

2010

Working with Youth: In Search of the Natality of the Teacher

Chris Higgins

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/jec>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Higgins, Chris (2010) "Working with Youth: In Search of the Natality of the Teacher," *Journal of Educational Controversy*: Vol. 5 : No. 1
, Article 15.

Available at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/jec/vol5/iss1/15>

This Special Section 2 is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-reviewed Journals at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Educational Controversy by an authorized editor of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

ARTICLE

Working with Youth: In Search of the Natality of the Teacher

for Maxine

Chris Higgins

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

With respect to sympathetic curiosity, unbiased responsiveness, and openness of mind, we may say that the adult should be growing in childlikeness.

- John Dewey (1916, p. 50)

A teacher in search of his/her own freedom may be the only kind of teacher who can arouse young persons to go in search of their own.

- Maxine Greene (1988, p. 14)

Overture

In teacher education, what one says about teaching is probably less important than how one addresses teachers. One of the things that make Maxine Greene's work singular and singularly important is her mode of address as a teacher educator. In her classes and her writings alike, she never forgets that she is speaking *to* teachers, and that in doing so she is speaking to human beings. This is not to say that others address teachers in an inhuman way. It is simply to point out that Greene reaches out to teachers, again and again, as fellow inhabitants of a set of typically human existential predicaments. Nor is this to suggest that she ignores the teacher *qua* teacher. To the contrary, she views teaching as a uniquely rich and important project, and personal projects are central to the ethical, existential terrain she is interested in.

From *Teacher as Stranger* (1973) to the latest posting on The Maxine Greene Foundation website (<http://www.maxinegreene.org/index.html>), Greene has been working to make visible the person in the role of teacher, and even “to make that person visible to himself” (1973, p. 271). Time and again, she has urged teachers to take an “interest in thinking about what it means to choose to be a teacher” (Greene, 1987, p. 181). She has offered us tireless and eloquent reminders that teaching is a transaction between selves in process, persons in need of meaningful projects and freedoms worth taking (see, e.g., Greene, 1986, pp. 76-79). She reminds us that the individual teacher, like any individual, needs some sort of studio space—some opportunity for retreat, reflection, and recreation—if she is to cultivate herself through her work (1973, p. 290). She reminds us that teachers also must fear the isolation that vitiates genuine action, which requires the catalysis and witnessing of others. And she reminds us that we are beginners, beings capable of breaking with the taken for granted, the routine and the mechanical (see, e.g., Greene, 1978, pp. 26-27; 1979). Greene's path-breaking work on these questions is the inspiration for the essay that follows. I explore the existential meanings, risks, and rewards of teaching through a close reading of two writers with whom she has frequently been in dialogue: Rainer Maria Rilke and Hannah Arendt.

Teaching and Natality: Recovery of an Untimely Question

Why teach? What draws us to this daunting practice and what sustains us there in the face of its inevitable difficulties? What sort of love does this labor express? Why might the practice of teaching be worth putting at the center of one's life?

One of the most stirring answers ever given to such questions appears in the last paragraph of Hannah Arendt's (1977) essay, “The Crisis of Education”:

Education is the point at which we decide if we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, not to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common

world. (p. 196)

For Arendt, one joins the educational task by making a decision, but this is no mere career choice. It is a life-altering decision prompted by an alarming situation. Arendt's idea is that the world we inhabit is a constructed one of meanings and projects. This human world is fragile, because without new perspectives and fresh infusions of hope, dynamic meanings ossify into inert signs and live projects collapse into lifeless habits. What saves us, not once and for all but again and again, is the potential in the young to undertake "something unforeseen by us."

Arendt calls this human capacity for beginnings *natality*. "It is in the nature of a beginning," Arendt (1998) writes in *The Human Condition*, "that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before" (pp. 177-178). If we need this reminder, it is because we tend to use the word *beginning* too loosely. We say that we "began the day with a cup of coffee" or "began the article with a quotation," but such starts do not constitute beginnings in Arendt's special sense unless they mark a break with business as usual. A true beginning taps into our individual distinctiveness and spontaneity. If you have heard an infant laugh for the first time, you will know what I mean. The sound comes as if from nowhere. By the time you have located it in your child, you then face the question of what sort of crying or coughing it could be. It is only after you have summoned a new conception of laughing and of your child that you are able to put the two together. Such beginnings are the exceptions, to be sure. As a rule, everyday life is a constant continuing. No matter how estranged from our natalty we become, though, the possibility to begin anew is always there, vouchsafed by the fact that each of us once made this radical beginning of infancy. According to Arendt (1998), every time we initiate a genuine, surprising action, it is like a "second birth" which echoes our first (p. 176).

Each new generation, then, represents an invaluable resource for the existing social order whose guiding conventions have once again become stale, pinched, and increasingly uninhabitable. This fact does not lead Arendt to envision an education of minimum interference as Rousseau famously advocates for the young Emile. To the contrary, she argues that in order to renew the common world, newcomers must first be initiated into it. For Arendt (1977), taking responsibility for the world includes faithfully representing the world to the young as it is, saying in effect: "This is our world" (p. 189). A Summerhillian disavowal of educational authority and influence is just as likely to nullify natalty as an overly dogmatic initiation to current conventions. In other words, if we want the young to say something new, we must avoid both the extreme of telling them what to say and that of withholding from them the existing modes of expression. Either way, this would be to "strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new" (1997, p. 196).

Thus, for Arendt, teachers operate in a crucial space of negotiations between the mature and the uninitiated, between tradition and innovation. Teachers strive to initiate the young into the fund of established meanings, but in such a way that their capacity for spontaneity is safeguarded and nurtured. What draws us to this activity, according to Arendt, is love for the fragile, common world and a sense of responsibility. At a certain point in our lives, she seems to suggest, we recognize that we can no longer take the world for granted as a stage for our actions, but must take care that our dramas will not be the last.

Later I will want to say more about this passage and the vision of human action that undergirds it, but first I want to juxtapose it with another passage. In the fourth of his letters to Franz Kappus—collected together in the beloved little volume *Letters to a Young Poet*—Rainer Maria Rilke (1954) offers this advice:

You are so young, so before all beginnings, and I want to beg you, as much as I can, dear sir, to be patient towards all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to *love the questions themselves* like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer. (pp. 34-35; emphasis in original)

By this point in their correspondence, Kappus has begun to trust Rilke with his most persistent worries and personal questions. Kappus is wondering whether he has chosen the right career, torn between the sheer impracticality of poetry and the deadening conventionality of the military life. He is wrestling with questions about companionship, love, and sex; he is wondering how to be true to himself and how to connect with others. And he is looking for solutions. How does Rilke respond to this knot of existential perplexities? He does not refuse the role of advisor, but neither does he take up this role in the usual way. In fact, he tells Kappus that it is almost impossible for one person to give advice to another. Instead of offering solutions for Kappus's problems, Rilke counsels patience towards what is "unsolved." Instead of offering answers to his questions, he urges Kappus to "love the questions themselves" (p. 35).

Worries and questions, Rilke seems to suggest, are valuable in their own right and should not be treated as problems to be solved. But why is this? To answer this question, we must look more closely at his opening words to Kappus. “You are so young,” Rilke writes, “so before all beginnings.” I suppose we could understand the second part of this sentence simply as poetic flourish, as if Rilke were saying, “you are so young, so very young.” Instead, what if we simply note that if one is before all beginnings, then there is no continuing, only beginning anew. Suddenly we are back to the first passage and to Arendt's concept of natality. Indeed, Rilke's work is, like Arendt's, full of evocations of child-like vision and the idea, as he tells Kappus, that “beginning is in itself always so beautiful” (p. 49).

Once we see that both passages are concerned with natality, we can read the Rilke quotation as extending the line of thought in Arendt. By the time he enlists Rilke as a mentor, Kappus's initiation into a language and a culture is well underway. He has long ago begun to learn the conventional names for things, but Kappus still finds it difficult to formulate his inner life in these terms. Something in him seems to exceed and resist such labels. This is Kappus' natality, his capacity to initiate and to surprise us. Such genuinely new actions cannot be adequately described in the existing fund of meanings. This is why Rilke urges Kappus to leave this room locked, cherishing the fact that there is a part of him written in such a “foreign tongue” that it resists translation. Rilke wants Kappus to see this natal, irreducible individuality as a resource, both for himself and the world. Like Arendt, Rilke would rather see the young poet introduce new understandings of love, work, and relationship, than accept the conventional wisdom about such things.

If each of these passages concerns the importance of safeguarding natality, what would make them complementary rather than identical would be their differing modes of address. Whereas Rilke hails his interlocutor—and *Letters to a Young Poet* hails its readers—with the words, “you are so young,” Arendt (1977) addresses us as members of the parent generation, asking us to “decide whether we love our children” (p. 196). Rilke calls on young people to love their personal questions rather than close them down with conventional answers.^[2] Arendt calls on us as adults to love the world enough to take responsibility for it. In other words, each thinker's devotion to natality leads them to name a kind of love and a developmental ideal appropriate to a different stage in life. Taken together, the passages seem to describe a progression from early in life, when our proper concern is our own development, and we take the world for granted as a stage for our actions, to later, when we become able to widen our view and recognize that this stage must be lovingly prepared for the next generation.

Returning to our opening questions, then, we might say that whereas Arendt speaks to teachers about their calling, and the promise of their students' natality, Rilke speaks as a teacher—though clearly not as a schoolteacher—to a young person about his natality. Together the passages suggest that teachers are drawn to teaching because they want to preserve and foster the natality of the young, both because it is precious in itself and because it is key to renewing our common world. Arendt names the call to teach, and Rilke illustrates it.

While this way of reading the passages is appealing, it is ultimately unworkable. Not only are these two passages not complementary in the way I just suggested, but I also want to argue that there is in fact an important tension between them. It is this tension that I now want to try to bring out. First, let us look more closely at Rilke's response to Kappus. Perhaps we were too hasty in our conclusion that Rilke's advice applies particularly to the young, that he counsels patience, introspection, and a love of questions because Kappus is still an adolescent. Rilke's letters do seem characterized by that special form of pedagogical tact; his responses seem tailored to Kappus and his situation. And certainly, Kappus is an adolescent, both in chronological and existential terms. By the latter I mean that Kappus' questions—as we gather from Rilke's references to them—are indicative of the particular dramas of adolescence: What do I do about these tumultuous passions stirring inside me? How can I escape this world of the superficial and the conventional? Where are the few kindred souls who can understand my poetry?

That said, there is something fundamentally wrong with reading Rilke in this way. To bring this out, let us try a thought experiment. What if Rilke were to meet Kappus later in life and find him still brooding over his existential questions. Do we imagine that Rilke would then, like St. Paul, advise Kappus to “put away childish things”? The answer must be no. Even a cursory glance at *Letters to a Young Poet* reveals that Rilke gives no advice to Kappus that he would not also apply to himself, as an adult. It is not as if Rilke urges introspective devotion to intractable questions because Kappus is still living in the protected world of the preparatory school. For one thing, Rilke would hardly mistake Kappus's *Gymnasium* as an environment particularly conducive to living one's way into a truly personal answer to life's questions. Having gone to a school just like the one Kappus attends (they were introduced by a teacher they had in common), Rilke is well aware of the crushing forces of conformity, and the equally conventionalized forms of non-conformity, that rule such a place. Rilke knows that Kappus is struggling “to bring outer and inner life into unison” (pp. 74-75), and worries that Kappus has already begun to send his most personal passions and questions underground. It is precisely during adolescence that this divorce between outer and inner grows so wide that many are pushed by loneliness and self-doubt to distance themselves

from their own inner lives and seek communion in inauthenticity.

Still, it might be true that relative to the constricting roles and stultifying labors of adult life, our school years provide a fair amount of freedom to explore different sides of ourselves. Rilke is clearly aware that Kappus will face new challenges upon leaving school. Concerning Kappus's impending career as a military officer, Rilke writes: "I consider it very difficult and very exacting, as it is burdened with great conventions and scarcely leaves room for a personal conception of its problems" (p. 40). Even if we agree that Kappus is out of the frying pan and into the fire, the fact remains that Rilke is advising Kappus during the transition from the conventional world of school to the even more conventional world of adult work. Rilke is affirming the value of Kappus' questions precisely as he is being asked to trade in his questions for a variety of conventional answers.

In other words, Rilke does not believe that loving the questions is a childish pastime that one must one day nobly renounce for something more difficult. In fact, Rilke sees acceptance of society's stock answers as the far easier course, and as an evasion of one's true work. The serious questions, about who one is and what one stands for, Rilke tells Kappus, "cannot be solved publicly and according to this or that agreement... [but] demand a new, special, *only* personal answer" (p. 56; emphasis in original). Thus, Rilke would reject the idea that growing up means putting away such questions as childish things in order to face facts. When we abandon our questions, it is not because they are idle and dreamy, whereas we must be practical and get to work. It is precisely the difficulty of our work, our "true work," that leads us to turn to conventions, or what Rilke describes as "public refuges along this most dangerous road" (p. 55). What some call "facing facts," Rilke would describe as soothing our worries with distractions and pre-empting our questions with received ideas. Why, Rilke asks, would you "want to exchange a child's wise incomprehension for defensiveness and disdain?" (p. 46).

Earlier, we read Rilke's tender address, "you are so young, so before all beginnings," as an address to Kappus's natality. This much still holds. Where we went wrong, it seems, was in how we related this to Kappus' chronological age. Rilke is not so much addressing a young person as the young part of a person, a person who is precisely on the cusp of maturity and in ever greater danger of becoming alienated from his natality. Thus, what began to look like complementary passages, each naming an ideal appropriate to a different stage of development, now appear as rival visions of maturity. Arendt calls on us to take an interest in children. Rilke calls on us to take an interest in the child that each of us once was. For Rilke, maturity means continually facing the demands of one's evolving self, never disavowing its promptings and puzzles, always looking for what might constitute "a high inducement for an individual to ripen" (p. 54). For Arendt, maturity means broadening our vision beyond the self, shifting our priorities from our own development to that of the next generation. Arendt worries that we will fail to make the transition from being mere recipients of our cultural inheritance to being stewards of it. Rilke worries that we will find excuses to distract ourselves from the patient, lonely work of "gestation and bringing forth" (p. 29), to drown out the sadnesses which mark the moment "when the future enters into us... in order to transform itself" (p. 65).

What this contrast makes clear, though, is that now that we are starting to get Rilke right, we are getting Arendt wrong. For Rilke's poetic ideal seems quite close to one of Arendt's highest ideals, the sphere of human activity she calls "action." Showing that she is a bit of a poet herself, Arendt (1998) describes action in this way in *The Human Condition*:

With word and deed, we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance. This insertion is not forced upon us by necessity, like labor, and it is not prompted by utility, like work. It may be stimulated by the presence of others whose company we wish to join, but it is never conditioned by them; its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative...Because they are initium, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action...This beginning is not the... beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself. (pp. 176-177)

For Arendt, action comprises those moments when, through "word and deed," we disclose who we are. Action does not so much accomplish something as enact somebody. It is not driven by the usual motors of necessity and utility, nor does it conform to the scripts of convention which say "this is what one does." In acting, we reconnect with our natality, respond to the presence of others, and rediscover the common world. "A life without speech and without action," Arendt (1998) tells us, "has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men" (176).

We now appear to have come full circle. We began with the observation that these two passages could be seen as

complementary, with Rilke enacting the vision of education Arendt describes. Then we noted a tension between the passages, since Rilke himself is offering a vision of adulthood, one that involves precisely the taking up of “childish” things. Now we see that whatever tension exists between Arendt's exhortation to teachers and Rilke's advice to Kappus—we cannot say that Rilke and Arendt hold fundamentally different views of maturity. Both thinkers, it turns out, urge us to find activities that preserve contact with our natality. In Arendt's concept of action and Rilke's call to love the questions, we see fundamentally harmonious views of human flourishing.^[3] So where does this leave us in relation to our opening question, why teach?

In their juxtaposition, each passage seems to offer us a puzzle about teaching. In the Arendt passage we find a compelling and recognizable account of teacher motivation, one that squares with our sense that teaching involves an intense responsibility to others. The puzzle arises when we consider how differently Arendt addresses us in “The Crisis of Education” and in *The Human Condition*. In the former, we are addressed as teachers, drawn to a kind of labor or work ennobled by its connection with the natality and action of others.^[4] In the latter, we are addressed as human beings, in need of a space to act, of a chance to enact ourselves. Since teachers are, in fact, human beings, the question arises: How are we to relate Arendt's call to teach and her call to action? Does the practice of teaching represent a space for action on the part of the teacher? If not, how are teachers to respond to both of Arendt's exhortations? Can teachers consign their enactment of self to their spare time? Is teaching a noble sacrifice in which one chooses to spend one's best hours fostering the natality of others, rather than attending to one's own process of becoming? Is this even possible if, as Greene observes in the epigraph, “a teacher in search of his/her own freedom may be the only kind of teacher who can arouse young persons to go in search of their own?”

Reading Rilke alongside Arendt, we find something like a mirror image of these questions. Rilke offers us a compelling reminder to choose a kind of work which allows one to cultivate and express one's natality and a warning that many of society's “occupations are paltry, their professions petrified and no longer connected with living” (p. 46).^[5] We could say that Rilke urges us to find a “poetic” calling, as long as we add that such callings are found not only in the arts, and not always found there. Poets too must sort out what is living and what is lifeless in their calling. This is why, for example, Rilke advises Kappus to avoid “facile and commonplace” forms of poetry, because “it takes a great, fully matured power to give something of your own where good and even excellent traditions come to mind in quantity” (p. 19). Or consider how he warns Kappus that poets often look to critics for affirmation when literary criticism represents only “partisan views, petrified and grown senseless in their lifeless induration, or... clever quibblings in which today one view wins and tomorrow the opposite” (p. 29). All professions, from the literary to the military, present their share of conventions, constrictions, and distractions.

Thus, when Kappus complains of the limitations of the military life, Rilke replies:

I know, your profession is hard and full of contradiction of yourself, and I foresaw your complaint and knew that it would come. Now that it has come, I cannot comfort you, I can only advise you to consider whether all professions are not like that, full of demands, full of enmity against the individual, saturated as it were with the hatred of those who have found themselves mute and sullen in humdrum duty. The situation in which you now have to live is no more heavily laden with conventions, prejudices and mistakes than all the other situations, and if there are some that feign a greater freedom, still there is none that is in itself broad and spacious and in contact with the big things of which real living exists. (p. 54)

Rilke reasons that the young poet is no worse off in the military life which offers at least ample solitude and contact with a “rough reality” than he would be in one of the “unreal half-artistic professions which pretend proximity to some art” (p. 78). For Rilke, all professions have poetic potential and all present myriad dangers to our natality, leading us toward a prosaic life.

This means that Rilke's call to love the questions—which we have been reading as a special kind of vocational advice—applies just as much to teaching as it does to poetry. But this sounds odd to our ears. When faced with the question “why teach?” we are used to calls for altruistic action like that of Arendt. How can Rilke's calls for patience, introspection, attention to one's own growth, and prioritizing of questions over answers possibly be construed as a call to teach? Isn't teaching precisely the kind of profession Rilke warns Kappus about, the kind that make one's “inner life [feel] cramped?” (p. 40). If we are honest, shouldn't we admit that the culture of school teaching is “full of enmity against the individual, saturated as it were with the hatred of those who have found themselves mute and sullen in humdrum duty”? Thus, if the

puzzle raised by the Arendt passage was how her inspiring vision of teaching could also be understood as a description of flourishing adult life, the Rilke passage makes us wonder how his inspiring vision of adult life could possibly be a description of a life of teaching.

Read together, these two passages lead us to a cluster of important and untimely questions.^[6] Can teachers work with youth in both senses of the term? That is, can teachers both work in the service of the natality of the young, as Arendt describes, and stay in touch with their own growing edge, as Rilke would advise? What happens to the natality of the teacher in a life of teaching? Put another way, does teaching represent only a chance to “give back,” or is it also an opportunity to advance one’s own project of becoming? Under what conditions does teaching become a poetic calling? In what ways has it grown petrified? What is the place of the practice of teaching within the life of the teacher? What are the obstacles to teachers’ flourishing? What does it look like when teachers become, through their work, more interesting, robust, alert, open-minded, adventurous, and so forth? Perhaps teaching is especially immune to the dangers Rilke describes since, as a kind of work centered around natality, it could serve to remind teachers of the young and growing parts of themselves. Or perhaps it is just the opposite. It could be that the very centrality of the growth of others makes the work of teaching supremely distracting, making teachers as prone as anyone to forget to “give something of their own” and to remain “in contact with the big things of which living consists.”

Coda

One is tempted to conclude on an optimistic note, with the sentiment that teaching feeds the natality of the teacher. And yet, the reality of the matter is more complex than this and to deny such complexity is to participate in one of the very problems facing teachers who would make their teaching a poetic calling: kitsch. As Greene (1986, pp. 74-75) has argued, the culture of teaching is highly prone to the sweetening and simplification of reality that is characteristic of kitsch. Whether it is the presence of youthful innocence or the pressure on schools to hold out hope of social progress, school culture is rife with the exclusion of “everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence” that Kundera (1984, p. 248) defines as the source of kitsch. We must, with Greene and Kundera, admit that teaching presents as many inducements to wallow in banality as to enact one’s natality.

At the same time, we may note that in Maxine Greene, we have at least one example of someone who has never ceased to work with youth, to grow in childlikeness in Dewey’s special sense of the term. Her personal example has been as powerful as her writings in showing us what it might mean to make teaching a personal project through which one cultivates and enacts her natality. Her example brings to mind the words of John Dewey (1916), with which I close:

What [one] gets and gives as a human being, a being with desires, emotions, and ideas, is not external possessions, but a widening and deepening of conscious life—a more intense, disciplined, and expanding realization of meanings.... And education is not a mere means to such a life. Education is such a life. To maintain capacity for such a life is the essence of morals. For conscious life is a continual beginning afresh. (pp. 359-360)

Bibliography

- Arendt, H. (1977). *The crisis in education* (D. Lindley, Trans.). In *Between past and future: Eight exercises in political thought* (pp. 173-196). New York: Penguin. Originally published in 1958.
- Arendt, H. (1998). *The human condition* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Originally published in 1958.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Greene, M. (1973). *The teacher as stranger*. Belmont: Wadsworth.
- Greene, M. (1978). Teaching: The question of personal reality. *Teachers College Record*, 80(1), 23-35.
- Greene, M. (1979). Liberal education and the newcomer. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 60(9), 633-636.
- Greene, M. (1986). Reflection and passion in Teaching. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 2(1), 68-81.

Greene, M. (1987). Teaching as project: Choice, perspective, and the public space. In F. Bolin & J. M. Falk (Eds.) *Teacher renewal: Professional issues, personal choices*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Greene, M. (1988). *The dialectic of freedom*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Higgins, C. (in press). *The good life of teaching: Toward a virtue ethics for teachers*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Higgins, C. (2010). Human conditions for teaching: The place of pedagogy in Arendt's *vita activa*. *Teachers College Record*, 112(2). Published online: August 12, 2009.

Kundera, M. (1984). *The unbearable lightness of being* (M. H. Heim, Trans.). New York: HarperCollins.

Rilke, R. M. (1954). *Letters to a young poet* (M. D. Herter-Norton, Trans. Rev. ed.). NY: W.W. Norton & Co. Letters composed 1903-08.

Notes

[1] Of course, Rilke does give Kappus advice throughout the letters, starting with this advice not to let the advice of others replace one's own process of reaching insight. Rilke advises Kappus to recollect his childhood, to cultivate solitude, to avoid reading literary criticism, to avoid writing in certain poetic forms, etc.

Most significantly, Rilke tells Kappus to give up poetry if he can (on the Romantic logic of artistic genius, that only a born writer should write, and that you know a born writer because they will die if they can't write). This advice, coupled with Rilke's subtle encouragement of the military career for Kappus that Rilke himself had been destined for, may be responsible for where Kappus ends up. Because Kappus' letters are not included in the volume, we never learn exactly what happens to him. We have the enigmatic and troubling closing lines of Kappus' Introduction. First, he tells us that his correspondence with Rilke "gradually petered out because life drove [him] into those very regions from which [Rilke] had sought to keep [him]." Then he declares: "But that is not important... Where a great and unique man speaks, small men should keep silence" (13).

Rather than reading Rilke's comment on the impossibility of advice as hypocritical, though, it might be best to read it as an example of what Kierkegaard called "indirect communication." The combination of advice and a warning not to rely on it may be the best combination an educator can offer. This latter idea I owe to René Arcilla. It was in Arcilla's seminars at Teachers College that I first became interested in the existential importance of adolescence.

[2] As a text, *Letters to a Young Poet*, functions in an interesting way. It originated as a series of letters to a particular person at a specific point in his life. It is marked by the intimate tone and direct address of the epistolary. Readers of a typical correspondence, though, find themselves a third party eavesdropping on this intimacy. By choosing to reproduce only Rilke's letters, and by titling the work to suggest that Rilke's letters should speak to any young, creative person, Rilke's editors created a new genre. As readers of this "response," we step into the role of Rilke's correspondent, receiving his replies to worries and confusions that we did not even know that we had shared.

[3] There are differences in their views, to be sure. If Arendt's paradigmatic action is the political speech act, e.g., Pericles' "Funeral Oration," Rilke's is the poetic act. Where Arendt's acting self encounters otherness in the form of other actors, or human plurality, Rilke's primary Other is nature.

[4] Though teaching would not seem to be driven by creaturely necessity as labor is, there are even more powerful reasons to think that Arendt would exclude teaching from the categories of work or action. Work comes to a definite conclusion in a tangible product. Action requires a public space and the catalyzing witness of one's peers. In Higgins (2010), I explore in greater detail this question of where teaching fits in Arendt's *vita activa*.

[5] The specific context of this statement from Letter Six (December 23, 1903) is how a young person comes to realize that adult activities are not as grown-up and important as he or she once thought.

[6] I explore these questions in Higgins (In Press).