"[An] empathetic and imaginative biography."
—*The New Yorker*

YOU MUST CHANGE YOUR LIFE

THE STORY OF
RAINER MARIA RILKE
AND AUGUSTE RODIN

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INTRODUCTION

I FIRST READ *LETTERS TO A YOUNG POET* WHEN I WAS TWENTY years old. My mother gave me the square, slender book with the title words "*Young Poet*" splayed grandly across the cover in gold script. The author's name, Rainer Maria Rilke, was strange and beautiful.

At the time, I was living in a Midwestern college town a few miles from where I grew up, in a mono-colored landscape of bland struggles and unspecial children. Like everyone else I knew, I had no interest in becoming a writer. As graduation loomed, the only drive I felt unmistakably was the will to leave. But I had no money and no clear destination. My mother said she had taken some comfort in the book when she was a younger woman, and thought perhaps I would appreciate it, too.

Reading it that evening was like having someone whisper to me, in elongated Germanic sentences, all the youthful affirmations I had been yearning to hear. *Loneliness is just space expanding around you. Trust uncertainty. Sadness is life holding you in its hands and changing you. Make solitude your home*. I saw how each negative in my mind could be reversed; having no prospects also meant having no expectations; no money meant no responsibilities.

Looking back, I see how Rilke's advice could be taken rather recklessly. But one can hardly blame him for that. He was only twenty-seven himself when he began writing this series of ten letters to an aspiring nineteen-year-old poet, Franz Xaver Kappus. He could not have fathomed then that they would be canonized as *Letters to a Young Poet*, one of the most frequently quoted texts at weddings, graduations and funerals alike, and what may today be considered the highest-brow self-help book of all time.

As the fledgling poet formed the words, the words formed him, allowing us to witness the making of an artist. What gives the book its enduring appeal is that it crystallizes the spirit of delirious transition in which it was written. You can pick it up during any of life's upheavals, flip it open to a random page, and find a consolation that feels both universal and breathed into your ear alone.

While the genesis of *Letters* is by now well known, fewer readers know that the insight Rilke transmitted to Kappus was not exclusively his own. The poet began sending the letters shortly after he moved to Paris in 1902 to write

a book about his hero, the sculptor Auguste Rodin. To Rilke, the raw, rough-hewn emotion of Rodin's art—the hungry lust of the *The Kiss*, the alienation of *The Thinker*, the tragic suffering of *The Burghers of Calais*—gave form to the souls of young artists everywhere.

Rodin was at the pinnacle of his powers when he granted the unknown writer entrée into his world, at first as his hovering disciple and then, after three years, his most trusted assistant. All the while, Rilke wrote down the master's every adage and bon mot and often paraphrased them for Kappus. In the end, Rodin's voice emanates loudly from behind the pages of the letters, his wisdom reverberating from Rilke to Kappus and to the millions of pleading young minds who've read *Letters* in the century since.

OVER THE YEARS I had heard in passing that Rilke once worked for Rodin. The details rarely went beyond this snippet of trivia, but it always remained a curiosity in my mind. These two personas seemed so incongruous that I almost imagined them living in different centuries or continents altogether. Rodin was a rational Gallic in his sixties, while Rilke was a German romantic in his twenties. Rodin was physical, sensual; Rilke metaphysical, spiritual. Rodin's work plunged into hell; Rilke's floated in the realm of angels. But I soon discovered how tightly their lives intertwined: how the artistic development of one mirrored the other and how their seemingly antithetical natures complemented each other; if Rodin was a mountain, Rilke was the mist encircling it.

As I struggled to grasp how these two figures—one in old age, one as a young man—understood each other, my research brought me to empathy. What we understand today as the capacity to feel the emotions of others is a concept that originated in the philosophy of art, to explain why certain paintings or sculptures move people. Rilke studied the theory in college as the word was first being coined, and soon it appeared in seminal texts by Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Worringer and other leading intellectuals of the time. The invention of empathy corresponds to many of the climactic shifts in the art, philosophy and psychology of *fin-de-siècle* Europe, and it changed the way artists thought about their work and the way observers related to it for generations to come.

As the compatibilities between Rilke and Rodin came into focus, so did the point of divergence that eventually drove them apart. Their relationships with women, and what they believed about a woman's place in society, played a prominent role in the way they saw each other. Both men were attracted to ambitious, independent women, but ultimately married those who sacrificed their own aspirations to support their husbands. Rodin often warned Rilke against womankind's manipulative tendency to distract men from their work, and for a long time Rilke did not question his mentor's chauvinist views. But the death of Rilke's beloved friend, a painter whose genius was cut short by an ill-fated pregnancy, upended everything he thought he knew about what it

means to suffer for one's art.

In the end, this book is a portrait of two artists fumbling through the desultory streets of Paris, finding their paths to mastery. But more than that, it is the story of how the will to create drives young artists to overcome even the most heart-hollowing of childhoods and make their work at any cost. "You Must Change Your Life" was not just art's injunction to Rilke, but one which he commands to all the frail, and hungry-eyed youth who hope to one day raise a timid hand in the air, grasp a tool and strike.

AFTER I READ the last page of the copy of *Letters to a Young Poet* that my mother had given me, I held the cover closed in my hands for a few moments the way one does when they've finished a book they know they'll never fully get over. Then I flipped it back to the beginning and saw that the book had been previously inscribed to my mother. A friend had given it to her when she was around my age, struggling with transitions of her own. He had copied one of Rilke's most famous passages onto the inside cover: "Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love." *Go*, it seemed to say. *Fling yourself at the unknown. Go where you're uninvited, and keep going*.

PART ONE

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Poet *and* Sculptor

CHAPTER 1

ALL ARTISTS MUST LEARN TO SEE, BUT THE IMPERATIVE was literal for young Auguste Rodin. He squinted through five years of boarding school before realizing that the obscurities on the blackboard were the effects of nearsightedness. Instead of gazing blindly ahead, he often turned his attention out the window at a sight too commanding to overlook: the great Cathédral Saint-Pierre in Beauvais, an ancient village in northern France.

To a child, it would have been a monster. Begun in 1225, the Gothic masterpiece was designed to be the tallest cathedral in Europe, with a pyramidal spire teetering five hundred feet into the sky. But after two collapses in three centuries, architects finally abandoned the job in 1573. What they left behind was a formidable sight: a house of cards in rock, glass and iron.

Many locals walked by without even noticing the cathedral, or perhaps only half-consciously registering the fact of its enormity. But for young Rodin it was an escape from the inscrutable lessons in front of him and into a vision of endless curiosity. Its religious function did not interest him; it was the stories written on its walls, the mysterious darkness contained within, the lines, arches, shadow and light, all as harmoniously balanced as the human body. It had a long spinal nave caged in by a ribbed ceiling, flying buttresses flung out like wings or arms, with a heart-like chamber at the center. The way its stabilizing columns swayed in the gales off the English Channel reminded Rodin of the body's perpetual steadying of itself for equilibrium.

Although any comprehension of the building's architectural logic was beyond the boy's years, by the time he left boarding school in 1853, he understood that the cathedral had been his true education. He would revisit the site again and again over the years "with head raised and thrown back" in awe, studying its surfaces and imagining the secrets within. He joined the faithful in their worship at the cathedral, but not because it was a house of god. It was the form itself, he thought, that ought to drive people to their knees and pray.

FRANÇOIS AUGUSTE RENÉ RODIN was born in Paris on November 12, 1840. It was a momentous year for the future of French art, also marking the births of

Émile Zola, Odilon Redon and Claude Monet. But these seeds of the Belle Époque would spring from very arid, conservative soil. Shaken by both the Industrial and French revolutions, Paris under the monarchy of King Louis-Philippe was the city of depravity and poverty depicted in *Les Fleurs du Mals* and *Les Misérables*. New manufacturing jobs attracted thousands of migrant workers, but the city lacked the infrastructure to support them. These newcomers piled into apartments, sharing beds, food and germs. Microbes multiplied in the overflowing sewer system and turned the narrow medieval streets into trenches of disease. As crowds spread cholera and syphilis, a wheat shortage sent bread prices soaring and widened the gap between *les pauvres* and the *haute bourgeoisie* to historic proportions.

As the city scrambled to register a proliferating class of paupers, prostitutes and unwanted children, Rodin's father found plenty of opportunity for work as a police officer. Like the conflicted vice inspector Javert in *Les Misérables*, Jean-Baptiste Rodin patrolled the streets looking for pimps and courtesans throughout the 1832 Paris Uprising, and then later during the 1848 revolution that finally dethroned the king. The job suited the impeccably principled and authoritarian man as he gradually ascended the ranks of the force.

When the barricades rose that year on the Rue Saint-Jacques, Jean-Baptiste and his seamstress wife, Marie, sent eight-year-old Auguste to the boarding school in Beauvais. There the elfin redhead remained safely tucked away from the bloody riots underway in Paris, which saw Baudelaire charge through the streets waving a gun and Balzac nearly starve to death.

Auguste was not an impressive student. He skipped classes and received poor grades, particularly in math. Although Beauvais offered an education more befitting of his father's rising professional stature, the tuition became a burden on the family. After five years, Jean-Baptiste decided not to waste any more money on an education that seemed unlikely to end with a career. When Auguste turned fourteen, his father withdrew him from school. The boy had always enjoyed working with his hands—perhaps trade school would suit him better.

When Auguste returned to Paris, his hometown was barely recognizable. The previous year, France's new president, Napoleon III, had appointed Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann to modernize the city—or to hack it to pieces, depending on who one asked. An obsessive symmetrist, Haussmann carved the landscape into a vast grid, divided into class-segregated arrondissements. He bulldozed the rolling hills to flatten the horizon and impose a sense of order. He widened the old winding brick streets into paved, barricade-proof boulevards that hindered rebels and welcomed strolling shoppers. A comprehensive cleansing initiative went into effect citywide. Engineers designed a new sewer system so advanced it became a tourist attraction. Aboveground the city installed thousands of gas lamps in the streets to light up the night and ward off criminals.

From the rubble of tens of thousands of demolished medieval houses rose

five-story neoclassical apartments, built from uniform blocks of stone and aligned into neat, rectilinear rows. The rapid construction estranged many Parisians from their native city, replacing the traditional homes with those that seemed to belong to no place or time at all. To many, the continuum of scaffolding on the streets looked less like progress than the skeletal remains of their butchered town.

For commercial sculptors, Haussmann's decades-long reconstruction effort meant big business. All of the new building façades needed cornices and stone decorations. The chief training ground for this burgeoning class of craftsmen, as well as for future clock-makers, woodworkers and metalsmiths, was the École Impériale Spéciale de Dessin et de Mathématiques, popularly known as the "Petite École." Tuition-free, the Petite École was the working-class counterpart to the more prestigious Grande École des Beaux-Arts. While the latter groomed graduates like Renoir, Seurat and Bouguereau for careers as fine artists, it was virtually unheard-of for a student from the lower school to show in the official salons.

Rodin, having just returned to Paris unclear of his interests or ambitions, enrolled at the Petite École in 1854. He did not yet consider himself an artist, and he certainly did not share the exalted views espoused by the Grande École professors, who compared art to religion, language and law. Sculpture was then, and would always be, first and foremost a vocation for Rodin.

SOME BIOGRAPHERS HAVE SPECULATED that Rodin's visual shortcomings may have nurtured his hypersensitive tactile intelligence. Perhaps it explained why he was always holding and rounding out lumps of clay in his palms. Even after he finally bought a monocle, he used it only to zoom in on the smallest of details. Most of the time he worked with his nose pressed flush against the clay (or, as one lover wryly noted, against his models).

Like most of his classmates, Rodin entered with the hopes of studying painting. But because it was cheaper to buy paper and pencils than paint and canvases, he settled on drawing classes instead. It was a hardship that had the fortunate outcome, however, of laying Rodin in the capable hands of Horace Lecoq de Boisbaudran, the professor who would first correct, and then truly open, Rodin's eyes.

Each morning, Rodin would gather his art supplies, tie a scarf around his slender neck and set off for his eight o'clock drawing lecture. Lecoq was a squat, soft-faced man, who liked to begin each session with a copying exercise. He believed that keen observation was the indispensable secret all great artists possessed. To master it properly, one had to figure out the essential nature of an object by breaking it down into parts: Copy a straight line from point A to point B, then add in the diagonals, the arcs, and so on until the components take form.

One morning, Lecoq placed an object in front of the class, instructing students to copy it onto paper. As he paced the aisles between desks

observing their work, he noticed Rodin sketching only its crude outline and then making up the details on his own. Rodin did not strike Lecoq as a lazy student, so he couldn't understand why he wasn't completing the task correctly. That's when it occurred to him that perhaps the boy simply could not see. And so it was in a single exercise that Lecoq identified basic myopia as the mysterious ailment that had plagued Rodin for more than a decade.

The other transformative revelation from Lecoq's class took Rodin longer to grasp. The professor often sent students to the Louvre to practice observing the paintings. They were told not to sketch them, but to truly memorize their proportions, patterns and colors. The young Rodin passed his adolescence there on benches seated before works by Titian, Rembrandt and Rubens. They were visions that opened up and expanded inside him like music. He rehearsed every brushstroke in his mind so that he could return home at night, still exalted, and reproduce them from memory.

In his free time, he paid visits to the Bibliothèque Nationale to practice copying masterpieces from illustrated books. He made rough sketches of works by the great Italian draftsmen to take home and later fill in the details from memory. The boy became such a fixture at the library that by the time he turned sixteen he was one of the youngest students to ever receive official admission to the print room.

To some, Lecoq's emphasis on copying seemed to train students only in the reproduction of other people's art. It was in many ways a traditional, mathematical approach to form and dimension that was in line with the curriculum at the Grande École. But Lecoq had a different goal in mind. He believed young artists ought to master the fundamentals of form only so that they might one day break them. "Art is essentially individual," he said. The purpose of the memorization exercises was actually to allow the artists time to acknowledge their reactions to a picture as its properties unfolded to them. Did a gently arched line produce feelings of serenity? Did a densely wound shadow evoke anxiety? Did certain colors trigger memories? Once artists could name these associations they could then begin to harden their own pooling sensations into external forms of their making. Ultimately, Lecoq's modern method encouraged artists to draw things not strictly as they appeared, but as they felt and seemed. Emotion and substance became one.

Rodin's individual style started to emerge at around sixteen. His notebooks from the time reveal an artist already preoccupied with formal continuity and silhouette. In what would become a trademark tendency, he began conjoining the figures in his sketches, linking their bodies together into harmonious groupings that would later evolve into the ring-shaped masterworks of *The Burghers of Calais* and *The Kiss*.

Lecoq's lessons remained with Rodin long after he graduated and had established his reputation over the years as a sculptor of impressions rather than replications. He recalled Lecoq's training decades later, when tasked with modeling a bust of Victor Hugo, who refused to pose for any prolonged period of time. Rodin seized glimpses of the man as he passed by in the hall

or read in another room, and then sculpted the images later from memory. One looks with the eyes, Lecoq had taught him, but one *sees* with the heart.

IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE Rodin had mastered the curriculum offered at the Petite École. He finished lessons so quickly that the teachers eventually ran out of assignments. He did not care to socialize with his classmates; he wanted only to work. The one exception was his uncommonly supportive friend Léon Fourquet, with whom Rodin shared a love of ponderous debates about the meaning of life and the artist's role in society.

The teenagers would stroll through the Luxembourg Gardens wondering whether Michelangelo and Raphael ever despaired for recognition as they did. They fantasized about fame, but Fourquet realized early on that this would be Rodin's fate alone. While Fourquet would go on to master the art of carving marble—a skill Rodin never learned—he always saw an aura of destiny surrounding Rodin and would later spend several years working for his friend. "You were born for art, while I was born to cut in marble what is germinating in your head—that's why we shall always be together," Forquet once wrote him.

By 1857, Rodin had won the school's top drawing prizes. It seemed he had excelled at every subject except one, and it was the gold standard of artistic achievement: to render the human body. To Rodin, the human form was a "walking temple." To model it in clay would be the closest he would ever come to building a cathedral. The human figure had fascinated Rodin for as long as he could remember. As a boy he used to watch his mother roll out and cut cake dough into playful shapes. Once she passed him the floury lump and he joined in, pinching out heads and bulky bodies for his mother to submerge in the bubbling oil. Once the dough men fried to a crisp, she spooned them out, revealing one hilariously disfigured character after another. It was, he later said, his first art lesson.

But since statue commissions went only to the "real" fine artists, trade schools had no reason to offer life drawing classes. If Rodin wanted to study the human form, he would have to transfer to the Grande École. So, in 1857, at the end of his third year at the Petite École, Rodin decided to embark upon the rigorous application.

At the six-day entrance exam, Rodin joined a semicircle of painters and sculptors before a live model each afternoon. According to some accounts, he waved his arms so wildly as he worked that the other students gathered around to watch. Because he was already producing the disproportionate, heavy-limbed figures for which he would become famous, his art proved as unconventional as his gesticulating and it was, in the end, too much for the admissions committee. He passed the drawing exam but failed in sculpture and his application was denied.

Rodin reapplied the following semester, and the semester after that, and was turned away two more times. The rejections sent Rodin into such despair

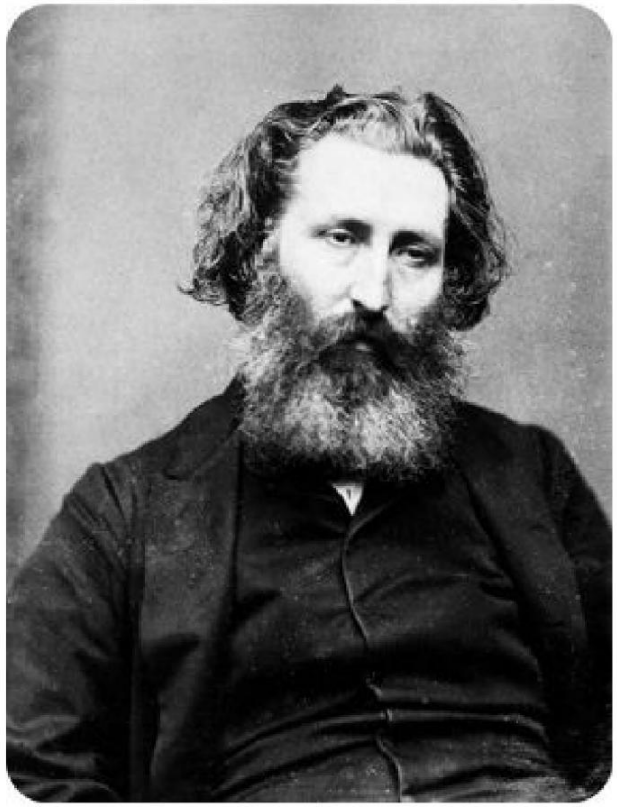
that his father grew worried. He wrote the boy a letter urging him to toughen up. “The day will come when one can say of you as of truly great men—the artist Auguste RODIN is dead, but he lives for posterity, for the future.” Jean-Baptiste knew nothing about art, except that it paid poorly, but he understood the power of perseverance: “Think about words such as: energy, will, determination. Then you will be victorious.”

Rodin eventually coped by turning against the pretentious academy, which he decided was filled with nepotists and guarded by elites who “hold the keys of the Heaven of Arts and close the door to all original talent!” He suspected that his exclusion had to do with his inability to supply letters of recommendation from renowned artists, which other boys had been able to obtain through family connections.

Rodin gave up on art school for good. He continued making his own work, but, denied his “heaven,” he stopped copying the idyllic Greek and Roman statues and adopted a kind of aesthetic of survival. From then on, his art was to be grounded in life, in all its unexceptional misery. He began to accentuate forms that clung desperately to their existence, and those that had been grotesquely defeated by it.

WHEN HE WAS EIGHTEEN, it came time for Rodin to earn a proper living. So, in 1858, he took a job stirring plaster and cutting molds for building ornaments. He was a cog in an assembly line that began with an architect whose blueprints would call for flowers or caryatids or demon heads, which Rodin would then sculpt in plaster. He then gave the model to a mason to reproduce in stone or metal. Finally it went to the construction worker to affix to the side of a building.

This sculpt-by-numbers approach left Rodin feeling depressed and uninspired. Once he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and for a moment saw himself as his uncle, who had also been a plaster craftsman and wore a smock streaked with white paste. He was starting to believe that this job might be it for him. Perhaps he had been foolish to think he could be an artist. “When one is born a beggar, one had better get busy and pick up the beggar’s pouch,” he lamented to his sister at the time.



Auguste Rodin circa 1875.

But the more Rodin eased into the routine of his job, the more a new world began to open up for him there. One day he was gathering leaves and flowers from a garden with his co-worker Constant Simon. After they brought these samples back to the studio to model in plaster, Simon observed Rodin's technique. "You don't go about that correctly," he told his younger colleague. "You make all your leaves flatwise. Turn them, on the contrary, with the tips facing you. Execute them in *depth* and not in *relief*." The form should push out from the center and advance toward the viewer, he explained, otherwise it was merely an outline.

"I understood at once," Rodin said. "That rule has remained my absolute basis." He couldn't believe he hadn't come to this brilliantly simple logic sooner. Through the example of a leaf he had learned more than most students did in all of art school, he thought. Young people were so busy copying the sculptures of antiquity that they scarcely even noticed nature. And they were so preoccupied with emulating the latest greats in the salons that they failed to recognize the everyday mastery of craftspeople like Simon.

Perhaps the monotonous labor he endured now was what the cathedral builders felt when they laid brick upon brick to build their masterpieces, Rodin

thought. He did not share their devotion to god, but he did feel a love that intense for nature. Perhaps if he could sculpt each leaf as if it were a tiny act of worship, then he could take pride in his work as a humble servant of nature. After all, no cathedral builder was singled out for his work, nor would glory come to any one building ornamenter. The cathedral was a triumph that belonged to all its artisans, and it would outlive every last one of its nameless makers.

"How I should love to sit at the table with such stone carvers," Rodin went on to write. He would later warn young artists to beware of the "transitory intoxication" of inspiration. "Where did I learn to understand sculpture? In the woods by looking at the trees, along roads by observing the formation of clouds . . . everywhere except in schools."

Yet Rodin still had to accomplish one crucial lesson from nature, that of the human form. Without access to live models, he settled for studying humbler versions of anatomy. He became a regular at the Dupuytren, a medical museum just down the street from the Petite École. The diseased body parts on view there undoubtedly influenced the contorted shapes of the hundreds of hands Rodin would sculpt over the years, some of which physicians have since claimed they can diagnose by sight.

Other times Rodin studied animal figures. There were markets all over town for the buying and selling of dogs, pigs and cattle, but Rodin's favorite was the horse fair on the corner of the Boulevard de l'Hopital, in front of the Salpêtrière psychiatric facility. He watched the owners lead their horses out from stalls and trot them up and down the dirt path. Sometimes he saw the naturalist painter Rosa Bonheur there, dressed as a man to avoid attention as she worked on reproductions of her famous painting *The Horse Fair*.

He also frequented the Jardin des Plantes, a seventy-acre menagerie in southeastern Paris that was home to a botanical garden, the world's first public zoo and a natural history museum, where Rodin enrolled in a course on zoological drawing. It was held in the museum's dank basement, and an uninspiring instructor lectured Rodin's class about skeletal structure and bone composition. When it came time for critique the man shuffled between the sculptors' blocks, muttering little more than, "All right, that's very good." The students, bored by the scientific minutiae, amused themselves by making fun of the old man's cheap suits and the way his shirt buttons fought to contain his paunch.

In a decision he would come to regret, Rodin dropped out before the end of the term. He later learned that the professor was a true master in disguise: Antoine-Louis Barye, one of the finest animal sculptors in European history. Sometimes called the "Michelangelo of the Ménagerie," Barye had been examining the caged carnivores of the Jardin since 1825, often with his friend the painter Eugène Delacroix. When an animal died, Barye was first on the scene to dissect it and compare its measurements to those in his drawings. Once, in 1828, Delacroix notified him of a new cadaver by writing, "The lion is dead. Come at a gallop."

Barye was a former goldsmith who defied the rigid realism of the day with wildly expressive bronzes. In his hands, a gnu being strangled by a python did not merely collapse to the ground in defeat. Instead, the beast's body merged with the serpent's coil as it sucked away its life and identity in what became a potent allegory for the dehumanization of war. Reviewing Barye's work in the 1851 Paris Salon, the critic Edmond de Goncourt wrote that Barye's *Jaguar Devouring a Hare* marked the death of historicist sculpture and the triumph of modern art.

There was no shortage of demand for work by the great *animalier*, but Barye was a perfectionist who refused to sell anything that did not live up to his exacting standards. Thus he never earned the money to match his talent and went through life looking like a pauper.

It was not until Rodin reached middle age that he finally recognized the significance of Barye's animal studies. The epiphany came to him one afternoon while strolling down a Paris street, gazing absentmindedly into the shop windows. A pair of bronze greyhounds in one of the displays caught his eye: "They ran. They were here, they were there; not for an instant did they remain in one spot," he said of the sculptures. When he looked closer he saw that they bore the signature of his old professor.

"An idea came to me suddenly and enlightened me; this is art, this is the revelation of the great mystery; how to express movement in something that is at rest," Rodin said. "Barye had found the secret."

From then on, motion became the dominant concern in Rodin's work. He began intuiting tiny gestures—the curve of a model's arm or a bend in the spine—and amplifying them into new, large-scale actions. His human figures took on an animal intensity; in sculpting one especially muscular model he said he imagined her as a panther. Years later the critic Gustave Geffroy identified Rodin's debt to his old master. Rodin "takes up the art of sculpture where Barye left off; from the lives of animals he proceeds to the animal life of human beings," he wrote in *La Justice*.

Once Rodin had discovered his task—to express inner feelings through outward movement—his work departed further from that of his historical heroes and began to fall into step with the flux and anxiety of the rapidly modernizing world around him.

CHAPTER 2

IN A CHILDHOOD DREAM, THE YOUNG POET LAY ON A BED OF dirt beside an open grave. A tombstone etched with the name “René Rilke” loomed overhead. He did not dare lift a limb for fear that the slightest movement might topple the heavy stone and knock him into the grave. The only way to escape his paralysis was to somehow change the engraving on the stone from his name to his sister’s. He did not know how to do it, but he understood that freedom required rewriting his fate.

The fear of being crushed by a rock became a recurring theme in the boy’s nightmares. It wasn’t in every case a tombstone, but it was always something “too big, too hard, too close,” and it often portended a painful transformation; a rebirth contingent upon the downfall of that which came before him.

Indeed, it was a death that chaperoned the poet’s very entrance into the world, on December 4, 1875. A young housewife from a well-to-do family, Sophia Rilke lost an infant girl a year before giving birth to her only son. From the moment he was born, she saw him as her replacement daughter and christened him with the feminine name René Maria Rilke. Sometimes she called him by her own nickname, Sophie. Born two months prematurely, the boy stayed small for his age and passed easily for a girl. His mother outfitted him in ghostly white dresses and braided his long hair until he entered school. This splintered identity had mixed consequences for Rilke. On the one hand, he grew up believing that there was something fundamentally mistaken about his nature. But on the other, his acquiescence pleased his mother, which was something no one else seemed able to do, especially not his father.

A young Rainer Maria Rilke, dressed as a girl, circa 1880.

Josef Rilke worked for the Austrian army as a railroad station master. He never rose to the officer's rank that his well-bred wife had hoped for, and he spent the rest of his marriage paying for the disappointment. His good looks and early professional promise initially won his bride over, but Sophia prized status above all else and never forgave Josef for failing to bring her the noble title she had bargained for.

Josef, meanwhile, resented the way she babied René, and later blamed her for the boy's incessant versifying. He was not mistaken. Sophia had decided that if they weren't going to be granted nobility, they would fake it, and so she began teaching René poetry in an attempt to "refine" him. She had him memorizing Friedrich Schiller verses before he could read and copying entire poems by age seven. She insisted he learn French, too, but certainly not Czech. Under the imperial rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Czech was relegated to the servant classes, while German became the dominant language in Prague.

Born into this segregated city, Rilke quickly discovered that gender was not the only boundary that proved contradictory in his early life. He was part of

Prague's German-speaking minority, which enjoyed vast cultural and economic advantages over the Czech majority. Liberal families like the Rilkes wanted to live peacefully alongside the Slavs, but they kept to their own schools, theaters and neighborhoods, delineated by street signs written in their own language. Rilke would go on to speak Russian, Danish and French, but he always regretted never learning the language native to his homeland.

When René turned nine, Sophia left Josef. She had become almost fanatically religious and, as Rilke later reasoned, was a woman who "wanted something indefinite of life." By that time René had grown out of his girlish looks into a slender, narrow-shouldered adolescent and his parents sent him to live at the St. Pölten military academy near Vienna. Rilke was not opposed to following in his father's footsteps, but not because he was interested in combat or physical training. He liked the elegant uniform, the order, and the rituals the military represented.

But Sophia and Josef's hope that their son might achieve what his father had not was promptly dashed. While the move had succeeded in replacing René's dolls with dumbbells, it also thrust him into a roost with fifty brutal boys, with whom he had nothing in common. He quickly discovered that life at the academy had little to do with discipline or elegance.

Young Rilke longed only to join the adult world. He was too intellectual to keep company with the working-class boys and he wasn't refined enough for the aristocratic ones. Solitude might have suited him fine, but he wouldn't be so lucky. To his classmates, René was fragile, precocious and a moral scold —all qualities that aligned into ideal crosshairs for bullies. In an account of one of the many attacks he suffered as a boy it becomes painfully clear why he was seen as a target:

> Once when I was struck so hard in the face that my knees shook, I said to my unjust attacker—I can still hear it—in the calmest of voices "I will suffer it because Christ suffered it, in silence and without complaining, and while you were striking me, I prayed to my dear Lord that he may forgive you." The miserable coward simply stood there for a moment dumbfounded, then burst into a fit of scornful laughter . . .

The boy went to the chapel to recover from his beating and to nurse his righteous indignation. It was around this time that he developed the chronic, undefined infirmity that would afflict him for the rest of his life. Some thought Rilke's mysterious ailments were entirely imagined and, indeed, when a lung infection took the boy out of school for six weeks, he seemed to learn that sympathy could be a deft social strategy. But others who saw him in these states testified that his trembling muscles and pallid complexion were too convincing to discount.

In any case, the sickroom became Rilke's sanctuary at military school. It provided immediate asylum from his antagonizers and, more importantly, allowed him time and space to read. Lying in bed, he rolled around with

sentences day and night. He cried into pages of Goethe. His grades in literature classes started to improve, though they dropped in fencing and gym. Despite his failing physical education, Rilke still thought he could be a military officer, and at one point tried to prove it to his instructors by writing an eighty-page “History of the Thirty-Years War.”

At the suggestion of teachers, the boy began submitting poems to newspapers, and several were accepted. He survived on these small consolations until he turned fifteen, when, finally, his parents saved him from that “dungeon of childhood,” as he called the academy. But he fared no better at the business school they sent him to next in the Austrian town of Linz. Noticing with “scorn and uneasiness” that his son was still writing poems, Josef tried to convince René to focus more on his studies and write only on the weekends. He saw no reason why his son couldn’t maintain both a job and a hobby, which was how he saw poetry. But to René, his poems were his “dream children,” and nothing was more upsetting than the thought of sacrificing them to a dull office job. He had decided that the artist who only wrote on the weekends was “not an artist at all.”

Within the year, René’s Uncle Jaroslav took pity on the boy and offered to pay for a private tutor in Prague so he could finish his studies at home. A prosperous lawyer, René’s uncle was now known as Jaroslav *von* Rilke, having achieved the noble title that so painfully eluded his brother. Jaroslav had no trouble covering the expense and, with no surviving sons of his own, saw René as a potential protégé to one day take over his law firm and legacy.

Jaroslav instituted a stipend to support René during the remainder of his high school education and through university. Of course, the aspiring poet had no intention of going to law school. He had made up his mind to become a writer—a detail he was able to spare his uncle, for Jaroslav died of a stroke that winter.

Although Rilke did not carry out his uncle’s wishes, he did not squander the man’s generosity. The year following his graduation he wrote dozens of short stories, plays, news articles and launched his own literary journal. He joined a writers’ group and even made a few friends. In 1894, Rilke published his first book, a volume of gushing love poems titled *Life and Songs* that was inspired by his first serious girlfriend, “a bright shooting-star” called Valerie. The sentimental verses were sodden with the dewy flowers and singing maidens of German Romanticism, and the book did not reward him with the immediate glory he thought he deserved.

When Rilke’s psychodramatic playwriting fared no better, he did not consider the possibility that his work was amateur. Instead, he blamed readers for failing to understand it. Prague was a town of the bygone, filled with graveyards, castles and parochial dilettantes, he concluded. The people there were so stuck in the past they even looked old. “The only progress they know is when their coffins rot to pieces or their garments fall apart,” he wrote. While Rilke admired many Slavic traditions, including their folk history and reverence for the land, the people were too poor to concern themselves with

literary pursuits. The Austrians were worse because they could afford to embrace the arts, but cared only about status and money.

When Rilke turned twenty, he realized that if his poetry didn't take off soon his parents would have their doubts validated. He would be forced to take a job at a bank or law firm in Prague and stay there, maybe forever. The city was not an environment hospitable to creativity, with its air that could hardly "be breathed, thick with stale summer and unconquered childhood," he wrote.

Rilke had met young people who moved to cities known for nurturing artists. Many had gone to Paris, but Rilke believed the French exerted too much influence over the artistic production of Eastern Europe. He saw a better option in Munich, then the intellectual nerve center of Europe, where the most coveted social seat in town was at the lecture hall. At the cafés, secular youth debated Nietzsche's declaration of "the death of God," while the artists revolted against the academy, resulting in the Munich Secession of 1892—five years before Gustav Klimt led the movement in Vienna.

Rilke could continue living on his uncle's stipend there as long as he was in school. So, in the fall of 1896, he enrolled in classes at the University of Munich with the intention of rejecting everything that had defined him thus far. His mother's zealous Catholicism, his father's military aspirations, Prague's provincialism—even his own name—he was prepared to leave it all behind.

AN INTELLECTUAL TREND in German-speaking countries at the end of the nineteenth century was the study of individuals and how they functioned within societies. Philosophers and neurologists were combining expertise to create new sciences of the mind. Phenomenology was founded to study the nature of consciousness; psychoanalysis for the unconscious. Art, and the study of art known as aesthetics, became a common point of convergence within these disciplines. Psychologists began to see how looking at people's emotional responses to art, and the motivations that drove some to create it, could help explain aspects of human nature that had never been tested in laboratories.

The German doctor Wilhelm Wundt accidentally forged the birth of psychology in the 1860s, while he was conducting some routine research on reaction times. He had rigged the pendulum of a clock into a timer he called a "thought meter," when it occurred to him that perhaps his experiment measured not only a neurological phenomenon, but an unconscious one. Reaction times seemed to bridge the gap between voluntary and involuntary attention, between the brain *and* the mind. If science could measure the former, he couldn't see why it wouldn't also apply to the latter. In 1879, Wundt founded the world's first laboratory for psychological experimentation in Leipzig.

It took a philosopher from the next generation, Theodor Lipps, to draw the link between Wundt's new discipline and his own, aesthetics. Lipps had been a forerunner in the creation of phenomenology, but started to break away

from the field and its figurehead, Edmund Husserl, in order to pursue a psychological approach to his central question: Why does art give us pleasure?

At the time, scientists largely reduced art appreciation to mathematical properties. They believed that certain unities of geometry were simply more agreeable to the mind's eye than others. But Lipps refused to settle for this rigid, retinal explanation. He thought it could help explain perception, but that it had little to do with pleasure, which he suspected involved more subjective forces, like an individual's mood or educational background.

Perhaps the equation could be reversed, he decided. Rather than art grafting pleasure onto the eye, maybe the eye made the art. After all, the distribution of paint on canvas could not be considered beautiful without a beholder to see it as such. (A contemporary of Lipps's in Vienna, the art historian Alois Riegl, later called this the "beholder's involvement.") In this view, colors are simply pigments until a mind filters them into what one might call tones, or hue-based triggers of memory and emotion. The moment a viewer recognizes a painting as beautiful, it transforms from an object into a work of art. The act of looking, then, becomes a creative process, and the viewer becomes the artist.

Lipps found a name for his theory in an 1873 dissertation by a German aesthetics student named Robert Vischer. When people project their emotions, ideas or memories onto objects they enact a process that Vischer called *einfühlung*, literally "feeling into." The British psychologist Edward Titchener translated the word into English as "empathy" in 1909, deriving it from the Greek *empatheia*, or "in pathos." For Vischer, *einfühlung* revealed why a work of art caused an observer to unconsciously "move in and with the forms." He dubbed this bodily mimesis "muscular empathy," a concept that resonated with Lipps, who once attended a dance recital and felt himself "striving and performing" with the dancers. He also linked this idea to other somatosensory imitations, like yawns and laughter.

Empathy explained why people sometimes describe the experience of "losing themselves" in a powerful work of art. Maybe their ears deafen to the sounds around them, the hair rises on the backs of their necks or they lose track of the passage of time. Something produces a "gut feeling" or triggers a flood of memory, like Proust's madeleine. When a work of art is effective, it draws the observer out into the world, while the observer draws the work back into his or her body. Empathy was what made red paint run like blood in the veins, or a blue sky fill the lungs with air.

Paradoxically, then, empathy is by definition a selfish emotion: we empathize with the external in order to enjoy ourselves. Empathy is life-affirming, it allows us to permeate the world. On the other hand, when art fails to activate this response, people may say that it doesn't "move" them. That it is "impenetrable" or they cannot wrap their "head around it." In these instances, perception is the only sense at work.

Intellectuals across Europe quickly took note of Lipps's research on

einfühlung and began to build upon it. Art historians had been attempting to explain why certain cultures created certain art, what Riegl called *Kunstwollen*, or the "will to art." In 1906, one of Lipps's students, Wilhelm Worringer, proposed a seminal theory that coupled his professor's writing on empathy with that of another professor, the Berlin sociologist Georg Simmel. Adopting Simmel's use of binaries—a relativist view that held that to understand one concept, such as symmetry, one should also consider its opposite, asymmetry—Worringer described the binary that he believed defined all of art history, and titled his book after it, *Abstraction and Empathy*.

But it was psychologists who transformed the obscure term from German art history into the cornerstone of human emotion that we understand as empathy today. In Vienna, the young professor Sigmund Freud wrote to a friend in 1896 that he had "immersed" himself in the teachings of Lipps, "who I suspect has the clearest mind among present-day philosophical writers." Several years later, Freud thanked Lipps for giving him "the courage and capacity" to write his book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. He went on to advance Lipps's research further when he made the case that empathy should be embraced by psychoanalysts as a tool for understanding patients. He urged his students to observe their patients not from a place of judgment, but of empathy. They ought to recede into the background like a "receptive organ" and strive toward the "putting of oneself in the other person's place," he said.

Little known outside of specialist circles today, Lipps was a kind of intellectual celebrity and a highly sought-after speaker. On Friday nights he hosted a lively psychology club, where participants debated the distinction between actions and nonactions, and logicians pitted themselves against psychologists. For a time Lipps also edited an art journal that had the ambitious aim of chronicling the history of art, not dating back to the earliest paintings, but to the origins of creativity itself. When he was appointed chair of the University of Munich's philosophy department in 1894, thinkers and artists from around the Continent signed up for his classes. The Romanian artist Constantin Brancusi was a student, as was Wassily Kandinsky, from Russia. Lipps's foundational aesthetics course was also one of the first Rilke enrolled in upon his arrival from Prague.

BY RILKE'S OWN ADMISSION, he still felt like a child when he arrived in Munich. He moved to Schwabing, a district in the center of town known for a high concentration of students and artists. Apart from Lipps's class, he signed up for courses on Darwin and Renaissance art, taking an especially keen interest in the paintings of Sandro Botticelli, whose sad, pleading-eyed Madonnas seemed to "stand at the heart of the longing of our time."

Soon enough, Rilke found himself moving within social circles alongside Siegfried Wagner, the composer's son, and Jakob Wassermann, the German novelist. Wassermann introduced Rilke to the work of the Danish writer Jens

Peter Jacobsen, whose book about a young “dreamer, floundering around in a slough of doubt and self-analysis,” *Niels Lyhne*, would become an essential source of comfort to Rilke for years to come. But even this would not compare with the gift Wassermann gave him when, in 1897, he introduced the poet to Lou Andreas-Salomé. For a woman of any era, Andreas-Salomé’s intellectual influence was extraordinary. For a radical Russian feminist in the nineteenth century, it was almost inconceivable.

Louise von Salomé, as she was named at birth, was an accomplished philosopher and writer, but today she is better remembered as a muse. She had rejected two marriage proposals from Friedrich Nietzsche, who once called her “by far the smartest person I ever knew,” and another from Nietzsche’s friend the philosopher Paul Rée. Although she didn’t want to marry either man, she was fascinated by their minds and suggested they all live together in an intellectual “holy trinity.” Astonishingly, they agreed.

Lou Andreas-Salomé with Friedrich Nietzsche and Paul Rée, 1882.

A photo taken in 1882 to celebrate their "Pythagorean friendship," as Nietzsche called it, shows the two men hauling Salomé, then twenty-one, in a wooden cart while she brandishes a whip. The trio's amusement didn't last long, however, before jealousy set in and destroyed the union before it had a chance to materialize. Salomé decided that she wanted to spend the winter in Berlin with Rée alone. He was only too happy to comply, writing, "I really ought to be thinking about 'the origin of conscience in the individual,' but, dammit, I am always thinking about Lou."

Nietzsche, feeling betrayed and abandoned, met Rée and Salomé at a train station in Germany only to storm off and never see them again. He wrote a letter soon after to inform them that their cruelty had compelled him to take an "enormous quantity" of opium. But instead of committing suicide, Nietzsche actually retreated to northern Italy, where in ten days he wrote *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which includes the famous line thought to refer to Salomé, "Thou goest to women? Do not forget thy whip!"

Four years later, Salomé married the forty-one-year-old philologist Carl Andreas. (He, too, reportedly threatened to kill himself, if she rejected him.) Her consent came with two considerable caveats, however: no sex and no children. She was to remain free to continue her affair with Rée or anyone

else she might fancy, and Andreas could also take lovers. She even offered to help introduce him to prospective paramours. The arrangement did not always go smoothly—Andreas fathered a child with their housekeeper, who lived with the couple for the rest of her life—but they never parted.

Andreas-Salomé's main gift was her acutely analytical mind. She had an uncanny ability to comprehend abstruse ideas from the era's most formidable thinkers, often illuminating aspects of their own arguments that they had not even conceived. She was a kind of intellectual therapist: listening, describing, analyzing and repeating back their ideas in order to illuminate the places where shadows fell in their logic.

Rilke added himself to Andreas-Salomé's long list of admirers almost from the moment he learned of her existence. He had just written his "Visions of Christ" cycle, a Nietzsche-inspired challenge to Christian dogma, when an editor friend suggested he read her essay on similar themes, "Jesus the Jew."

As he pored over her words, an intimate literary kinship formed in Rilke's mind overnight. Soon he began mailing her unsigned poems. She did not learn who this anonymous correspondent was until the spring of 1897, when she paid a visit to Munich. When Rilke heard she was coming to town he convinced Wassermann, a mutual friend, to stage an introduction over tea.

Andreas-Salomé, fourteen years Rilke's senior, arrived to Wassermann's apartment in a dress of loose, cottony layers that softened her muscular contours. She had a wide, Russian face and tied her ashy hair in a tousled knot atop her head. Rilke quickly saw that she was a mesmerizing storyteller. She commanded the room's attention with her direct, matter-of-fact descriptions of people and places, yet, strangely, she told narratives out of order, without regard to temporality or linearity at all. Rilke gazed at her "gentle dreamy lost smile," while she remarked later in her journal upon his soulful eyes. Less kindly, she also wrote that he had "no back to his head."

Rilke was so instantly enraptured with Andreas-Salomé that he wrote to his mother that night to tell her about meeting "the famous writer." The next morning he wrote another letter, this time to Andreas-Salomé, confessing that the late nights he had spent reading her work had aroused in him a sense of intimacy: "Yesterday was not the first twilight hour I have spent with you," he told her, adding that he hoped he might one day read her some of his own verses. "I can think of no deeper joy."

Andreas-Salomé was more compelled by Rilke's "human qualities" than by his poetry at first. She could not remember the verses he had enclosed in those early, unsigned letters, but she reread one of her responses to them now and it led her to believe that she "must not have liked them very much." She did, however, like Rilke's "manly grace" and his "style of gentle but inviolable control and dominance." She thought his physical appearance was in perfect accord with his personality. Two weeks after their first meeting they took a weekend trip to a Bavarian lake, where they immediately became lovers.

They spent the next several months together, with Rilke reading to her by

day, and Andreas-Salomé cooking borscht for him in the evening. He soon adopted her bohemian habits of walking barefoot and eating a vegetarian diet. And he now shunned stiff professional attire in favor of tunics and loose peasant garb.

Rilke felt for Andreas-Salomé the kind of reckless passion he would later ascribe to young people who "fling themselves at each other, when love takes possession of them, scatter themselves, just as they are, in all their untidiness, disorder, confusion." Andreas-Salomé did not return Rilke's unhinged adoration, but she began to genuinely appreciate his talent and believed that the qualities she disliked in him could be fixed with a little grooming. She began to mold the poet into a version of himself that she found more attractive. She advised him to copy her courtly style of handwriting and to cultivate his masculinity. The name René was too French and feminine, she said, and suggested he change it to the sturdier, Germanic Rainer.

The poet hungered to become her creation. More than his first great lover, Andreas-Salomé was his confidante, his mentor, his muse, even a kind of mother—if not to the young man, then at least to the artist maturing inside him. "I am still soft, I can be like wax in your hands. Take me, give me a form, finish me," he wrote in an autobiographical story when he met her. Rilke welcomed her rechristening him with this enigmatic new name, which would take on an almost mythical identity of its own. To the author Stefan Zweig, the letters looked as if they ought to be hammered into fine threads of gold. "Rainer Maria Rilke," wrote another friend, "your very name is a poem."

Within the year, Rilke dropped out of the university in Munich to follow Andreas-Salomé to Berlin. Her native Russia was becoming a kind of mythopoetic symbol of the Slavic identity Rilke felt he had been denied growing up under the Austrian Empire. She had been teaching him the language, and he now hoped to learn it well enough to translate Russian literature.

In 1899, the pair took their first trip to Moscow together. To outsiders, the tall older woman and the meek young poet did not always register as a couple. The literary critic Fyodor Fiedler mistook Rilke for Andreas-Salomé's "pageboy," while the writer Boris Pasternak remembered a chance encounter at a train station with the poet and "his mother or older sister." To confuse matters more, Andreas-Salomé's husband joined them.

But the lovers paid no attention to the gossip. There was only one matter that concerned them in those days: to meet their shared idol Leo Tolstoy. It was no easy task. The novelist, by then retired and in his seventies, was not a welcoming man. He now only wrote bitter screeds denouncing modern art and the godless young people responsible for it. That might have served as a warning to his young visitors, but they were resolute. Andreas-Salomé called on some of her well-placed Russian acquaintances and managed to secure an invitation to his house for tea.

When they arrived, the stooped old man greeted them grumpily. He was bald, with a white beard that had endured a lot of pulling and twisting. Almost

immediately he started shouting at Andreas-Salomé in a rapid-fire Russian incomprehensible to Rilke. But it did not take long for him to figure out that the only reason Tolstoy had accepted the meeting was because he had taken issue with some of Andreas-Salomé's writing and wanted to tell her off. A devout convert to Christianity, Tolstoy told her that she overly romanticized Russian folk traditions in her work and warned her not to partake in peasant superstitions.

The conversation was interrupted by a man's shrieks in the other room. Tolstoy's adult son, noticing that Rilke and Andreas-Salomé's coats were *still* hanging in the hall, had cried out, "What! all the world is still here!" The intruders took that as their final cue to leave and rushed out the door, with Tolstoy ranting behind them the whole way. They could still hear his voice bellowing halfway down the street until finally the sound of church bells drowned it out.

Despite their traumatic introduction to Tolstoy, the pair decided to try and meet him once again the following summer. When they arrived at his country estate this time he gave them a choice between joining his family for lunch or taking a walk, just the three of them. Anyone acquainted with the Tolstoys knew that the only person surlier than Leo was his wife, Sophia, so the guests eagerly accepted the second option. A conversation about literature began benignly enough, but soon Tolstoy started raving about poetry as an impoverished art form. To make matters more awkward for Rilke, the man spoke almost exclusively to Andreas-Salomé, ignoring the poet altogether. Rilke later wrote in his diary that Tolstoy seemed to have "made a dragon out of life so as to be the hero who fought it."

Rilke might have been more devastated by Tolstoy's rejection had it not given him insight into his next project, a book of poetry in the form of a medieval prayer book. Once he returned to Berlin, he began writing *The Book of Hours*, a chronicle about his search for a poetic god, which he would complete in three parts between 1899 and 1903. When the book came out, he inscribed a copy to Andreas-Salomé:

LAID IN THE HANDS OF LOU
for all time.
Rainer.

Rilke largely had her to thank for inspiring what would become the most prominent book of his lifetime. "You took my soul in your arms and cradled it," he later told her. Her emphatic criticism of his sentimentality had begun to strengthen his verses, while his passion for her drove him to write one of the headiest love poems ever written:

Put out my eyes, and I can see you still,
Slam my ears to, and I can hear you yet;
And without any feet can go to you;
And tongueless, I can conjure you at will.

Break off my arms, I shall take hold of you
And grasp you with my heart as with a hand . . .

In those days, Rilke might actually have enjoyed blindness if it meant that Andreas-Salomé would guide him. He relied on the care of others to what might seem a selfish degree had he not loved them back just as lavishly. But by the summer of 1900, his neediness started to annoy her. His letters stalked her everywhere she went. Once, in Russia, she left him behind for a few days to visit some family abroad and he threw a tantrum. A letter begging her to return contained some of his ugliest prose yet, she thought, and persuaded her only to stay away longer. Abandoned for ten days, Rilke sank into despair. When she returned to find him trembling and feverish, she announced that she would be returning to Berlin on her own; he ought to make his own plans. She had told him that she longed to "be more by myself, as I was until about four years ago," when they first met. But privately she wished in her diary that she could tell him to "go away, *go completely away*." To achieve that, "I would be capable of brutality. (*He must go!*)"

The impending separation devastated Rilke, but he did not dare defy her. The day after they returned to Berlin he accepted an invitation to visit a friend at an artist colony in northern Germany. It would give her some space for now, but, as Rilke's verse had promised, she would not be able to swat him away so easily. For the rest of his life, he would cry out to Andreas-Salomé whenever he couldn't write, or whenever he tumbled into recesses of himself so remote that he feared he might disappear forever. Each time, she would come, take him calmly by the hand and lead him back into the light.

CHAPTER 3

AFTER ABANDONING HIS STUDIES AT THE JARDIN DES PLANTES in the late 1850s, Rodin spent four years working as a trade sculptor and making his own art in the mornings and at night. He rented his first studio near the Gobelins tapestry factory, in an unheated, barely converted horse stable. It cost ten francs a month, which left him with nothing to hire models, who often earned as much in a few hours as he did in an entire day. Instead he was forced to make do with amateurs desperate enough to pose for his poverty rates.

For a little extra drinking money, an elderly Greek handyman known as Bibi was happy to offer his services to Rodin. The man had a broken nose and such a "terribly hideous" face that Rodin could hardly bear the thought of modeling it at first. It "seemed so dreadful to me," he said. But the man was cheap and already worked in the studios three times a week as a sweeper, so, beginning in the fall of 1863, Rodin faithfully began to sculpt one pit and furrow after another into a bust, treading across the clay as heavily as life had tread across Bibi.

Over the next eighteen months, Rodin started to notice occasional glimpses of handsomeness in Bibi's face. He had a nicely shaped head and, beneath the ravaged façade, there was a certain nobility to the bone structure. His was not entirely unlike the faces on view at the Louvre, Rodin thought, so many of them also being Greek and timeworn.

The bust Rodin completed in 1863 was a radical departure from the polished portraiture of the day. Baudelaire wasn't being entirely hyperbolic when he provocatively titled an essay fifteen years earlier, "Why Sculpture Is Boring." Until then, sculpture had been made almost exclusively as decoration—filigree on a cathedral, for example, or a war memorial in a park. Before the latter part of the century, even the best new sculpture was still being mounted on the sides of buildings, like Carpeaux's drunken dancers on the façade of the Paris Opera. If a freestanding work made it into a museum, it was probably because its original habitat had been destroyed.

Whether Rodin knew it or not, his *Man with the Broken Nose* was a brazen affront to this long, unquestioned tradition. The unknown man's face would never have appeared on a monument or a building, except perhaps as a symbol of sin. But Rodin's Bibi was truly ugly, not allegorically ugly. He was a

self-contained being, not intended as a denunciation of something else, as Rilke would later notice: “There are a thousand voices of torment in this face, yet no accusation rises. It does not plead to the world; it carries its justice within itself, holds the reconcilement of all its contradictions.”

The 1864 Paris Salon seemed like the right time for Rodin to introduce the bust to the public. The names of his contemporaries—Monet, Cézanne, Renoir—were starting to become well known, even if they were not yet fully accepted by the establishment salons. Two-thirds of the submissions to the previous year’s official salon were rejected, including Manet’s scandalous *Déjeuner sur l’herbe*. But they went on view in a separate show, derisively dubbed the Salon des Refusés, which ultimately proved far more popular than the main event, and made Manet a cult hero.

But before Rodin had a chance to submit his bust to the jury that winter, the temperature in his studio dipped below freezing. The back of the terra-cotta head cracked off and shattered on the floor. When Rodin went to work one morning and saw the mess, he stared at it for a long while and then decided it actually looked better this way. The mask now bore the reality of Bibi and Rodin’s impoverishment on its surface, expressing the coldness of life in a most literal way.

Rodin submitted the work to the 1864 salon as a mask rather than a bust, but jurors rejected it that year, and again the following year. Rodin did not take the news as hard as he might have in the past. He knew the sculpture marked a crucial revelation, whether anyone else realized it or not. Bibi had taught Rodin that beauty was about truth, not perfection. “There is nothing ugly in art except that which is without character . . .” he would conclude. The human being, flawed creature that it is, cannot relate to perfection. But people can empathize with scars, wrinkles and lines, which together add up to the semblance of a lifetime.

“The mask determined all my future work,” Rodin later said. “It was the first good piece of modeling I ever did.” As he started to acknowledge his talent, he also realized that it came, like many gifts, with a catch. Artistic gifts had to be shared with others or else they lost their worth. The burden fell on him to find an audience and to make seen that which is inherently invisible. As such, many gifts go unrealized, while the gifted go on suffering, carrying the absence inside them like an unreturned love. Rodin, like Rilke, spent his youth crushed under the weight of his gift’s imperative. It was not until 1864 that he met the woman who would act as his witness and committed guardian for life.

ROSE BEURET WAS EIGHTEEN and already a seasoned laborer when she met the twenty-four-year-old sculptor in 1864. She had recently moved from her family’s vineyard in Champagne to take a job as a seamstress. Down the street from Rodin’s studio, Beuret was stitching flowers to adorn ladies’ hats while he was sculpting them out of stone for a new opera house, the Théâtre

de la Gaîté, which was being built to replace the one Haussmann tore down on the Boulevard du Temple, or, as it had become known, the “Boulevard of Crime.”

Beuret had dusty brown hair that curled around the edges of her bonnet. She had a tough, tense face and easily agitated eyes that impressed Rodin from the start. “She didn’t have the grace of city women, but all the physical vigor and firm flesh of a peasant’s daughter, and that lively, frank, definite masculine charm which augments the beauty of a woman’s body.” He invited her to model for him at once. Beuret, probably welcoming the extra income and a friend in the city, gladly agreed.

She came to the job as “tough as a cannon ball,” Rodin said. She posed in his cold studio for hours with one arm stretched downward, as if setting a mirror on a nightstand, and the other sweeping up her hair. “I had put into her all that was in myself,” he said of the figure he made in Beuret’s likeness, which was to become his first life-sized figure, titled *Bacchante*. Rodin worked on it on Sundays and in the mornings before reporting to his job sculpting clay maquettes for the popular Romantic artist Albert-Ernest Carrier-Belleuse. While he was saving the money to have *Bacchante* cast, he set it aside and moved on to other projects. Eventually, he filled his studio and needed to relocate to a larger space. As the movers carried his patient *Bacchante* away, the figure started to wobble in their arms and fell to the floor. When Rodin heard the crash he ran toward the sound and, to his horror, saw that “my poor bacchante was dead.”

The flesh-and-blood Beuret would not depart so easily, however. After her first modeling session, “she attached herself to me like an animal,” Rodin said. The pair soon became lovers and formed a formidable partnership built around their labor. Sculpting was Rodin’s job; Rodin was hers. She became his best studio assistant, posing for him in the mornings, then returning again at night to cover the unfired mounds of clay with damp rags to keep them from drying out. She continued working as a seamstress on the side and, every once in a while, Rodin helped her sew buttons.

Rodin was loath to admit how much he depended on Beuret. When asked about their relationship he would say with a shrug, “It is necessary to have a woman.” But he didn’t believe a man needed a wife, so when she gave birth to their son out of wedlock in 1866 the boy’s birth certificate read Auguste-Eugène Beuret, father “unknown.” Nonetheless, they remained together for the rest of their lives, with Beuret acting as Rodin’s chief adviser, partner, lover and, ultimately, the sustainer of his gift.

RODIN WENT TO GALLERIES as an observer over the next decade. Eleven years had passed since the Paris Salon rejected his *Man with the Broken Nose*, and he had not submitted another work since. Sensing that an artist could stake a career on a single statue, he was determined to return only when he had realized a masterpiece.

He was confident in his technical abilities, but unsure of how to synthesize his miscellaneous education into a proper life-sculpting practice. Lecoq had taught him the rules of attention; Barye taught him movement; but still no one had taught him the human form. So, in 1875, he went to Italy to learn straight from the source: Michelangelo.

He packed a bag with French sausage so he wouldn't have to eat the seemingly iron-deficient Italian cuisine, and then boarded a train. He took the scenic route, passing through France and Belgium to see the Gothic cathedrals along the way. "Dinant is picturesque, but Reims, its cathedral, is of a beauty I have not yet encountered in Italy," he wrote to Beuret.

All of Florence was celebrating Michelangelo's four hundredth birthday when Rodin arrived that winter. He visited the Medici Chapel, where Michelangelo's statue of Lorenzo de Medici sat in a contemplative pose much like *The Thinker* would. He went on to examine the contours of every Michelangelo figure he could find in Florence before traveling on to Rome to see the paintings at the Sistine Chapel. The experience totally destabilized Rodin. Every decision Michelangelo made seemed to run counter to what Rodin had learned from the Greek artists at the Louvre. " 'Hold on!' I said to myself, 'why this incurving of the body? Why this hip raised, this shoulder lowered?' " Yet he knew Michelangelo would not have miscalculated.

Now that he was a student again, Rodin re-created Lecoq's old exercises, filling his notebooks with sketches "not directly of his works, but of their scaffolding; the system I'm building in my imagination in order to understand him," he wrote to Beuret. Gradually, "the great magician is letting me in on some of his secrets."

When Rodin returned home a month later, he was brimming with ideas. He set to work at once on the statue that would finally win him entrée into the salons. He found his model in a young Belgian soldier with a graceful musculature. The man posed with one fist clutching a spear-like rod, the other hand raised to his head as if in distress. Rodin examined his form obsessively, from the front, back and sides, then in three-quarter profiles. He climbed up a painter's ladder to capture the view from above, then crouched on the floor to look from below. He spent three months on one leg, and altogether a year and a half modeling each successive contour inch by inch.

The result was an uncannily realistic plaster man, which Rodin titled *The Age of Bronze*. His eyes half closed, this was someone who had seen something terrible, as if he had just come upon the slain body of his lover, or as if he realized that he was the one who had killed her. Rodin eventually removed the spear in order to preserve an unobstructed view of the figure's profile, a decision that only added to the already enigmatic pose.

The salon admitted *The Age of Bronze* in 1877. It was received with such enthusiasm that the French government asked to purchase a version of it for the city. But then the salon opened in Paris and Rodin's fastidious accuracy backfired. Critics complained that *The Age of Bronze* was *too* realistic. It was a "study rather than a statue, a too servile portrait of a model without