

The Poet and the Sculptor

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In 1902, a young, aspiring German poet took the bold step of addressing a letter to an old and famous French sculptor, praising his work and asking for a chance to meet him. The sculptor responded by inviting the poet to come to his studio in Paris. The result was that two of the greatest artists of the twentieth century formed a close friendship that lasted four years, and would figure significantly in their biographies, as well as more broadly in the history of modern art and literature. The two had nothing in common but their different arts, in which one was a novice and the other a master, but they were drawn together by a personal affinity that seemed magnetic. Despite their differences in age and accomplishment, they hit it off at once, with the result that the sculptor invited the poet to stay as long as he liked. The poet was Rainer Maria Rilke, who at 27 still had most of his career ahead of him, and the sculptor was Auguste Rodin, who at 62 was already world-famous and could look back with satisfaction on a series of masterworks he had created during the thirty-five years of his remarkable career. Rodin had earned all the honors and acclaim he might wish. His sculpture was in demand all over the world. Rilke, on the other hand, was just coming into his own as an artist, having published only two books in German so far, a collection of short stories and a collection of short poems, but in them there was promise that he, too, might gain world fame some day as a major author, not only in German but through translations into other languages. This promise was lost on Rodin, who did not know German; the two men spoke only in French. Rodin could learn nothing about sculpture from Rilke, and there was nothing Rilke could learn from Rodin about literature. They

became friends because there was an unspoken bond between them: both were committed to the highest standards of art.

Rilke had gone to Paris in pursuit of excellence, and chose as his mentor an artist who excelled in his art, who had attained a maturity of expression in sculpture that Rilke hoped to emulate in a very different art. The poems he wrote in German, while observing the French sculptor at work every day in his studio, gave new depth and realism to his already remarkable gifts. While Rodin was busy drawing new designs to mold in plaster and carve in marble or cast in bronze, Rilke was busy creating lyrics that brought a new perfection to the German language. Rodin found Rilke a willing disciple, fluent enough in French to serve as his private secretary for a while, relieving him of the burden of responding to his host of admirers and freeing him to concentrate wholly on his work. The two artists lived and worked together from 1902 to 1906, and each benefited from the other--until, quite suddenly and unaccountably, their friendship ended. It was broken by Rodin, who, in a fit of temper, abruptly dismissed Rilke. He never apologized for his outburst nor did Rilke ever blame him. They were reconciled two years later, on Rodin's initiative, and remained friends, but did not resume their close relationship. The sculptor went on working in his Paris studio on new projects that would bring him additional honors. Rilke left the city which had meant so much to him, and went on his solitary journey to other parts of Europe, continuing to perfect his art, as he had while living and working at Rodin's side, eventually living up to the high promise he had brought with him to Paris.

Their meeting was the convergence of two very different worlds. Rodin was born in Paris on Nov. 12, 1840, in the working-class district of Mouffetard in the Latin Quarter of the city, near the Pantheon. At the time of his birth; his father had a clerical job in the office of the Prefect of Police. Rodin began his education under the Brothers of the Christian Doctrine, but he

was not academically gifted, and he was handicapped by near-sightedness, which however did not keep him from showing exceptional talent for drawing, even while young. This natural bent prompted his parents to send him to the Petite École to study art, starting him on the path toward what would be an illustrious career. He was given the normal method of instruction in art schools, copying the work of earlier artists, and he quickly proved adept at it. But he had ambitions of his own, and he often walked across the Seine to view the splendors of the Louvre, where he could copy works by the greatest masters of painting and sculpture, especially those of his favorites, Michelangelo and Raphael. He studied briefly under a sculptor noted for his skill in drawing animals, but he was more interested in human figures. A French priest, Father Eynard, recognized his talent and provided him with a shed in his monastery for his first studio. He paid his debt by making a bust of Father Eynard which is one of his masterpieces. In 1864, at the age of 24, he met another great influence on his career, a young seamstress named Rose Beuret, with whom he fell in love. She became his model, his mistress, his cook and his housekeeper for the rest of his life. He would immortalize her in some of his most charming drawings and sculptures, and would at last marry her, shortly before she died, and only a few months before his own death. By 1865, at the age of 25, Rodin had become so skilled in sculpture that he scored his first great success, with a bronze head he called The Man with the Broken Nose. It became his signature work, a realistically carved head that appeared disfigured and ugly at first glance, but was so strikingly original in its rugged strength that it became the hallmark of his mature style. Abandoning the sort of formal academic sculpture he had been copying, Rodin created a singular work of realism that distinguished him from all the other talented French sculptors. He offered it to the Paris Salon, a yearly competition in the arts, but the judges refused it, failing to see the originality which serious critics would later accept and

even praise.. Rodin was a sculptural pioneer, a Modernist before Modernism was anything more than the latest fashion, years before Claude Monet launched the Impressionist movement in painting that gave Modernism its first collective identity.. Starting with this singular bronze head, Rodin worked steadily toward larger subjects, conceiving one by one the fully realized human figures which made him the wonder of the artistic world:: The Age of Bronze, The Thinker, The Kiss, Adam and Eve, the Hand of God, John the Baptist Preaching, the Burghers of Calais, and many other works which bore the marks of his genius and caused a stir wherever they were exhibited. His realism was often starkly molded and controversial, but it earned him a wider and wider audience, and his works became particular favorites at the world fairs that were held throughout Europe and America. . He survived a scandal in 1875, when one of his masterpieces, The Age of Bronze, was declared a counterfeit. Art critics thought the nude male figure was so realistic it could not have been freely carved, but had been cast from a live body. To prove it was carved from life, he put the model on public display and carved a replica by hand while they watched. He caused another scandal when his sensual masterpiece, the Kiss, was exhibited at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. It is a favorite everywhere today, but when it was about to be shown to the public for the first time, the organizers feared that the lifesize marble of a naked couple in full embrace would be too much for them, and so the statue was walled off in a room open only to adults. Despite the scandals, Rodin's work became widely popular and was in constant demand for public monuments. He provoked a *cause célèbre* when the city fathers of Calais commissioned him to create a statue in honor of the Burghers of Calais, a group of loyal citizens who had long ago volunteered to save the city from a British siege. He produced lifesize bronze figures of six stalwart men, walking solemnly out of the city to be hostages to the British troops surrounding it. The city fathers found it too grimly heroic, and rejected it at first , but later

proudly set it up in the city square, honoring it for what it was, a masterpiece of calm dignity, one of the glories of Rodin's art.

Thus when Rodin met Rilke in 1902, his works had become familiar classics of modern sculpture, rivaled only by the masterpieces of Michelangelo in Renaissance Italy and Phidias in Classical Greece. At the time Rilke entered his life, Rodin was working hard just to keep up with the demand for his statues. Though he had begun his career in poverty in 1865, by 1902 he could ask 40,000 francs for a single commission, yet could not satisfy all the patrons clamoring for his art.

Rilke, an artist in a totally different medium, approached Rodin with awe. A generation younger, he was born December 4, 1875, in Prague, a capital of the Austro-Hungarian empire, in which his father served as a military officer. His mother was a devout Catholic who smothered him with affection, naming him René Maria Rilke, and dressing him as a girl until he was seven. He changed into trousers when he began his education in a German grammar school, but because his father was a military officer, Rilke was sent off at the age of ten to a military school at St. Pölten, in Austria, where he proved to be a good student but a poor fencer, hating the military uniform and the strict discipline. His education was haphazard; he tried law and business before earning a diploma with distinction from the Graben Gymnasium in Prague, where he studied the classics of Latin and Greek. Having finally graduated in 1895, at the age of 20, he began seriously writing poetry and publishing it in magazines, and became well enough known as a poet to travel about Europe on his own, visiting Munich and Berlin and Venice, and then, audaciously, going on an extended trip to Russia with an older married woman, Lou Andreas-Salomé, who was his first great love, a liberated woman with strong literary interests. She prompted him to read Nietzsche and led him to meet Tolstoy. Rilke found Czarist Russia

enchanting; he said it was a land bordering on God, and he made it the setting for his first book, *Geschichten vom Lieben Gott*, or *Stories of the Loving God*, published in 1900 at the age of 25. German readers were intrigued by his religious fables, and even more impressed with his first collection of poems, published in 1902, as *Das Buch der Bilder*, *The Book of Images*. By the time it appeared in print, he had parted with Lou Salomé, and traveled to the artists' colony of Worpswede, near Bremen in northern Germany, where in 1901 he had met and married Clara Westhoff, a talented sculptor who had studied under Rodin in Paris and who urged him to write a book about the noted French sculptor.

So he went to Paris on her recommendation to meet Rodin and start a new phase of his career. He had been commissioned by a German publisher to write a monograph on the sculptor, whose fame was international. As soon as he arrived, Rilke began work on his monograph, a brief illustrated essay summing up Rodin's achievement up to that time. He completed and published *Auguste Rodin*, as it was titled, in 1903, and it was admired as a serious appraisal of the sculptor's achievement from the perspective of a fellow artist. Rilke had written it without interrupting his own work, which showed increasing mastery of German lyric poetry. He would eventually collect it all in two volumes he called *Neue Gedichte*, *New Poems*, published in German in 1907 and 1908, inspired by his years of close observation of Rodin at work in his studio. Critics saw in these new poems a notable concreteness of imagery, a three-dimensional realism in words, which they attributed to the influence of Rodin's sculpture, and which differed from the style of any other German poet.. Rilke never directly described any of Rodin's superb bronze and marble statues, but seemed to enter with uncanny accuracy into the interior of his subjects, which might be animals like the real panther he saw pacing inside a cage, in the menagerie of the Jardin des Plantes, or the carousel of painted animals with children on their

backs, which he watched as it revolved in the Luxembourg gardens, or a child sitting by his mother at the piano, absorbed in hearing her play, or it might simply be moods evoked by the changing seasons or the weather. He had transformed his experiences in Paris into lyrics that seemed drenched with reality. It was as if Rilke had managed to translate Rodin's visual art into his own verbal art. What he had learned from Rodin, he said in his monograph, was that "His art was not built upon a great idea, but upon a minute, conscientious realization, upon the attainable, upon a craft."

Rilke had entered a new world in Rodin's studio, full of finished and unfinished works in plaster or marble that would become masterpieces in the sculptor's hands. "One walks," he wrote, "among these thousand forms overwhelmed with the imagination and the craftsmanship which they represent, and involuntarily one looks for the two hands out of which this world has risen." To Rilke, Rodin had discovered the essential distinction of modern art, the fusion of strength with beauty. He looked at Rodin's first notable sculpture, "The Man with the Broken Nose," and saw the realistic presentation of a human head not outwardly handsome, but inwardly infused with a visible power, giving it a kind of flawed perfection which revealed both the beauty and the ugliness inherent in human nature. To Rilke, Rodin was an artist who had learned how to combine the real and the ideal in human forms. Rodin had educated himself not only by his artistic endeavors, but by serious reading; his favorite poets were Dante and Baudelaire. Neither the medieval Italian poet nor the modern French poet were Romantics; they expressed in their poetry an acute awareness of the fallen nature of man, the capacity for evil as well as for good. Rodin drew figures from both *The Divine Comedy* and *The Flowers of Evil* for many of his most imaginative works. In *The Gates of Hell*, his most ambitious work, which he began in 1870 and never completed, working on it till his death in 1917, he incorporated

many of his greatest single works—The Three Fates, The Thinker, Adam and Eve, The Prodigal Son, Ugolino and his Sons,

Paolo and Francesca—all tormented souls at the threshold of Dante's *Inferno*. Among ancient sculptures, Rodin had always preferred the broken remains of Classical Greek statues exhibited in the Louvre, notably the Venus de Milo and the Winged Victory of Samothrace, to the polished figures of later sculptors. Rilke understood Rodin's taste for fragmentary perfection in art, going often to the Louvre himself, His *New Poems* contain a bittersweet tone that stems from the awareness of death in the midst of life, of the mixture of good and evil in human experience. Most of the *New Poems* were written during his years with Rodin, and the sculptor's influence is detectible in them. Rodin's work includes some deliberately unfinished sculptures, which seem to be emerging out of the marble rather than being carved from it. Though he never wrote a single poem about the statues he had watched fashion, Rilke did write one memorable poem about a headless and limbless Greek statue, the kind of fragmentary art Rodin admired among the antique sculptures in the Louvre. One of his finest sonnets could be called a work of poetic sculpture:

ARCHAIC TORSO OF APOLLO

The god's unheard-of head we cannot know,
nor see the apple-ripeness of his eyes.
His body is a candelabra, though,
from which his gaze, borne downward, still will rise,

still deeply shining. Otherwise the arc
of bending breastbone could not blind you so;
a smile could not reach through the curving, dark,
soft loin, to the genitals, and glow.

This stone would otherwise be only stone,
a stunted pillar shouldering the air--
instead of this translucent, leonine

body, from whose edges light is torn
as if it were a star: now everywhere
is filled with seeing. You must be reborn.

Rodin had gained a true disciple in the young German poet who came to see him late in his career. He also gained a new home. When Rilke met him, he had two studios, one on the Rue de l'Université in the center of Paris, right across the Seine from the Louvre, and another in the suburb of Meudon not far away, where he kept the largest collection of his finished and unfinished works. But he had wanted a place large enough to house them all, and as a last tribute to their friendship, Rilke found it for him. Walking about Paris with his wife Clara, he had come upon the Hotel Biron, a spacious mansion near the Left Bank of the Seine, and in 1908, when their friendship was restored, he invited Rodin to view it. Rodin liked it immediately, and rented the ground floor for his new studio. Being a man of means, thanks to his many lucrative commissions, he soon purchased the whole house and grounds, where he could display his greatest statues indoors as well as outdoors. He lived and worked there the rest of his life, and on his death in 1917, he left it to the city of his birth, where it would become the Rodin Museum, one of the greatest sculpture galleries in the world, and one of the most popular destinations in Paris for lovers of art. It is dedicated to

Rodin, the master sculptor, but is also a memorial to his friendship with Rilke, the youthful German poet who was drawn to him by the power of his art. There, among the hedges and flowers of the garden, are the familiar figures of *The Thinker*, *Ugolino and his Sons*, and Rodin's supreme masterpiece, *The Gates of Hell*. The universal appeal of Rodin's sculpture has long been recognized. So has Rilke's poetry to readers of German, and to many others who read him in translation.. What Rilke wrote of Rodin in his early monograph could be applied equally to himself :”This creator lived so completely in his conceptions, so entirely in the depths of his work, that inspiration or revelation came to him only through the medium of his art.” Though Rilke's 51 short years were no match for Rodin's 77 long years, to those who take in the entire body of his poetry, from the early visionary *Book of Images* through the sculptural *New Poems* and the mystical *Duino Elegies* to the final magical *Sonnets to Orpheus*, the result is comparable to the vast panorama of Rodin's sculpture. What Rilke wrote of Rodin he might well have written of himself:

To discover in all lusts and crimes, in all trials and all depths, an infinite reason for human existence is a part of that great longing that creates poets. Here humanity hungers for something beyond itself. Here hands stretch out for eternity. Here eyes open, see Death and do not fear him.