

Autobiographical Notes by Rodin in a Letter to Gaston Schefer, 1883

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Article abstract

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Dans cet article nous publions pour la première fois le facsimile d'une lettre écrite par Rodin en 1883, au début de sa carrière comme sculpteur établi. C'est un document important. Rodin lui-même, dans plusieurs pages manuscrites, s'efforce pour décrire les faits appropriés concernant sa vie et sa carrière; il écrivait à une connaissance, Gaston Schefer, qui s'était offert pour écrire un article sur le sculpteur. Des notes explicatives et des commentaires parsemés parmi le document sont inclus dans le texte traduit afin de mettre en contexte l'effort autobiographique de Rodin.

Autobiographical Notes by Rodin in a Letter to Gaston Schefer, 1883¹

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RÉSUMÉ

Quoique beaucoup de matériel biographique a été publié sur la vie du sculpteur français Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), ce matériel est basé principalement sur des interviews avec Rodin après qu'il devint reconnu comme sculpteur important, et sur ses souvenirs de relations datant souvent de plusieurs années.

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The French sculptor Auguste Rodin, born in 1840, was nearly 40 years old before he became established as an independent sculptor in Paris. Even then he received little public recognition until 1889 when he held a joint exhibition with Manet at the Georges Petit Gallery. The first scholarly biography was published in 1889, in *The American Architect and Building News*,² the result of a series of interviews with the American journalist and artist, T. H. Bartlett. Bartlett's articles and many others over the next 25 years, as well as Judith Cladel's biography, *Rodin, sa vie glorieuse, sa vie inconnue*, published in 1936,³ have long been the primary source of our knowledge of Rodin's early life and training. In each case we see Rodin as interpreted by his interviewers.

In 1883, six years before Bartlett's articles appeared, Rodin wrote his own biographical sketch in response to the request of an acquaintance, Gaston Schefer. According to Schefer's later recollection, he had suggested writing an article about Rodin to an editor friend who then requested more information; hence Rodin's autobiographical effort.⁴ Since no publication of that time can be located that contains the results of this effort (and Rodin diligently kept journal references to him and his work during those years),

it can be assumed that the article, if completed, was not published at that time. It has not been mentioned as a reference in any later publications about Rodin's life until 1984.⁵

The letter is here published in its entirety.⁶ Although undated, Rodin's effort can be assigned to late 1883 for he noted in this letter to Schefer that the bust of Victor Hugo had been completed but not yet shown. In fact on 28 July 1883, he had written to his British friend, William Ernest Henley, and noted that he was doing the bust of Hugo;⁷ the bust was first shown at the Salon in the spring of 1884.

Rodin attached a short note⁸ to his seven pages of autobiographical data.

Dear M. SCheffer:⁹

Here are some notes but not enough from the point of view of my ideas that I would like to give you. More important would be fewer of the anecdotes and more of what I think, for only the ideas have worth, wouldn't you agree, you who live only for ideas. I will bring these notes Tuesday evening and I have a choice of drawings for you.

Rodin's intent in the following autobiographical sketch was obviously to convince a reading public that although he was relatively unknown he was an experienced sculptor worthy of recognition;

thus he stressed the well-known artists, critics, and connoisseurs who had encouraged him and even some who had bought his works. His recall of his early years acknowledged struggle but did not describe undue hardship. Later commentaries, beginning with Bartlett's and continuing through Cladel's biography in 1936, place great emphasis upon an economically deprived childhood and stressed years of severe economic struggle up to the mid-1870s. It is probable that the more successful Rodin became the more tempting it was to magnify early deprivations, whether from Rodin's own fading recall or from the biographers' desire to portray him in heroic proportions.

Born in Paris in 1840.

Son of parents of modest means.

Goes to the Petite École de Dessin on the rue de l'École-de-Médecine, drawing and modelling, drawing from memory with Lecocq de Boisbaudran.

Horace Lecocq de Boisbaudran was the author of *L'Education de la mémoire pittoresque* in which he presented a method for teaching students to look at an aspect of nature or a work of art, then to retain it, and later reproduce it from memory.¹⁰

Rodin was a particularly apt pupil of this method. In most interviews throughout his life Rodin would continue to acknowledge the influence of this early teacher.

This school kept some of the spirit that animated the eighteenth century and had, towards 1855, teaching methods very distinct from those of the École des Beaux-Arts which ended by imposing a ponderousness of style on all of its students. Goes to Barye's.*¹¹

*(Man of genius as yet misunderstood, as great as those of greater genius, such as Dante, Michelangelo, Donatello, Puget, etc. . . .)

"GOES TO BARYE'S"

In later years Rodin spoke of the sculptor, Barye, as either teacher or employer. In fact this cursory comment probably best describes the sculptor Barye's relationship with Rodin, for Rodin was a friend of Barye's eldest son. He would thus have been in Barye's studio when he taught and perhaps did odd jobs for him, but neither of these roles would be as defined as Rodin later implied: "*For a very short time frequents the Horse Market; great admirer of horses. Drawing many of the antiques at the Louvre; often visited the Bibliothèque Nationale, but was refused entry to the École des Beaux-Arts (how lucky).*"

This last ironic phrase, suggests that Rodin himself originated this idea later attributed to his sculptor friend, Jules Dalou, by Judith Cladel: "Rodin had the luck not to have been at the École des Beaux-Arts";¹² Rodin seems to have

appreciated the fact that by being denied the traditional artistic education he had escaped the early influence of the strict confining precepts that defined the work of his contemporaries.

"PRELUDE TO BEING REFUSED AT THE EXHIBITIONS"

It is interesting to note that Rodin by 1883 felt secure enough in his profession to be willing to offer freely this information that could have influenced negatively an assessment of his talent and skill. One can also sense his pride in being able to become a respected independent sculptor without the help of the establishment.

Soon studies are interrupted by life's struggles. In his daily work he sets apart leisure time so that he can continue to learn, a hard life that is known to poor young men. He becomes part of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts on the Boulevard des Italiens, exhibits there. It is at this time that he makes a bust that is refused at the Salon and which becomes known in the world of sculpture (it is *The Man with the Broken Nose*); this bust recalls antiquity because of the power of the modelling. The artist had a fondness for this sculpture for it is found in the homes of about fifteen artists who appreciate its modelling. The president of the English Academy, Sir Frederick Leighton, painter and sculptor, put it in his studio; other painters such as Cazin, L'hermitte, Léopold Flameng, have it in their homes. At this time he works at the studio of Carrier-Belleuse, a most prolific sculptor who helps him to earn his living; he could continue to study. After the siege of Paris, in 1870, he goes to Brussels and enters into a partnership. In this way he works on different monuments: the Bourse, Royal Palace, Conservatory, Ducal Palace, etc. . . . At Anvers, he collaborates on the Loos Monument which depicts a great number of decorative figures.

Returned to Paris, he exhibits *The Age of Bronze*.**¹³ This statue is nearly refused, it is then badly placed (~~the eyes of the artist are not those of the École des Beaux-Arts~~).

** *The Age of Bronze* sent to the Belgian exhibition had won the gold medal. Amusing detail: M/Rollin-Jacquemin former minister, father of the present minister, wished, during his way through Paris, to bring the medal himself to the artist, but seeing the interior of his modest home, he laughed, adding: "One does not make money in the arts."¹⁴

Rodin again displayed his pride in his independence by emphasizing the fact that with the *Age of Bronze* he knowingly defied École des Beaux-Arts precepts because his nude man lacked clarity of meaning. In addition, the stance was unbalanced and the posture did not ennoble.

The style of the artist is condemned by the professors. Nevertheless, the students, the graduates, the independents like the figure. Henceforth the artist has a group around him (~~of friends who are interested in him~~). Henceforth his reputation is made, slight, and in

the studios; it will go far without the artist being aware of it, *believing himself to be always alone*.

Not discouraged by such unfairness (*ignorance*), he moves on, he meets those who are drawn to his work, a stranger who speaks to him of his statue at the Salon. It is M. Turquet. J.-P. Laurens, Dalou, Gandex (Gaudez***), Osbach, Captier, Aube, Paul de Vigne, (*Boucher*) Bastien-Lepage have seen it and certainly his friend, the sculptor, Boucher, who lends him an strong helping hand.

*** Gaucher-Gauchez, *Journal de l'Art*, has given freely this assurance of his generous support to the artist and, amongst the critics, Echerac, Bazire, and Paul Mantz Fourcant have been enthusiastic supporters of the sculptor.

Later writers made much of the rumour that Rodin, upon exhibiting this nude at the Salon in Paris in the spring of 1877, had been accused of making a life cast. At that time there had been no actual accusation. This insinuation had first arisen when the work had been shown earlier that year at the Cercle Artistique in Brussels. One reviewer had written in *L'Étoile Belge*, "As to what role casting from life may have had in the making of this plaster we shall not examine here."¹⁵ It was then referred to in a passing comment by a member of the jury at the Salon in Paris who said that "if it is a veritable piece of modelling and not a cast from nature, the man who made it is better than we are."¹⁶ Rodin, offended by the suggestion, had written to ask to have the opportunity to clear his name. He assembled a package of photographs of the model and testimonials from sculptor friends in Brussels but the jury did not even unseal the envelope. The rumour persisted until the State finally bought the statue in May 1880.

It is curious that Rodin only obliquely refers to the accusation in this autobiography. Perhaps he realized that his original response to what had been more spiteful innuendo than official accusation had been an overreaction. Had the accusation created a blot on Rodin's reputation, as was later suggested,¹⁷ Rodin would have used this forum to offer his rebuttal. The sculpture, by the time this autobiography had been written, had not only received the gold medal in Brussels but also the third medal at the Paris Salon. The fact that Rodin made no direct reference to the charge suggests the incident assumed a greater significance again in later years, supposedly setting the beleaguered Rodin against the establishment.

The artist exhibits then the *Saint Jean*. As ever, badly rendered according to the point of view of those who are established and who will condemn it, but pleasing to the young and to those who tend toward the expressive.

New statue: *La Creation* (later renamed *Adam*) which is accepted thanks to a friend who is on the jury, Cap-

tier who helps independent artists whose work is badly placed always near the doors.

At this time, M. Turquet, Secretary of State for the Fine Arts, dares to have it cast and buys the two statues, *The Age of Bronze* and *Saint Jean*.

A confusion arises over dates. It would seem from Rodin's comments that *La Creation* and *The Age of Bronze* are contemporary yet the latter was bought in early 1880 and surviving records indicate that the former was first exhibited in 1881.

He [Turquet] dares to order a monumental door; he believes in the artist; he has followed his progress for a long time during the years when he moved in the direction of the fine arts. He does not hesitate to give an order to Dalou who renders him a major work, and to Rodin, who is overjoyed to make a sculpture free from constraints such as he has wished for all of his life, working with the same good fortune as artists of the past. . . .

This work for the bronze doors of the proposed Musée des Arts Décoratifs would become known as *The Gates of Hell*. Why Turquet gave such a commission to Rodin has long puzzled scholars. Rodin's explanation that M. Turquet wished to commission monumental sculptures from both Jules Dalou and himself at this time is logical when the available evidence is examined. Turquet had been one of Rodin's supporters ever since they had met in 1877, according to this letter. Both Rodin and Dalou had entered a competition in 1879 for *La République* but neither had been awarded the commission. John Hunisak, Dalou's biographer, wrote that Turquet had been favourably impressed with Dalou's entry and had then asked Dalou to complete his work for another location in Paris.¹⁸ Dalou began work before the end of 1879 and was officially awarded the contract on 14 July 1880. Rodin received his commission one month later on 16 August and could have begun his primary studies early in 1880 according to A. E. Elsen.¹⁹ Apparently Turquet was more impressed with Rodin's ability than with his entry in the competition, *A Call to Arms*, for he had asked Dalou to develop his competition maquette, while from Rodin he commissioned a new work, *The Gates of Hell*. ". . . [N]eeding money particularly to pay his models whom he always has in his studio, often leaving them free to move about, but observing them out of the corner of his eye and turning to his own account the inventive genius that is in his nature."

Although it would take many years for most of his public, including critics and connoisseurs, to appreciate and acknowledge this essential ingredient, inventiveness, Rodin was, even at this early stage, emphasizing it.

At this time J.-P. Laurens, the great artist, asked Rodin to make his bust and at the Salon of 1882 people were able to admire [both] the portrait of Rodin [painted] by Laurens, [and Rodin's bust of Laurens] who himself had a cast made from a model by Rodin which was poured in bronze superbly by Gonon, the founder of the lost wax process. J.-P. Laurens ordered from him a small study that the master [Laurens] has in his studio. Immediately thereafter, the bust of Alphonse Legros, the great aquafort specialist and French painter in London, and the bust of Danielli.

The last of his busts is that of Victor Hugo. The great man welcomed the artist with much kindness and admitted him into his circle of intimate friends for a time and if the artist does not work by the usual methods, if he has been obliged often to resort to drawing from memory. . . .

During this period Rodin wrote to William Earnest Henley describing the unorthodox arrangements. "He [Hugo] had not — what is called — posed, but I have lived with him, lunching or driving or frequenting his soirées for the last four months, with the bust at his house, which allowed me to work there always. Sometimes I was with him whole afternoons, but I did not have him as a model that one places as is most convenient for the purpose."²⁰

. . . if the emotion that is felt near this man is that of a giant of his century made him work harder for a long time, he none the less produced this bust which will be shown at the next Salon and which already has enjoyed success in his own studio. The great man finds it good and Georges and Jeanne [Hugo's children] find it a good likeness. Victor Hugo, stooped as he was, had it re-set upright, not wishing the bust to express a particular action, but all of his thoughts.

Rodin's recall of the acceptance of the bust later changed. Bartlett wrote in 1889 that "By many of the poet's friends it was, at first, regarded as a complete failure, but time gradually developed its merits and those who at first disliked it became its enthusiastic admirers."²¹ In 1911 Dujardin Beaumetz wrote that Rodin had told him that Hugo "was so convinced that I was going to make a bad bust that he wouldn't even look at it; my bust was so criticized by his entourage that I was somewhat cast down."²² This is but one more example of how the passage of time can influence recollection.

The value of these autobiographical notes, prepared several years before Rodin was interviewed concerning his education and professional development, is threefold. For the first time scholars can measure the quality of later recall and interpretation concerning Rodin's early years against this document written by him in 1883. Secondly, as our knowledge is increased our conjecture can be lessened concerning such events as the importance at the time of the suggestion that Rodin

had made a life cast or the circumstances surrounding the awarding of *The Gates of Hell* commission. Most importantly however, this letter enables us to see Rodin as he, himself, wanted to be seen by the public — proud of his independence, emphasizing his somewhat unorthodox education, revelling in his acceptance by reputable artists, and above all cognizant of his own unique, "inventive" artistic vision.

APPENDIX

In the following transcription only a few punctuation marks have been added (mostly periods) to facilitate meaning. All erasures that add to the content have been included.

Cher Monsieur SCheffer :

Voilà quelque notes mais ce n'est pas assez au point de vue des mes idées je veux vous donner. Ce qui est principal moins de pe tites histoire et plus de ce que je pense, car on n'a de valeur que par l'idée. J'apporterai notes mardi soir et j'ai choix aussi de Dessins.

Agrérez. . .

* * * * *

Né à Paris en 1840.

Fils de parents pas fortunes.

Va à la petite École de dessin en de rue de l'École-de-Médecine, dessine et modèle dessine de mémoire avec Lecocq de Boisbaudran. Cette école avait un restant de l'esprit qui anime le 18^e et avait vers 1855 un enseignement très distinct de celui de l'école des Beaux-Arts qui a fini par imposer sa lourdeur à tous ses élèves. Va chez Barye.*

*(L'homme de génie encore incompris grand comme ceux qui ont le plus de génie, soit Dante, Michel-Ange, Donatello, Puget, etc.)

Très peu de temps fréquentes le Marché aux chevaux grand admirateur des chevaux. Dessine beaucoup aux antiques du Ouvre : fréquente la Bibliothèque nationale. Mais est refusé à l'école des Beaux-Arts (grande chance). Prélude des refus aux expositions.

Bientôt les études sont interrompues avec la vie luttés. Sur son travail quotidien il prélève de quoi défrayer son temps de loisir ou il continue d'apprendre dur labeur que connaissent les jeunes gens pauvres. Il fait partie de la Société nationale des Beaux-Arts du boulevard des Italiens y expose. C'est à ce moment qu'il fait un buste que est refusé au salon et qui est connu dans la sculptue (c'est la Nez Cassé.) Ce buste rappelle l'antique pour la force du modèle! L'artiste a un prédilection pur cette sculpture depuis elle se trouve chez une quinzaine d'artistes qui en apprécient le modèlé. Le président de l'académie Anglaise Sir Frédéric Leighton peintre et sculpteur l'a mise dans son ateliers des peintres comme Cazin, L'Hermitte, Léopold Flameng l'ont aussi chez eux. Dans ce temps, il travaille chez Carrier-Belleuse le fécond sculpteur qui l'aide à gagner se vie il peut étudier. après le siège de Paris en 70 il part à Bruxelles et s'associe. De cette façon it travaille à différents monuments Bourse Palais du roi Conservatoire Palais ducal, etc. À Anvers il colla-

bore au monument de Loos ce qui représente un bagage considérable de figures décoratives.

Revenu à Paris il expose l'Âge d'Airain.** Cette figure est presque refusée, elle est donc mal placée. (les yeux de l'artiste n'est pas celui de l'École).

** L'Âge d'Airain envoyé l'exposition de Belgique a eu la médaille d'or. ~~Détail amusant M. Rollin Jacquemin ancien ministre père du ministre actuel, a voulu, dans son passage à Paris apporter lui-même la médaille à l'artiste mais voyant l'intérieur d'un ménage plus que modeste il rit en ajoutant. L'on ne fait pas fortune dans les Arts.~~

Le genre de l'artiste est condamné par les professeurs. Cependant des élèves, des studieux, des indépendants aiment la figure. Désormais l'artiste a un groupe autour de lui (~~des amis qui s'intéressent~~). Désormais sa réputation est faite, petite et dans les ateliers, elle ira plus loin sans que l'artiste s'en doute, *se croyant toujours seul*.

Non découragé par tant d'injustice, (~~ignorance~~) il marche, mais il rencontre de jour en jour un sympathique, un inconnu qui lui parle de sa figure du Salon. C'est M. Turquet. C'est J.-P. Laurens c'est Dalou c'est Gandez (Gaudez***) Osbach c'est Captier Aubé Paul de Vigne (~~Bouche~~) Bastien-Lepage qui l'ont vue et surtout son ami, le sculpteur Boucher qui lui donne un fort coup de main.

*** Gaucher-Gauchez. *Le Journal de l'Art* a donné librement cette assurée son magnifique appui à l'artiste et parmi les critiques d'Echerac Bazire Paul Mantz Fourcand qui ont été très enthousiaste du sculpteur.

L'artiste expose alors le Saint-Jean tendance mauvaise toujours, au point de vue de ceux qui sont arrivés et que ça démolira, mais agréable aux jeunes et à ceux qui marchent vers l'expressif.

Nouvelle figure la Création qui est acceptée grâce à un ami qu'il a dans le Jury à Captier qui rend service aux artistes libres, mal placés, toujours près des portes.

Dans ce temps M. Turquet, secrétaire d'État aux Beaux-Arts, ose lui faire fondre et acheter les deux figures l'Âge d'Airain et le Saint-Jean, il ose lui commander une porte monumentale. Il croit à l'artiste il l'a suivi longtemps pendant des années et arrivé à la direction des arts il ne balance pas à donner une commande à Dalou qui lui rend un chef-d'œuvre à Rodin qui heureux du bonheur de pouvoir faire de la sculpture librement tel qu'il l'a désiré toute sa vie travaille avec le bonheur des artistes d'autrefois ayant besoin d'argent surtout pour payer ses modèles qu'il a toujours à l'atelier leur laissant souvent la liberté, mais les observant du coin l'oeil et mettant à profit (l'original) qui est dans la nature.

Dans ce temps J.-P. Laurens l'artiste puissant, demande son buste à Rodin et au Salon de 1882, l'on pouvait admirer le portrait de Rodin par le Maître qui lui-même était coulé en bronze admirablement par Gano le fondeur à la cire perdue sur le modèle de Rodin. J.-P. Laurens lui commande la fonte d'une petite esquisse que le Maître a en son atelier. Vient ensuite le buste d'Alphonse Legros le grand aquafortiste et le peintre français à Londres et le buste de Danielli.

Dernier de ses bustes est celui de Victor Hugo. Le Maître a accueilli l'artiste avec sa haute bienveillance, l'a

amis dans son intimité pendant quelque temps et si l'artiste n'a pas travaillé avec la Méthode ordinaire, s'il a été obligé de recourir souvent au dessin de mémoire, si l'émotion que l'on ressent près de cet homme qui est le géant du siècle l'ont fait peiner plus longtemps; il n'en est pas moins sorti avec un buste qui paraître au Salon prochain et qui a déjà lu succès dans son atelier. L'illustre Maître le trouve bien et George et Jeanne le trouvent ressemblant. Victor Hugo de penché qu'il était l'a fait remettre droit ne voulant pas qu'il exprime une action particulière mais toute sa pensée.

NOTES

- 1 Archives of the Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France, Paris.
- 2 *The American Architect and Building News*, xxv (19 January-15 June 1889), 27-29, 44-45, 65-66, 99-101, 112-14, 198-200, 223-25, 249-51, 260-63, and 283-85. Reprinted in A. E. Elsen, ed., *Auguste Rodin: Readings on His Life and Works* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965), 13-109.
- 3 Judith Cladel, *Rodin, sa vie glorieuse, sa vie inconnue* (Paris, 1936). English translation: James Whitall, trans., *Rodin* (New York, 1937).
- 4 Gaston Schefer, *Mémoires*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1920). In vol. 4, 223-29, he recalled these meetings and published an edited version of the letter. Only two partial copies of these *Mémoires* are known to still exist in public archives: Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, and the Yale University Library, New Haven, Conn.
- 5 M. J. Hare, "The Portraiture of Auguste Rodin" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, UMI restricted, 1984), 40.
- 6 The author wishes to express her appreciation to Admiral Marcel Duval through whose considerable efforts permission was granted to publish a facsimile of Rodin's autobiographical effort and to Mme. Françoise Dumas, le Conservateur en Chef de la Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France, for so graciously consenting to this request.
- 7 Archives of the Musée Rodin.
- 8 Translation by the author. The transcribed note and letter follow in the Appendix.
- 9 In all of his correspondence with Gaston Schefer, Rodin consistently misspelled the name and then attempted to correct his mistake, probably because his mother's maiden name had been Cheffer.
- 10 For further explication see F. V. Grunfeld, *Rodin* (New York, 1987), 18-19.
- 11 The asterisks are Rodin's. All three of Rodin's footnotes appear at the end of this letter.
- 12 Judith Cladel, *Rodin: The Man and His Art, with Leaves from His Notebook*, English trans. by S. K. Star (New York, 1917), 36.
- 13 Salon of 1877.
- 14 The text is crossed out by Rodin.
- 15 *L'Étoile Belge*, 29 January 1877, quoted in Cladel, *Rodin*, 48.
- 16 Grunfeld, *Rodin*, 101.
- 17 For example, by T. H. Bartlett who wrote that "The statue . . . was carried to the sculptor's studio with the ban of disgrace upon it and him" (*The American Architect and Building News*, xxv [2 March 1889], 99).
- 18 John Hunisak, *The Sculptor Jules Dalou: Studies in His Style and Imagery* (New York and London, 1977), 215.
- 19 A. E. Elsen, *The Gates of Hell by Auguste Rodin* (Stanford, Calif., 1985), 41.
- 20 Letter translated in F. Lawton, *The Life and Work of Auguste Rodin* (London, 1906), 206.
- 21 T. H. Bartlett, *The American Architect and Building News*, xxv (9 March 1889), 114.
- 22 Elsen, ed., *Auguste Rodin*, 169.