

RILKE'S RODIN

W

E CAN PRETEND TO KNOW PRECISELY.

At three o'clock on the Monday afternoon of September 1, 1902, bearing the appropriate petitions of entry, although he had arranged his visit in advance, the twenty-six-year-old poet Rainer Maria Rilke appeared on the stoop of Auguste Rodin's Paris studio, and was given an uncustomary gentle and courteous reception. Of course Rilke had written Rodin a month before to warn of his impending arrival. It was a letter baited with the sort of fulsome praise you believe only when it is said of yourself, and it must have been an additional pleasure for Rodin to be admired by a stranger so young, as well as someone with a commission to write of the sculptor and the sculptor's work as handsomely as, in his correspondence, he already had. Rilke was enthusiasm in a shabby suit, but Rodin, who paid little mind to social appearances except when he was mixing with potential clients, was willing to set aside some time for a chat while suffering the foreigner's fledgling French without complaint. He could not have realized that he was going to be the victim of a role reversal, because it was the artist who would play the sitter for a change. Rilke had arrived with an anticipatory portrait well advanced, and his tireless pen immediately began making mental corrections. ". . . it seemed to me that I had always known him," he wrote his wife, Clara, the following day. "I was only seeing him again; I found him smaller, and yet more powerful, more kindly, and more

noble. That forehead, the relationship it bears to his nose which rides out of it like a ship out of harbor . . . that is very remarkable. Character of stone is in that forehead and that nose. And his mouth has a speech whose ring is good, intimate, and full of youth. So also is his laugh, that embarrassed and at the same time joyful laugh of a child that has been given lovely presents.”¹

Released to explore the studio and its holy objects, Rilke discovers, almost immediately, a hand: “*C’est une main comme-ça,*” Rodin says, gesturing so impressively with his own broad blunt peasant hands with their plaster white fingers and blackened nails that Rilke fancies he sees things and creatures growing out of them. In Rilke’s steamy state of mind Rodin’s every word rises in the air, so that when he points to two entwined figures and says: “*c’est une création ça, une création . . .*” the poet believes, he reports to Clara, that the word ‘*création*’ “had loosed itself, redeemed itself from all language . . . was alone in the world.”² Everything small has so much bigness in it, he exclaims to his page.

Rilke tries to take everything in as if there will not be a next day, but there is a next day, and at nine he is on the train to Meudon, a twenty-minute ride to transformation. The town clings to a hillside from whose crest the Seine can be seen snaking its way to Paris. He walks up a “steep dirty village street” to Rodin’s villa called des Brillants which the sculptor had bought in 1895. Rilke describes the journey to Clara with the sort of detail one saves for wonders of the world: over a bridge – no voilà yet – down a road – no voilà yet – past a modest inn – no voilà yet – now through a door in the villa wall that opens on a gravel path lined with chestnut trees – still no voilà – until he rounds a corner of the “little red-yellow house and stands” – voilà now! – “before a miracle – before a garden of stone and plaster figures.”

Rodin had transported the Pavillion de l’Alma, in which he had exhibited his work in Paris in 1900, to the small park surrounding his house where there were already several studios set aside for cutting stone and firing clay. The pavilion was a heavily glassed light-filled hall full of plaster figures in ghostly con-fabulation, and it also contained huge glass cases crammed with fragments

¹ Letter to Clara Rilke, Tuesday, September 2, 1902. *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke 1892–1910*, translated by Jane Bannard Greene and M.D. Herter Norton, New York: W.W. Norton, 1945, 77,8.

² *Ibid.* 78.

from the design of *The Gates of Hell*. “There it lies,” Rilke writes, already composing his monograph,

yard upon yard, only fragments, one beside the other. Figures the size of my hand and larger . . . but only pieces, hardly one that is whole: often only a piece of arm, a piece of leg, as they happen to go along beside each other, and the piece of body that belongs right near them . . . Each of these bits is of such an eminent, striking unity, so possible by itself, so not at all needing completion, that one forgets they are only parts, and often parts of different bodies that cling to each other so passionately there.³

Rilke had brought a sheaf of his poems which Rodin dutifully fingered although he could only admire (as Rilke imagines) their pose upon the page; otherwise he left Rilke to roam about the place examining its treasures. The poet poured out upon these figurines and fragments a bladder full of enthusiasm as was his pre-Paris habit (“each a feeling, each a bit of love, devotion, kindness”); but the city’s unyielding and indifferent face and the sculptor’s dedicated work habits would teach the poet to see his surroundings as they were in themselves and not simply allow his glance to fall like sunshine on surfaces where it could admire its own reflection and its glitter.

Then it was lunchtime. And the first lesson, *en plein air*. They sat five at a trestle. No one was introduced. There was a tired looking, nervous, and distracted lady whom Rilke assumed was Madame Rodin. There was a Frenchman notable for a red nose, and “a very sweet little girl of about ten” who sat just across from him. Rodin, dressed for the city, is impatient for his meal. Madame replies with a torrent of apparent grievance. Rilke begins to observe – *regarde! regarde!* is the new command – and sees Madame giving forks, plates, glasses little pushes that disarray the table as if the meal were already over. “The scene was *not* painful, *only sad*,” he writes. The Master continues to complain as calmly as a lawyer until a rather dirty person arrives to distribute the food and insist that Rilke partake of dishes he does not desire. The poet should

³ Ibid., 79.

have been hungry, he was on his uppers, but he was also finicky to a fault, vegan of a sort, a fancied sign of his ethereal nature. Rodin rattled on agreeably. Rilke spoke of his art colony days in Worpswede and of the painters he met there, few of whom Rodin had heard of, although that would not have surprised the poet had he realized that his acquaintances, his friends, were nobodies. And as a poet, he was invisible in this space.

Because it was full of blazing plaster casts in a pavilion that gathered light as if it were fruit. “My eyes are hurting me, my hands too,” he wrote to his wife. Madame Rodin was gracious after lunch, inviting him back, as we say, “anytime you’re in the neighborhood,” little realizing, I imagine, that for Rilke that would be tomorrow.

And so ended the second day.

Nothing is more fragile than adoration, yet Rilke’s adulation might have remained that intense, agreeably decorating a dirty pane like a window’s curtain, had he not sunk into an outcast’s life. Poor, alone, he sought refuge from the friendless Paris streets in the Bibliothèque Nationale, often from ten to five; or he fled by train to Meudon and its sheltering plasters, kinder to his eye though they blinded him than the beggars who would offer him their misfortunes for a franc; while evenings he passed in the squeeze of his room writing letters to his wife as forlornly beautiful as letters get. The poet was, among other things, an inadequately educated youth who would play the poet even on those days he wasn’t one, and who sought to unite his spirit with the spirit of his poems, so as to live several feet above the ground. Yet the great sculptor would eventually prove to be a crude rude clown, a satyr in a smock, who was losing his strut, caught in the curves of female connivance and flattery only to be led around eventually (in Sir Kenneth Clark’s estimation) like a dancing bear.⁴ So loyalty would demand that Rilke separate the man from his art, a split easier for a Solomon to decree than a babe to endure, and an act at odds with his inclinations.

Moreover, the fragments he so admired in Rodin’s workshops, alive in every brief line that defined them, were confronted by the ugly realities of the avenues, poor creatures who every day looked more like himself.

⁴ Clark, Kenneth. *The Romantic Rebellion*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973, 353.

They were living, living on nothing, on dust, on soot, and on the filth on their surfaces, on what falls from the teeth of dogs, on any senselessly broken thing that anyone might still buy for some inexplicable purpose. Oh what kind of world is that! Pieces, pieces of people, parts of animals, leftovers of things that have been, and everything still agitated, as though driven about helter-skelter in an eerie wind, carried and carrying, falling and overtaking each other as they fall.⁵

In these lines written in Worpswede during the following summer he relived for his former mistress's benefit his Paris suffering. Rilke was also rehearsing what would become the magical opening pages of his novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. It is worth quoting a bit more in order to demonstrate the psychologically stressful difference between the euphoric celebrational style of the first Rodin monograph and its author's daily state of mind.

There were old women who set down a heavy basket on the ledge of some wall (very little women whose eyes were drying up like puddles), and when they wanted to grasp it again, out of their sleeves shoved forth slowly and ceremoniously a long, rusty hook instead of a hand, and it went straight and surely out to the handle of the basket. And there were other old women who went about with the drawers of an old night stand in their hands, showing everyone that twenty rusty pins were rolling around inside which they must sell. And once of an evening late in the fall, a little old woman stood next to me in the light of a store window. She stood very still, and I thought that like me she was busy looking at the objects displayed and hardly noticed her. Finally, however, her proximity made me uneasy, and I don't know why, I suddenly looked at her peculiarly clasped, worn-out hands. Very, very slowly an old, long, thin pencil rose out of those hands, it grew and grew, and it took a very long time until it was entirely visible, visible in all its wretchedness. I cannot say what produced such a terrible effect in this scene, but it seemed to me as if a whole destiny were being played

⁵ Letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé, July 18, 1903, op. cit., 109.

out before me, a long destiny, a catastrophe that was working up frightfully to the moment when the pencil no longer grew and, slightly trembling, jutted out of the loneliness of those empty hands. I understood at last that I was supposed to buy it.⁶

In the novel, Malte eventually realizes with horror that he has become an accomplice . . . another shabby person of the street.

. . . when I noticed how my clothes were becoming worse and heavier from week to week, and saw how they were slit in many places, I was frightened and felt that I would belong irretrievably to the lost if some passer-by merely looked at me and half unconsciously counted me with them.⁷

Perhaps, when you only beg from the best families and the finest foundations, you can call yourself a development officer, but where Rilke was living now there were no banks, no fancy estates occupied by susceptible titled ladies, just *Aisles d’Nuits*, the *Hôtel Dieu*, and other *hospices de la maternité*.

The path to Paris had been a circuitous one, the result of flailing more than plan. At Christmas, two years before, Rilke had returned to Prague to visit his mother, always a trying time for him, although Santa brought him a new briefcase, and on his way home he stopped in Breslau to visit an art historian, Richard Muther, whom he hoped might agree to tutor him in this vast field, since Rilke was now considering a career as an art critic. Perhaps Muther might help him combine this fresh but desperate interest with a trip to Russia that Rilke was planning. It would be his second.⁸ Muther was presently the editor of some pages on art for a Viennese weekly called *Zeit*, and he suggested that Rilke write something on Russian art for its pages. Rilke promptly did so and composed another article after he had completed his trip.

When they met again it was at the newly married couple’s cottage near the art colony of Worpswede, outside Bremen. Rilke’s second essay was about to

⁶ Ibid., 109, 110.

⁷ Ibid., 111.

⁸ Ralph Freedman. *Life of a Poet: Rainer Maria Rilke*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996, 108.

appear. Muther had just completed a monograph on Lucas Cranach and sent a copy ahead of his arrival. His hosts showed him studios and introduced him to painters as a part of their mutual cultivation. A few months later, Muther would get his review and Rilke receive the Rodin commission. In that regard he had an edge his youth and inexperience could not dull: his wife, Clara, was herself a sculptor who had studied with the Master and for that reason they had initially planned to do the piece together. Clara's previous relationship might be expected to make entrée easier.

Rilke was eager to get out of his honeymoon house, a cute thatch that had lost a good deal of its charm after Clara had given birth. Babies often allow wives to feel they have done their sexual duty and husbands to feel they have been warned: what the house now holds will hold them. Clara was also anxious to return to work and would eventually join Rilke in his Paris penury after she had dumped little Ruth with her grandmother. (The word, 'join,' suggests more intimacy than was sought since they maintained separate lodgings.) The commission was urgent because the couple's funds were nearly exhausted, and, although Clara insisted on paying her own way, Rilke's sources of charity were drying up.

Rilke was learning on the run. He had no scholarly skills. Confronted by a mass of materials, he tended to freeze. "Instead of taking notes on a text with concentration and efficiency, he was forever tempted to copy the entire book."⁹ There were many things about his subject he would have known, for they were in the air as well as the newspapers or came from Clara's recollections. But some of the things he thought he knew were wrong and some of the things Rodin revealed about himself weren't true: that he had married "*parce qu'il faut avoir une femme*,"¹⁰ for instance, since he would not marry Rose Beuret, the woman he had – unlicensed – lived with from 1864, when she had become his model and his mistress, until their approaching deaths made such legalities matters of concern. (Rose died in October of 1917, he in November, less than a month later.)

Rodin had been born a profligate and it had apparently always been neces-

⁹ Wolfgang Leppmann. *Rilke: A Life*. Trans. by Russell Stockman. New York: Fromm Intl., 1984, 174.

¹⁰ Letter to Clara Rilke, September 5, 1902, op. cit., 84.

sary to have a woman . . . or two. Waiting to pose, nude or nearly, a pair of models might lounge around the studio. When they did, they often had to assume and maintain athletically strenuous erotic positions for extended periods while he drew – comfortably wrapped – in a room Rose kept cool to save sours and suppress inclinations, although often, nearer his models and more discreet, Rodin worked at the *Dépôt des marbres* in Paris. “Moving constantly around him as he worked were several nude models. He watched them as they moved, like Greek gymnasts, establishing a familiarity with the human body, and with muscles in movement.”¹¹ Occasionally he would insist they caress one another. His artistic excuse for these practices was that through them women were psychologically laid bare not merely their thighs and bosoms. Rilke, predictably, put a feminist spin on these images. Speaking of figures on *The Gates of Hell*, he says: “. . . here the woman is no longer an animal who submits or is overpowered. She is too awake and animated by desire, as if they had both joined forces to search for their souls.” During such times that the models moved or froze in the midst of a gesture the artist worked with great rapidity, sheets of drawings literally flying from his pad to litter the floor. At a more leisurely moment, he would apply a light wash of color to the graphite.¹² Rodin did not conceal his erotic drawings from less candid eyes but exhibited them more than once. The Musée Rodin has many thousand such sketches. Later, Picasso would exhibit a similar unremitting libidinous energy.

Without warning, the maestro would disappear for weeks from beneath Rose’s eye.

These absences sometimes corresponded to brief encounters with one of his models or with one of the innumerable society women, whose appetites were aroused by his reputation as a lover. But when, to excuse himself, Rodin put up a sign on the door of Studio J of the *Dépôt des marbres* which read: “The sculptor is in the Cathedrals,” it was sometimes true he was visiting them.¹³

¹¹ Sue Roe. *Gwen John: a Painter’s Life*. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2001.

¹² Albert Elsen. *Rodin*. Museum of Modern Art. New York: Doubleday, 1963, 165.

¹³ Robert Descharnes and Jean-François Chabrun. *Auguste Rodin*. Translation from Edita Lausanne. Secaucus, N.J.: Chartwell Books, 1967, 118.

Four years before Rilke's arrival, Rodin had broken off an extended affair with Camille Claudel, the gifted sister of the great poet and playwright Paul Claudel, and a splendid sculptor herself, with disastrous consequences for Camille who had to be institutionalized, though there were doubtless other reasons for her paranoid delusions. She and Rosa had passed through words to come to blows, and it is said (by those who say these things) that Camille had a habit of lurking about the grounds and that Rosa had once fired a shot in the direction of some concealing plants. Camille's brother, whose Catholicism was central to his work, was not Christian enough to forgive the sculptor such a prolonged misuse of his sister, but in this case forgiveness might have been a fault.

As for Rodin, he was nearsighted: he had the big bulging eyes of a lecher. When he worked he had his nose right on the model and on the clay. Did I say his nose? A boar's snout, rather, behind which lurked a pair of icy blue pupils. In all his sculpture, what you have is his nose working together with his hand, and sometimes you catch the face emerging from the very middle of the four fingers and the thumb. He tackles the block as a whole. With him everything is compact, massive. It is dough that gives unity. His limbs tend to get in the way.

How different from my sister's light, airy hand, the sense of excitement, the perpetual presence of the spirit, the intricate and sensitive tendrils, the airiness and play of inner light!¹⁴

While Rilke was in attendance, Rodin took up with Gwen, another sister, this time of Augustus John. She would survive the experience to become a talented painter though she never married and the little village of Meudon held her fast her entire life.¹⁵ Through Gwen John's letters we can follow the progress of their affair and get an idea of how many of these amours must have taken a similar path, because, if it was a unique romance for each woman, it

¹⁴ Ibid., 130. In *L'oeil écoute* (The Eye Listens) Claudel had written extensively about Flemish art and praised it in particular for capturing "the movement of human life toward its conclusion." In contrast, Rodin's art would have had to seem profane.

¹⁵ Roe, *op. cit.*, chapters 6 & 7.

was an established routine for the artist, who was consequently always in charge. As girls they came to Paris to make art their career; they sought work as a model in order to pay their way; sometimes they would pose for a painter who posed for Rodin and that way achieve an introduction. In Gwen's case, it was her suppleness that initially appealed to the Master, though other women doubtless had their own special qualities. Soon he would be singling her out, lending her books, asking her to make copies of certain passages he would mark for extraction, and then – la coup de coeur – requesting to see her work. One day, while she was in a half-naked, knee up, head bowed, prancing pose for the Whistler memorial statue, the kiss arrived. "I can feel, rushing across my lips, sensations of mystery and intoxication," she told him.¹⁶ Gwen will dream of giving up all for him (especially her career), of becoming his wife, of taking his material tasks in hand and, though not a tidy, enterprising person, organizing his life. For this last task, Rodin would solicit and seduce Rainer Maria Rilke.

In his two monographs, Rilke will touch on such matters so discreetly not even he will avow his knowledge of them; but the contradiction between Rodin's life of quarrelsomeness, deceit, and sensual indulgence and his consuming artistic dedication; the difference between the studio's dusty physicality, and its apparent product – abundant beauty and grace arising out of clay, marble's serene cool glisten like light in a water glass, lofty ideals caught in casts of plaster – these militant contrasts govern every line of the poet's essays – where Rilke enlists awe to ward off consternation – just as they control every surface of the artist's sculptures, including the version of the Balzac memorial that depicts the novelist with an erection. After George Bernard Shaw sat for his bust by Rodin, he wrote that "The most picturesque detail of his method was his taking a big draught of water into his mouth and spitting it onto the clay to keep it constantly pliable. Absorbed in his work, he did not always aim well and soaked my clothes."¹⁷

On Rilke's next visit Rodin held class. After a lunch which resembled the

¹⁶ Ibid., 56.

¹⁷ Quoted in Elsen, op. cit., 126. Rodin's impact on Rilke, from the French point of view, is thoroughly discussed by J.F. Angelloz in *Rainer Maria Rilke – l'Evolution spirituelle du poète*. Paris: 1936, and by K.A.J. Battered in *Rilke and France: a Study in Poetic Development*. London: Oxford University Press, 1966.

first in everything but menu, they sat on a bench that had a fine view of Paris while Rodin spoke of his work and its principles. Rilke has to run after Rodin's rapid French as though for a departing bus. The sculptor's work is manual like that of a carpenter or mason and produces an object unlike the memos of an office manager, consequently, to the young, the calling has lost its attraction. They don't care to get their hands dirty, but "*il faut travailler, rien que travailler*" he likes to repeat. In fact, Rodin did little if any carving (or welding either, of course), although it is said that he liked to greet people at the door head to toed with dust and fisting a chisel. His bronzes were cast, his marbles carved, by workers he rarely saw.¹⁸ Henri Lebossé enlarged the sculptor's plaster models to the dimensions proper for a public monument.¹⁹ Rodin complains that the schools teach "the kids nowadays" to compose – to emphasize contour rather than to model and shape surfaces. ". . . *ce n'est pas la forme de l'objet, mais: le modelé . . .*"²⁰ Rodin's hands were his principal tools, and with them he plopped and punched and gouged and smoothed, making both curves and straight lines wavy, allowing shoulders to flow into torsos and torsos to emerge from blocks (even when they hadn't), encouraging elbows to establish their own identity, his fingers everywhere busy at fostering the impression of life, giving strength and will to plaster, ethereality and spirit to stone.

Not to everybody's taste. Rodin's hopes for his work were revolutionary and, at first, few shared them. Lovers of the antique saw in the figure of Aphrodite the embodiment of Love. She was a god of mythology and therefore never existed, so she could only be regarded as ideal. Her thighs were to be as smooth as a peeled stick, though fleshier and amply curved. Since, like Hamlet or Jesus for that matter, no one knew what Love looked like, her form and all her emblems eventually achieved a generic status (Jesus is blond and thin, tall and handsome, not in the least Semitic); but this stereotype was never of a particular, an instance of which you might meet on the street, instead its entire being was devoted to the service of the universal. For fanciers of Christian figures,

¹⁸ R.H. Wilenski. *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1961, 25.

¹⁹ See Albert Elsen's article, "Rodin's Perfect Collaborator, Henri Lebossé," in *Rodin Rediscovered*, edited by Albert Elsen for The National Gallery of Art. Washington, D.C. 1981, 249-259.

²⁰ Letter to Clara Rilke, September 5, 1902, op. cit., 84.

however, Mark and the other Testament teachers, while remaining within the type that had been cast for them, and representing the ideals of the religion as well as figures in Christian history, were nevertheless to be depicted as actual persons. Jesus may have been a scapegoat, but he must not be so idealized he becomes nothing but sacrifice. Another example: many sopranos must be able to play Mimi; if one of them cannot make Mimi's emaciated weight, then cast, crew, and customers will pretend they are watching the role sing rather than the occupant of it. Rodin's departures from these norms were felt before they were formulated. Where would we locate the walk of *The Walking Man*? in "walking itself"? in this sort of stride among many? in the habitual gait of someone exercising? and particularly during his morning constitutional? This amazing figure is the expression of a specific kind of muscular movement in which the determination of the walker's will, even without the walker, is evident in them. These legs walk by themselves. Across meadows. Down streets. Through walls. The battered torso is the handle of their fork.

The Walking Man as finally exhibited is the antithesis of the nineteenth-century statue, for it lacks the old values of identity, assertive ego, moral message rhetorically communicated, completeness of parts and of finish, and stability. More than any other of Rodin's works, this sculpture overwhelms the viewer by the power of movement . . . No sculptor before Rodin had made such a basic, simple event as walking the exclusive focus of his art and raised it to the level of high drama.²¹

As Rodin's style developed so did the complaints. *The Age of Bronze* was felt to be so lifelike that it must have been made from a body cast. *The Walking Man* convicted the sculptor of dismemberment. *The Man with the Broken Nose*, *The Crouching Woman*, and *The Old Courtesan* were attacks upon their subjects, deliberately disgusting, or perverse attempts to make the ugly attractive. *The Kiss* was too sexy or too pretty, and *The Thinker* banal – or worse, a schoolboy bathroom joke. *The Gates of Hell* had ended up an expensive hodgepodge. *The Burghers of Calais* were too sorrowful, the monument didn't depict them as

²¹ Elsen, op. cit., 32.

behaving bravely enough; although his model, *The Call to Arms*, proposed to commemorate the Franco-Prussian war, was so vehement it failed consideration. The great draped *Balzac* didn't look like Balzac, while the naked *Balzac* was an affront to the writer, his art, and his public. *Balzac*, in particular, called for outrage.

He was accused variously of having depicted his subject as a penguin, a snowman, a sack of coal, a menhir, a phantom, a colossal fetus and a shapeless larva. Other criticisms included the charge that Balzac had been reduced to the role of an actor in a gigantic Guignol, that he had just gotten out of bed to confront a creditor, or that exposing the public to such maladroit handling of proportions and physical distortion was equivalent to the dangers of a live bomb.²²

As late as 1932, R.H. Wilenski would claim, in his *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*, that "Rodin's interest when he modelled the Balzac was concentrated in the head. Remove the head and we have nothing but a shapeless mess." Wilenski provides an illustration in which he has done the decapitation.²³

It was claimed that Rodin's impressionistic style was better suited to painting than to sculpture, although the impressionists weren't initially approved of either; moreover, he appeared to disobey the modernist rule that the work should reflect the nature of its materials and manufacture, yet in what but clay would his kind of modulations occur? or his mingling of limbs be easy? This much was true: Rodin's aim was to transform his materials into something ontologically alive – after all had not God made mud into man?

Elie Faure enlists his eloquence, honed through a thousand pages of his *History of Art*, to register Rodin's errors.

Often – too often, alas! – the gestures become contorted, the unhappy idea of going beyond plastics and of running after symbols creates groups in which the embracing figures are disjointed; the volumes fly out of their orbit, the attitudes are impossible, and, in the whole liter-

²² Elsen, op.cit., 103.

²³ Wilenski, op. cit., 23, illus. 1b.

ary disorder, the energy of the workman melts like wax in the fire. Even in his best days, he lives and works by brief paroxysms, whose burning sensation runs through him in flashes.²⁴

A good many of the misapprehensions that Rilke says constitute Rodin's fame were fomented by social scandals, as I have tried to suggest, and the sculptor's name continued to collect scurrilous rumors for the remainder of his life; but at the same time his renown drew to him many who were also famous, each bringing with them their own bounty of slander, gossip, and glorification. Isadora Duncan claims that she wants to have children of genius by him, and Loïe Fuller would love to wind multicolored ribbons round her body while he draws her.²⁵ Eleanora Duse will recite poetry at the Hôtel Biron, and Wanda Landowska play Bach upon a harpsichord trucked in for the occasion. Meanwhile the press enjoys publishing lampoons of various kinds, and caricatures by Sem and Belon amuse their publics. In one Rodin is depicted pulling the arms and legs off a female figure. I think we are to imagine she is not alive at the time. Another shows a garden of disembodied heads and embracing bodies called "Terrain Rodin."²⁶

The Meudon days begin to pass. Rilke reads Rodin's press clippings in the villa's little park and enjoys the garden's postcard views, or he walks up the village slopes to a thick wood where he can brood in a solitude free of Paris's insistent presence or Rodin's impalpable one. Among his wishes: that he could take the forest's lofty fresh air back with him to the city where the heat is oppressive, the atmosphere odiferous, stale, and heavy. He presses his face against the fence of the Luxembourg Gardens like one in jail, and even the flowers in their beds feel constrained to be there.

On September 11 Rilke does something so transparent it almost ceases to be

²⁴ Elie Faure. *History of Art – Modern Art*. Trans. by Walter Pach. New York: Harper and Bros., 1924, 402-3.

²⁵ Lest we forget Mrs. Fuller's talent, namely her skill with illusion, here is a juicy bit from Cocteau: "Is it possible . . . to forget that woman who discovered the dance of her age? A fat American, bespectacled and quite ugly, standing on a hanging platform, she manipulates waves of floating gauze with poles, and somber, active, invisible, like a hornet in a flower, churns about herself a protean orchid of light and material that swirls, rises, flares, roars, turns, floats, changes shape like clay in a potter's hands, twisted in the air under the emblem of the torch and headdress." Jean Cocteau. *Souvenir Portraits*. Trans. by Jesse Browner. New York: Paragon House, 1990, 81.

²⁶ Descharnes and Chabrun, op.cit., 216.

devious. He writes Rodin a letter. Like a lover, he explains that his poor French makes it difficult for him to express himself as he would like, and the care with which he prepares his questions make them seem contrived and inappropriate for the occasion; so he is sending on a few verses in French with the hope that they will bring the two of them a little closer. After some customary fulsomeness, Rilke confesses that “It was not only to do a study that I came to be with you, – it was to ask you: how must one live?” The answer we’ve heard: *il faut travailler*. However, Rilke says he has always waited for the beckon of the muse, waited for what he calls the creative hour, waited for inspiration. He has tried to form habits of diligence but now he knows he must try again, try and succeed. Sadly . . .

. . . last year we had rather serious financial worries, and they haven’t yet been removed: but I think now that diligent work can disarm even the anxieties of poverty. My wife has to leave our little child, and yet she thinks more calmly and impartially of that necessity since I wrote her what you said: “*Travail et patience*.” I am very happy that she will be near you, near your great work . . .

I want to see if I can find a living in some form here in Paris, – (I need only a little for that). If it is possible, I shall stay. And it would be a great happiness for me. Otherwise, if I cannot succeed, I beg you to help my wife as you helped me by your work and by your word and by all the eternal forces of which you are the Master.²⁷

The verses in French Rilke wrote for Rodin have a German brother, because on the same day, doubtless after the same stroll through the same park, he also penned one of the two better known autumn poems from *The Book of Hours*. His state of mind could not be better represented.

AUTUMN

The leaves are falling, falling from far away,
as though a distant garden died above us;
they fall, fall with denial in their wave.

²⁷ Letter to Auguste Rodin, September 11, 1902, op. cit., 87-88.

And through the night the hard earth falls
farther than the stars in solitude.

We all are falling. Here, this hand falls.
And see – there goes another. It's in us all.

And yet there's One whose gently holding hands
let this falling fall and never land.

Despite his misery, his anxiety, Rilke is greedily gathering material. These months will be among his richest. Incidents of no apparent moment will crystallize and coalesce. Here is one. At the end of September, he writes to Clara:

Rodin has a tiny plaster cast, a tiger (antique), in his studio . . . which he values very highly . . . And from this little plaster cast I saw what he means, what antiquity is and what links him to it. There, in this animal, is the same lively feeling in the modeling, this little thing (it is no higher than my hand is wide, and no longer than my hand) has hundreds of thousands of sides like a very big object, hundreds of thousands of sides which are all alive, animated, and different. And that in plaster! And with this the expression of the prowling stride is intensified to the highest degree, the powerful planting of the broad paws, and at the same time, that caution in which all strength is wrapped, that noiselessness . . .²⁸

The panther Rilke will study in the Jardin des Plantes began to find its words, I suspect, as a tiny plaster tiger with a prowling stride and broad paws, the bars of his cage were borrowed from the Luxembourg Gardens, and his gaze from the poet's own, as well as his sense of desperation. The abbreviated sonnet, J.B. Leishman suggests, was the earliest of the famous *Dinge* or "thing" poems whose nature has been ascribed to Rilke's Rodin experience.²⁹

²⁸ Letter to Clara Rilke, September 27, 1902, op.cit., 90. Rilke refers to the little tiger again in a letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé, August 15, 1903, 128.

²⁹ J.B. Leishman, editor and translator. *Rainer Maria Rilke – Selected Works, Vol. II: Poetry*. New York: New Directions, 1960, 178. These translations are from William H. Gass. *Reading Rilke*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1999.