that Werfel spoke, peppered with accents of Czech and Austrian dialect, Rilke's German was pure. Werfel had expected that at least Rilke's language would sound similar to his own; after all, they had both been
educated in the same city of Prague, and so many of the Prague Germans had a sense of pride in their unique dialect. To Werfel's ear, the Rilke's German sounded not only foreign—it sounded homeless, learned in a city far away from Prague, indeed a city where people learn the language but make no effort to personalize it, to own it.

After Werfel had listened to this foreign German for hours on end as it recited verses from various poems, he looked up to be confronted by a new surprise. Rilke was courteously asking Werfel to accompany him for dinner—but to Werfel's chagrin, the sign upon the door indicated that it was a vegetarian establishment. More than the dialect difference, this preference shocked Werfel to the core. Like most of his countrymen would have done, he politely suggested that they stop for coffee instead.

As they sat in the coffee shop, Werfel found his opportunity to explore Rilke's attitude about Prague. By asking with genuine curiosity about Rilke's travels around the world, Werfel finally brought the conversation back to their home city. Rilke's heart seemed to return to Prague along with the conversation. His eyes filled with a combination of sadness, longing, and happiness as he thought about the city, and he spoke with tenderness of his feelings. Only for Prague did Rilke seem to have so much emotion, yet even in Prague he had never felt at home. Over the years he had changed his address, his dialect, even his taste in food—yet his heart remained in the city.

As they parted ways a couple days later, Werfel felt that he had made a slight connection with this great poet, though he knew in his heart that the two would never be close friends. Driven by a stimulating conversation, Werfel shouted as they parted ways, "The main thing is the human being!" Rilke turned slowly around, rolling the words over in his head. "No, "he said slowly, almost sadly, "for me the main thing is not
the human being. Men are foreign to me, I see them pursuing incomprehensible activities. The women—they stir me. \(^6\)

As Werfel suspected, Rilke’s shocked look indicated dismay bordering on disgust. From Rilke’s point of view, the meeting with Werfel had been just short of a failure. The young man seemed altogether different from the wise poet who had composed the lines that Rilke admired every evening. At first Rilke thought that Werfel exhibited a type of admirable naïveté that caused him to remain so dedicated to the traditions of the home city. As the two got to know each other, however, Rilke began to view this naïveté rather as immaturity caused by too few excursions into the world beyond the borders of Bohemia. Werfel’s words began to grate on him and to cause him to doubt the talent that he had previously cherished.

Rather than stopping in Leipzig, as he had planned, Rilke returned immediately home. He desired to be alone so that he could reflect over this meeting and seek a reason for its failure. He composed a letter to his dear friend, Marie, telling her of his disappointment. Tearing up the letter, he determined to rewrite the entire letter in French—somehow composing it in a foreign language allowed him to set some distance between this person who now viewed Werfel in a harsher light and that side of him who had previously supported the young talent so enthusiastically.

\(^6\) Quoted in Goldstücker’s article
Paris, 17 Rue-Campagne-Premiere
21 October 1913

I met Franz Werfel very often in Hellerau and in Dresden. It was sad. "A Jew boy," Sidie Nádhéry said, and she was not completely wrong. I was very prepared to welcome this adolescent with open arms but instead I kept them on my back like a detached person who is just walking along.

Ten times a day I would tell myself that it was he who had created all these wonders. When he was not here I could still become passionate about him, but when he was here I was so embarrassed that I could not even look him in the face.

However, he was not at all unpleasant. He was extremely intelligent, maybe even too intelligent for his literature, which would lose something if it were to be considered carefully and delicately by a Jewish spirit who would be far too familiar with his material.

But the value of his work is such that it will undoubtedly be possible for me, one day or another, to go back to a point of view that is less negative and more valid than the one I currently have.

For the first time I felt the insincerity of my mentality—the mentality that feels free from everything that holds us and yet manages to talk about it anyway, feeding on a quasi-negative experience; the spirit that penetrates things that it could not have like a poison that gets into everything to take its revenge for not being part of an organism.

Your

R.M. Rilke
Several days later, while he was reading Marie’s reply, he felt almost foolish for having believed that he could cultivate a relationship with this stranger. Marie indeed did not seem surprised by the results of the meeting. *I do not want to say that I told you so, because I do not want to fall short of the respect one owes the poets. However, I am not at all surprised by your impression of Werfel. I was sure he would be like that. I have, for sure, much admired how you described him to me, but there was something that, from time to time, instinctively repulsed me.*

Feeling as though reality had just thrown him to the ground, Rilke reached for his journal to escape again to the world of words. As he lifted the journal from the desk drawer, a thin sheet of paper danced gracefully to the floor. Eager for any distraction to tear him from his thoughts about Werfel, he lifted the paper and began to read it, the words burning a hole in his heart as he realized their relevance.

“I don’t want to write any more letters. How can I tell someone that I am changing? If I am changing, then I am not staying the same person who I was, and I am something else than what I was before—so it is clear that no one knows me now. I am a stranger to them. And to strangers—to people who don’t know me—I cannot possibly write.”

And so it was that Rilke uncovered his journal from 3 years before and began to question why he wrote Werfel a letter in the first place. His mind journeyed back through the ghettos of Prague, remembering the loneliness he had felt even as a child in his home city. With sadness, Rilke realized that he had begun to look at Prague as something *fremd*—he had tried, unsuccessfully, to escape it—yet the city kept calling him to return. When Rilke denied the great city’s wishes by traveling the world but ignoring Prague, the city had called to him in the voice of the young poet.

Hastily recognizing the power of the city, Rilke determined to remain staunch in his loneliness, to remain comfortable in his solitude. He glanced at the volumes of
Werfel's poems, which had begun to gather dust on the shelf, and decided that he would leave them there. Perhaps someday he would be able to withstand the power of the city and learn to appreciate Werfel for his poetry alone—without searching for kinship.

Weeks passed, and Rilke found himself looking once again favorably upon the volumes of poems on the shelf. Now and then he would dust them off and read some of his favorite verses, always newly amazed at their beauty. While strolling through the streets in early 1914, he succumbed to the urge to venture into the bookstore in search of Werfel's new volume of poems. Rather than reading the poems in the bookstore, however, he returned with them to his home, and there he found himself again amazed by Werfel's talent.

The poems are there that shake away everything that was wrong and constrictive about our meeting. Can one doubt that here is his genuine nature and that the other is merely the young man through which the poet works? Again I would go through all fire for him if it came to that. Even in Werfel's poems, the past (his own, and otherwise relying on general principles) presses through to the surface, driving a contrary, fleeting, enormous, staggering, nostalgic, and all too true element. I had always had a suspicion about that element: that it was stuck and stagnate in those oftentimes intrusive Prague houses. This element tumbles and falls out of his verses into awareness.\(^7\)

At last he could no longer resist the urge to write one final letter to Werfel but promised himself that he would resist the power of the city that tried to persuade him to once again pursue a deeper friendship.

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\(^7\) Written in a letter to Marie von Thurn und Taxis on February 24, 1914, several weeks after he wrote his final letter to Werfel.
17 Rue Campagne-Premiere XIV
Paris
1 February 1914

My dear Werfel,

I must write to you this minute, just as the great surge of your new poems came over me. God is marvelously on your side, may the jubilation of his greatness be in you and reward you. I cannot say any more, because it certainly can’t be said, but your art makes us grow to an ever higher design, your art is right, it will be proven right. If you allow yourself to go in the art and carry it, if you throw all of the rushing of your heart to it, if you die in the narrowness of each thing, so that each thing will be resurrected in you and will be enraptured in its blessedness.

But I do not know which is the most beautiful—Hekuba? Der Held? Die Prozession?—I do not know. With your voice I almost read “Eines alten Lehrers Stimme in Traum.” thinking about the evenings on the terrace.

Dear Werfel, you will have asked yourself sometimes “how did it happen that this person to whom I gave the happiest joys during the entire summer (without even wanting to!) completely forget me after we pleasantly met each other?”

This has to do with the fact that I live in a ravenous state of loneliness, only write the most essential letters (essential also meant in reference to this letter) and have barred my doors so tightly that every acquaintance, indeed every imagination of an acquaintance stays foreign for weeks, for months. I know this about myself and must let it be allowed, whether it now leads anywhere or only harms itself in the open. So please do not take any negative conclusions from this behavior—the thought of writing you comes often in ink, for many people write to me about your books when you are busy with them. I also heard of your reading in Berlin through such friends, who followed them with the innermost involvement.

Heartfelt and with admiration,

Your

R.M. Rilke
January, 1927

As Werfel reread the final letter he received from Rilke, he was again struck by the admiration that this great author had shown towards him. After reflecting on their brief correspondence and on the feeling of loss that both had experienced when their short communication came to an end, Werfel felt prepared to write a memorial piece for the Berlin Tagebuch.

I had received at that time a letter from Rilke. Both of my first volumes had been published, and I know for sure that I had not sent him the volumes out of disbelieving awe. But he did not only find the books and read them; he sat down and distinguished me with a letter—and what is more than both, he took the trouble to scout out my address from friends. This special effort, that was evident by his letter, made me the happiest. The letter was very lovely, one of those letters that Rilke sent to many addresses as a monologue of his loneliness; letters that are poems in crystalline condition; letters in whose essence the most wonderful similes were released to give them a magical flavor, thereby removing all directness from them. Works of art of a man who is gifted with words for every emotion, who can only write in poems everything he has to say!

For me the letter had a priceless meaning. I had erred in every good and bad way at the beginning, grew up without direction, halfhearted and boastful at the same time, but then reassurance came from a master and gave me new security.®

® Translated from an excerpt of the article contained in Goldstücker’s article. Unfortunately I was unable to obtain a complete copy of the article for myself.
As Werfel continued to write, the letters seemed to flow from the pen of their own accord. At the bottom of the final page, he paused and looked up. He finally, after thirteen years of not understanding, realized why he never felt that he could relate to Rilke. His sphere, he wrote, had something Fremdes for me, something sapless and sophisticated, that strained me and made me tired.

Thirteen years after Rilke had described his meeting with Werfel as fremd, Werfel had finally found the same word to describe Rilke. As Werfel reflected on the words, he marveled at the irony that someone who was born in and educated in the same city could seem so foreign. Perhaps, he thought, it is exactly because they were born in the same city—Prague—that made them foreign, to themselves and to others. They were born as Fremde, and no matter where they moved or what disguise they wore, they would remain fremd.
Bibliography


