



Rainer Maria Rilke

Letters on God *and*
Letters to a Young Woman

NORTHWESTERN WORLD CLASSICS



Translated from the German by Anne marie S. Kidder

Letters on God
and
Letters to a Young Woman



NORTHWESTERN WORLD CLASSICS

*Northwestern World Classics brings readers
the world's greatest literature. The series features
essential new editions of well-known works,
lesser-known books that merit reconsideration,
and lost classics of fiction, drama, and poetry.
Insightful commentary and compelling new translations
help readers discover the joy of outstanding writing
from all regions of the world.*

Rainer Maria Rilke

Letters on God
and Letters to a
Young Woman

Translated from the German
by Annemarie S. Kidder



Northwestern University Press ♦ Evanston, Illinois

Northwestern University Press
www.nupress.northwestern.edu

English translation, introductory material, and notes copyright © 2012 by Annemarie S. Kidder. Published 2012 by Northwestern University Press. *Letters on God* originally published in German by Insel-Verlag under the title *Über Gott*, copyright © 1933 by Insel-Verlag, Leipzig. *Letters to a Young Woman* originally published in German by Insel-Verlag under the title *Briefe an eine junge Frau*, copyright © 1930 by Insel-Verlag, Leipzig. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rilke, Rainer Maria, 1875–1926.

[Über Gott. English]

Letters on God ; and, Letters to a young woman / Rainer Maria Rilke ; translated from the German by Annemarie S. Kidder.

p. cm. — (Northwestern world classics)

“Letters on God originally published in German by Insel-Verlag under the title *Über Gott*, copyright © 1933 by Insel-Verlag, Leipzig. Letters to a Young Woman originally published in German by Insel-Verlag under the title *Briefe an eine junge Frau*, copyright © 1930 by Insel-Verlag, Leipzig.”—T.p. verso.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8101-2740-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Rilke, Rainer Maria, 1875–1926—Correspondence. 2. Rilke, Rainer Maria, 1875–1926—Translations into English. 3. Authors, German—20th century—Correspondence. I. Kidder, Annemarie S. II. Rilke, Rainer Maria, 1875–1926. *Briefe an eine junge Frau*. English. III. Title. IV. Series: Northwestern world classics.

PT2635.I65A2 2012

831.912—dc23

2012000888

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Foreword | vii |
| Introduction to <i>Letters on God</i> | 3 |
| <i>Letters on God</i> | 13 |
| Introduction to <i>Letters to a Young Woman</i> | 35 |
| <i>Letters to a Young Woman</i> | 39 |
| Notes | 67 |
| Further Reading | 73 |

For the first time, this volume makes available to an English-speaking audience two of the earliest collections of letters written by Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) and published after his death: one on the theme of God, the other addressed to a young woman. *Letters on God* has never before been translated into English in book form. *Letters to a Young Woman* was translated into English by K. W. Maurer in 1945, shortly after World War II, but the book has been out of print for half a century.

Rilke was an avid letter writer, and more than seven thousand of his letters have survived. Carefully composed on stationery with printed letterhead and a copy made for his own files, they often were sent via registered mail in an envelope that bore Rilke's personal waxed seal. Recipients were friends and family, novelists and poets, painters and sculptors, literary critics and publishers, and those who upon reading his work had contacted the poet and counted themselves among his admirers. The best-known collection today is *Letters to a Young Poet*. Their recipient was one such admirer, Franz Xaver Kappus, who had sought the poet's help in refining his own poetic ambitions. These letters were among the first published after Rilke's death.

In 1927, Rilke's daughter, Ruth Rilke-Sieber, and son-in-law, Carl Sieber, gathered, cataloged, and edited the mountain of Rilke correspondence. In 1929, the first chronological collection of Rilke letters appeared, covering the years from 1902 to 1906, followed by five more volumes, all organized by chronology. Between 1929 and 1939, the Siebers saw to the chronological editions of six volumes of Rilke letters, and they reissued and expanded another six-volume edition published between 1936 and 1939. Over time, Rilke's letters were collected and

published according to four categories: letters collected by chronology; letters organized by themes—such as the arts, poetry, and politics; letters sent to a certain person; and letters sent to and received from a particular person.

The earliest editions of Rilke letters contained those sent to one person. The first collection was published in 1927 by the letters' recipient, comprising six letters from the last year of Rilke's life to the Dutch publisher Alexander Alphons Marius Stols. Two more collections appeared in 1928: one by the French Rilke biographer Maurice Betz, containing three letters Rilke had sent him, the other a set of letters that Rilke had sent to Auguste Rodin (1840–1917). In 1929, the Siebers issued their first volume of Rilke letters addressed to one person. The *Letters to a Young Poet (Briefe an einen jungen Dichter)* contains ten letters to Kappus spanning largely two years (1903–4, with one letter written in 1908) and an introduction by the “young poet” Kappus himself. A similar collection appeared the following year. Titled *Letters to a Young Woman (Briefe an eine junge Frau)*, this 1930 volume contains nine letters to Lisa Heise and a brief epilogue by Carl Sieber. In 1934, Heise published the letters she had sent to Rilke. (In 2003, Insel Verlag issued a German edition containing both sets of correspondence between Heise and Rilke. Edited and with a commentary by Horst Nalewski, this edition also contains a previously unpublished 1924 Rilke letter, his last to her, and a biographical sketch of Heise with autobiographical notes, literary excerpts, and photographs.)

Also from this early stage of the publication of Rilke letters comes a collection focusing on one particular theme. The first thematic collection was published in 1933 and is titled *On God: Two Letters (Über Gott: Zwei Briefe)*; it was reissued in German by Insel Verlag in 1996). It contains the two letters and an introduction by Carl Sieber. Since Rilke's thematic reflections in *On God* offer a framework through which to read even his preceding correspondence, that volume is presented here first.