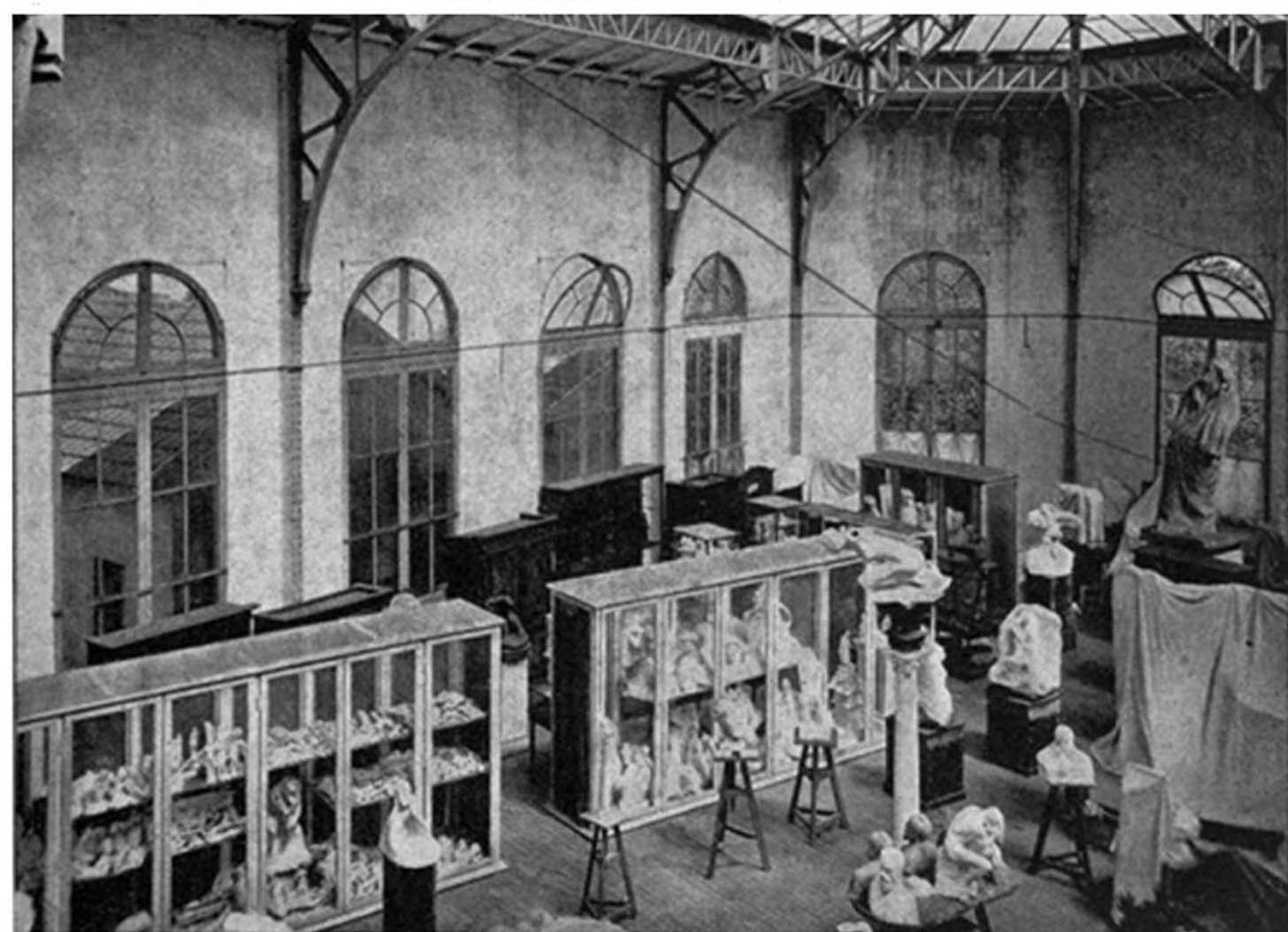


THE PHILOSOPHY OF AUGUSTE RODIN

Some Comments on the Mental and Spiritual Vision of a Famous Sculptor

By ARTHUR SYMONS



AUGUSTE RODIN IN HIS GARDEN AT MEUDON

When the Germans were approaching Paris in the late summer of 1914 the French Government ordered every one away from the suburbs of the capital. M. Rodin abandoned his studio and his unfinished sculptures and went to Rome, where he made the bust of the Pope, printed in the March Vanity Fair. He has now returned to Meudon, where he carries on his work, serenely confident of resting undisturbed by any Teutonic interruption.

JUDITH CLADEL, the daughter of one of the most original writers of our time, wrote two books. One is the life of her father, whose "Va-nu-Pieds" has always seemed to me, not only a masterpiece in itself, but full of excitement, of fury, of imagination, of vehemence; with an almost unique sense of pity where he evokes, in "L'Hercule," the most grotesque tragedy I have ever read, touched with an unforgettable beauty.

HER other book is "Auguste Rodin pris sur la Vie," at once a document and a living thing. The main interest lies in the exactitude with which it records the actual words of Rodin, much as he must have spoken them. There is a fine and subtle personal quality in the record, an inspiring and discriminating enthusiasm; it is Rodin seen through a temperament, and the temperament of a woman who is also an artist. Nothing so valuable has yet been written about Rodin, because there is nothing which tells us so much about him in so nearly his own words, and with so sympathetic a filling up of the gaps which a man's own consciousness of himself leaves for the filling up of others. This book will have its value if it does no more than dispel the legend that Rodin is an *exalté*, following his own art by instinct, and knowing nothing outside it.

IT shows him, with perfect truth, not only the master of his own art—the art of form, of mass—but the profound artist incapable of saying anything of no matter what art without a kind of inevitable justice. In this book may be found the whole duty of the artist, not in the form of theory, but in a

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speech as simple as thought. When Rodin speaks, he puts everything that he has learnt into every sentence, as, in his art, he puts all his genius and all his science into every fragment of clay. Ask him a question, and he answers without pausing without hesitation, without effort,—like one who has meditated so long, so intently, and arrived at so certain a conclusion that the answer is ready, the question having been already asked and answered by himself. Of himself he speaks as if he spoke of others; of others as if he spoke of himself.

BUT it is above all of nature that he speaks, of the unfathomable beauty of life; and when he praises life it is like a priest who praises God. As Spinoza was drunk with divinity, so Rodin is drunk with the divinity of life. In the ardor with which he embraces and begets life out of life, he is with Shakespeare and Balzac. And when he speaks, something of that intense yet equable flame seems to pass into one's veins, and the world lives with a more intimate vitality. "*La Nature!*" we hear him saying in Mlle. Cladel's book, "*je sais l'admirer, maintenant, et je la trouve si parfaite que si le bon Dieu m'appelait pour me demander ce qu'il doit y corriger, je répondrais que tout est bien et qu'il ne faut toucher à rien.*" God's work is perfect; it may not be improved.

THERE are few pages in this inspiring book on which there is not some phrase as simple and as final as that. Reading it with the sound of his voice hardly out of one's ears, it was as if one were still listening to him in that villa at Meudon "*presque vide comme un logis d'ouvrier, mais claire, saine et silencieuse,*" where I had so lately seen him moving to and fro in the midst of his white world of living clay. Some of the words are almost the same that I have heard him say, for, like every man who talks profoundly and sincerely about his own art, he repeats the same thoughts in the same words. And the words are often of that essence of literature which is rarely to be expressed in what is merely literature. "*Quand la voix des cloches est belle, on dirait que c'est celle des arbres! . . . L'Art du moyen âge, c'est le monde en raccourci . . . Ces femmes ravissantes! (des pastels de Latour, on dirait des cerises, et comme des cerises, on les mangerait. . . . Décidément, la lenteur est une beauté. . . . Une statue brisée, c'est un chef-d'oeuvre divisé en beaucoup de chefs-d'oeuvre. . . . L'artiste, comme la femme, a son honneur à garder. . . . L'art n'est pas d'éviter les défauts. C'est d'avoir une qualité qui emporte tout.*" How many and how subtle things are said with "effortless energy" in just those sentences!

FROM the thinker to the artist, in Rodin, there is not even a step. At Meudon, among many things that I knew already by heart, I found one thing wholly new, and, it seems to me, wholly new in sculpture. It is a monument to Puvis de Chavannes, meant to

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be set up in the open air, among trees (why not in the Parc Monceau?), and, as I saw it against the open door of the studio, it seemed already to harmonize with the green branches and the blue sky without. The composition of the group is by holes or gaps rather than by masses, and its simplicity, like all fine simplicity, is that of a geometrical problem which has come suddenly to life. There is a plain oblong stone table, on which rests, supported by a low and simple pedestal, the bust of Puvis, but not quite as we know the bust. The shoulders have been smoothed away, the features as if a little veiled; there is the same austerity, but calmed, with less of the lean energy of the worker; and the head is as if crowned with a living crown, for a slender apple-tree (to be cast in iron) rises from the ground and leans over him, while a figure, resting one hand lightly on the table and reaching out the other drowsily, is about to pluck an apple. It is the Bois Sacré of his own picture, an earthly paradise of some quite happy human joy; and this dreamy figure might be that of a peasant at home in Arcadia. The square lines and hollows of the table, flowing together in a single rhythm, the weaving of all this into one suave pattern, bring I know not what new enchantment into sculpture. It is not greater than the Balzac, but it is different, and not less a piece of living nature. That was a rock, this is an orchard.

NEAR this monument I saw on the ground a great kneeling figure, which I recognized at once to be Ugolino in the Tower of Famine. But, as I looked, the man's likeness seemed to go out of it, and the likeness of a beast came into the hands, clutching the ground like paws, and into the neck lengthened and swollen into a beast's neck, and into the feline eyes, and into the mouth drawn open in a groan or growl which surges upward through the body. It is to represent Nebuchadnezzar eating grass, and the idea came into the figure, once Ugolino's, through some half-seen likeness to a beast, caught in passing, and developed in a series of conscious and significant changes. All Rodin is in this process. Imagination comes to him out of life itself, out of the physical form of things. "*Je ne pénètre pas dans le monde des caractères; je ne les comprend qu'à travers les analogies qu'ils ont avec les formes*"; form being to the sculptor the passion, beauty and meaning of life.