

Rainer Maria Rilke, Letter to Clara Westhoff Rilke (November 7, 1918)

Abstract

Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) wrote very little poetry during the war years. His fragile psyche was traumatized by three weeks in a military training camp and two years in the War Records Office, where he had to transform horrifying frontline reports into heroic propaganda. This letter to his wife expresses the brief exhilaration of the revolutionary moment at the end of the war. The mass meeting at the Hotel Wagner described in this letter occurred on Monday, November 4, 1918. The social mix of participants at the meeting was itself a sign of change, from bourgeois intellectuals like the famous sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) and the pacifist Ludwig Quidde (1858-1941), to the anarchist Erich Mühsam (1878-1934), ordinary students, workers, and soldiers. The “pale young worker” Rilke quotes initially addresses the distinguished speakers with the formal “you” (*Sie*), but then, caught up in the revolutionary spirit, changes to the informal *Ihr*. Rilke’s postscript describes the proclamation of the Bavarian republic by socialist Kurt Eisner (1867-1919).

Source

Munich, November 7, 1918

Dear Clara,

Your letter (of October 28th) with its great free breath blew in ahead of the events. We here in the city have now to go instead through all the ups and downs and the many newspapers,

the hundred repugnant rumors and at every hesitation in the strife of that which finally has come, one's heart stops as though this future, still going on foot through the crowd, might stumble or turn back again.

I was so busy watching and listening, and above all hoping, that I overlooked how long it must have been since I had written you both. [...]

In the last few days Munich has given up some of its emptiness and quiet, the tensions of the moment are noticeable here too, even though between Bavarian temperaments they don't

act in an exactly spiritually elevating manner. Everywhere gatherings in the beer halls, almost every evening, everywhere speakers, among whom Professor Jaffe is of the first prominence, and where the halls aren't big enough, gatherings of thousands out of doors. I too was among thousands Monday evening in the Hotel Wagner; Professor Max Weber of Heidelberg, national economist, who is regarded as one of the best minds and as a good speaker, spoke, after him in the discussion the anarchistically overstrained Mühsam, and then students, men who had been four years at the front, all so simple and frank and of-the-people. And although they sat around the beer-tables and between the tables so that the waitresses only ate their way through the human structure like wood-worms, it wasn't at all stifling, not even for breathing; the fumes of beer and smoke and people did not affect one uncomfortably, one hardly noticed them, so important was it and so above all immediately clear that the things could be said whose turn has come at last, and that the simplest and most valuable of these things, in so far as they were to some extent made easily accessible, were grasped by the enormous multitude with a heavy massive approval. Suddenly a pale young worker stood up, spoke quite simply: "Did you, or you, or you,

any of you," he said, "make the armistice offer? and yet we ought to do that, not those gentlemen up there; if we take possession of a radio station and speak, we common people to the common people yonder, there will be peace at once." I can't repeat it half so well as he expressed it; suddenly, when he had said that, a difficulty assailed him, and with a moving gesture towards Weber, Quidde and the other professors who stood by him on the platform, he continued: "Here, these professor gentlemen know French, they will help us to say it right, the way we mean it [...]." Such moments are wonderful, and how we have had to do without them in this very Germany where only invective found words, or submission, which in its way was after all but a sharing in power of those who submitted. [...]

P.S. Friday morning early.

We have a remarkable night behind us. A soldiers', peasants' and workers' council has now been set up here too, with Kurt Eisner as first president. The whole first page of the *Münchener Neueste* is taken up by a decree he has issued, through which the Bavarian Republic explains that peace and security are assured the inhabitants. The night's enterprise was preceded by a gathering on the Theresienwiese attended by a hundred and twenty thousand people. Now it only remains to be hoped that this unusual insurrection will engender sense in people's heads and not go on beyond to fatal intoxication. So far everything seems quiet and one cannot but grant that the time is right when it tries to take big steps.

Source: Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke*, Volume Two, 1910–1926, translated by Jane Bannard Greene and M.D. Herter Norton. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1947, 1948, pp. 179–81.

Source of original German text: Rainer Maria Rilke, „ . . . mit dem großen freien Atem“, in *Weimar, Ein Lesebuch zur deutschen Geschichte 1918–1933*, edited by Heinrich August Winkler und Alexander Cammann. Munich: C.H. Beck, 1997, pp. 44–46.

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