

The Skin of Perception:

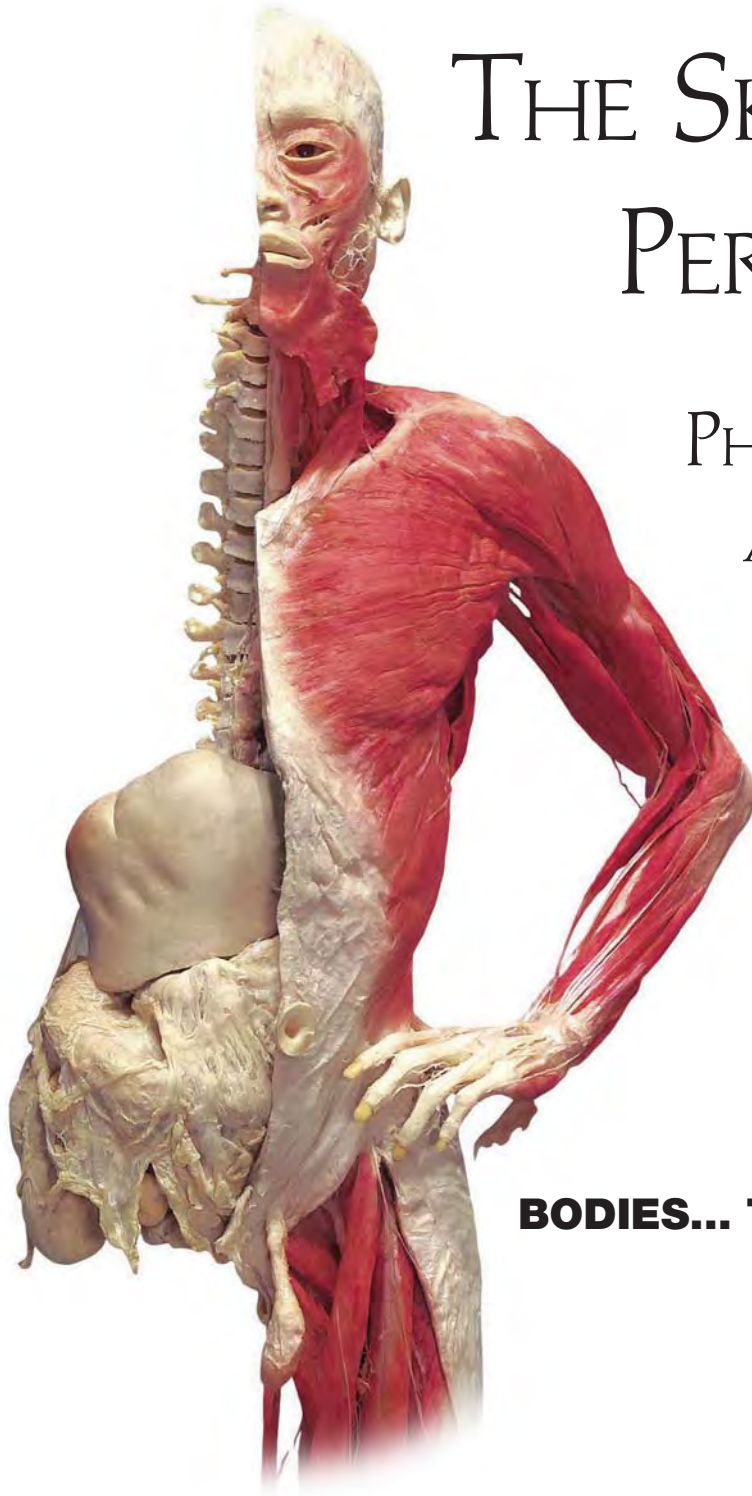
Phenomenology as a Cartesian Proposition

by Mark Daniel Cohen

BODIES. . . The Exhibition

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HYPERION:
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS



THE SKIN OF PERCEPTION

PHENOMENOLOGY
AS A CARTESIAN
PROPOSITION

BODIES... The Exhibition

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Current Venues:

South Street Seaport Exhibition Centre, New York

Auditorio de Medicina del ITESM, Hospital San José, Monterrey, Mexico

The Shops at Sunset Place, Miami, through Mar 25, 2007

800 Pike St., Seattle, through Mar 31, 2007

Beurs van Berlage Concert and Conference Hall, Amsterdam, through Apr 14, 2007

(Note: Not all venues list closing dates.)

“

Man is only man at the surface. Remove the skin, dissect, and immediately you come to machinery.

—Paul Valéry

“

Webster was much possessed by death
And saw the skull beneath the skin;
And breastless creatures under ground
Leaned backward with a lipless grin.

—T. S. Eliot, “Whispers of Immortality”

“

When you look at yourself from a universal standpoint,
something inside always reminds or informs you that there are
bigger and better things to worry about.

—Albert Einstein

Our destruction, if we bring it, will not be indefinite. It will be a definite thing indeed, and in deed. Decimation cannot be minced by the power of undecidability, not when it is the house of undecidability that will be decimated. As we ensconce ourselves in ruminations on the undecidable nature of speculation and encounter, as we amuse ourselves by focusing our thoughts on the ever-retreating objective of indeterminate specification draping all we can know and all we can experience, all that is phenomenal, in a shroud of indistinction and pride ourselves on our inability to hold back the tide of deconstruction from anything it is possible for us to know, we find ourselves in a place of growing absolutes. The shadows are gathering all around us and pool into a darkness that is inescapable—the absolute of eventuality. What we are about to do to ourselves falls outside the perimeters of what is in our power to control. If there is an undecidability, it is our inability to decide, for our thoughts are bringing us death, and it appears there is nothing we can do about them.

In his essay “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life,” Nietzsche warned us of the time in the life of the mind in which we live. The will falters with the awareness of history; it folds with the glance in the mirror, with the sense of the self as actor—it is subject to the law of Hamlet, doomed to the fate of Macbeth. We live in an awareness of history unfolding, for history has come to consume the present as well as the past. We see ourselves as agents in a story, even as we act as agents in the story. As Sontag wrote in the beginning of “‘Thinking Against Oneself’: Reflections on Cioran” (in which, in an act of audacious phrasal synonymy, she virtually rewrites the opening section of Nietzsche’s essay), “The human mind possesses now, almost as second nature, a perspective on its own achievements that fatally undermines their value and their claim to truth. For over a century, this historicizing perspective has occupied the very heart of our ability to understand anything at all. Perhaps once a marginal tic of consciousness, it’s now a gigantic, uncontrollable gesture—the gesture whereby man indefatigably patronizes himself.”

The intrepid risk of “the historicizing perspective,” committed as an intellectual “gesture,” is getting behind the curve, and that intrepidity is now harrowing. We are entering a fresh historical period: the era of universal nuclear capability, if it can maintain itself long enough to become an “era.” Given that there seems to be nothing that will withhold it, functionally, meaningfully, we are already there. And we have come to no pertinent determinations of what we will do about it, of how we will survive it. With every statement by a public official or political commentator concerning the number of years necessary for Iran to complete its nuclear program or for North Korea to build a rocket able to reach the contiguous states, we demonstrate our failure to comprehend just where we are. What matters is not the lead-time but the inevitability. It is as good as done. And we have thought of no answers.

And more is coming, for we have invented far more than nuclear power. Our risks are the results of the achievements of our minds, and our failures are the results of the shortcomings of our ability to think. As our technological ingenuities proliferate, the power of decimation disseminates. Increasing degrees of damage can be done by groups of diminishing size, and so by increasing numbers of people, and eventually it will be possible for any one person to destroy every last person. The lead-time does not matter—functionally we are there now. It would be unwise to suggest scenarios, but one need only look at several recent films to construe a sense of the general possibilities: *The Peacemaker*, *The Siege*, *Outbreak*, *12 Monkeys*.

And so, as is always the case, we are always thinking about the wrong thing, and in the wrong way. We all cut our teeth on the self-enveloping intricacies of deconstructive principles, of the protocols of ineradicable indetermination, of the implausibility of absolutes of any species, and if we do nothing wise, and if we do not do it shortly, our fate will be soon be decided absolutely. For the first time in history, we have the capability of destroying ourselves utterly. And at just the right moment, we have devised the incapability to see such a thing is

possible. We have surreptitiously postulated our own immortality, for we have become incapable of conceiving of our thorough, universal demise. The timing is perfect.

But we should know this, for it is by principle that we are always thinking wrong. If we recognize the broad applicability of the distinctly Heraclitean proposition of the *enantiodromia* of C. G. Jung (and a solid Nietzschean he), a proposition it appears more broadly applicable than even Jung thought, we should recognize that a time in which we are absorbed by the cutting-edge theorizations of indeterminacy must be a time in which adamantine implications are facing us, a time in which we confront eventualities that, once occasioned, cannot be corrected. Our thoughts convey by their “gestures” precisely the opposite of what they say—this is our nature, at least, our nature when we gather together in sufficient numbers and then attempt to think. For we should know that when enough people agree, the idea must be wrong. An individual may be possessed of insight; a congregation will delude itself. This is the true implication of the herd instinct—when the euphuism of the time leans to fathomless degrees of intricacy, a stark fate is looming.

And it is not a faltering of the will that is the issue at hand, for it is not that we cannot act, but that we do not see. The face in the mirror does not mesmerize; it obscures. We know not where we are; we know not what we do; we know not what we think, for there are structural patterns in thought that preclude our grasping our dilemmas, that put us at the mercy of ourselves.

For there is a gulf, there is a gap in the seal of perception. As much as our awareness of the world is determined by the laws that pertain to the epistemological conditions of knowing, as much as laws of thought rule the manner in which we may know and the decisions we may think to enact—knowledge and decisions that may well be capable of infinite parsing, of interminable splitting into ever subtler shades of indistinction, that may well refer to phenomena of ultimately indecipherable aspect—we commit actions that occur not among phenomena but in the world, that are as real as is the world without the range of our perceptions, and whose ramifications obey the laws not of thought but of objective reality, of physics: that are not implications but eventualities. For we are minds, but we are as well bodies, objects in a world of objective facts—facts among an ocean of facts. If the world is beyond our capacity to know with perfectly defined accuracy, with precision, so are our bodies, so are we, and so are the actions we devote. If our knowledge cannot be perfect, then our knowledge of ourselves must be imperfect, for we are, in the end and as Nietzsche knew so well, each of us a piece of nature. And unless we are incapable of surprise, unless we are competent to live through only what we can conceive, we will do to ourselves what we cannot predict. However uncertain our knowledge is, we are bodies and subject to absolutes, for as physical realities, the surest thing we are capable of is death, and death cannot be diced.

For finally, we live and, ultimately, we die not in the “world” we perceive

but in the world, and the world has the power to eradicate phenomena—to eviscerate our minds of every perception and thought, to extirpate our minds themselves—not just the phenomena of decimation but the very potency of conceiving phenomena itself. The world is apart from our power to encounter it, for the world will remain when we have erased ourselves from it. The scorched earth will be left behind when we all are gone, and the power that will flame it to a cinder is found at a level of magnification beyond the range of our senses, outside the precincts of the phenomenal. We will call down the thunder from a source we cannot conceive, but it will come as a result of what we will have created.

Such thoughts enter the mind when viewing “BODIES... The Exhibition,” not merely because the exhibition space is filled with what seem to be, and essentially are, coagulated renditions of what we are about to turn ourselves into, but because the experience of observing the quasi-scientific specimens of human remains itself invokes a pointed instance of the essential anomaly of our position as creatures of the world and as knowers of the world, as those who know ourselves as particles of the earth no better than we know the world of which we are fragments.

The exhibition in New York is only one installment of an enterprise of entertainment presentations—not quite art exhibitions and not quite science museum shows—continuing to arrive in a series of cities around the world. “BODIES... The Exhibition,” as seen in New York, presents 22 whole-body human specimens and 260 organ and partial body specimens preserved through the use of liquid silicone rubber. The technique involves the dissection of human bodies to expose inner structures and the substitution of the bodies’ water with a liquid silicone mixture that hardens to transform the remains into permanently preserved specimens with the texture of rubber and the appearance of the originals, meaning the appearance of authentic cadavers, which these apparently are, in that the original tissues evidently are transformed but not removed. The body parts are displayed with palpable sobriety, and the full-body specimens are opened to reveal muscles and organs and are posed: running with muscles streaming off in the seeming breeze, sitting in the posture of Rodin’s *Thinker*, playing football, and committing other such pantomimed antics. *

For those who will not make it to any of the venues: The alter-ego version of the New York exhibition (refer to the note at the end of this text) serves as one of the sets in *Casino Royale*, providing a reasonably clever reflection of the biological Calvinism that establishes the underlying value system for the Bond stories and that hasn’t been seen in the film series since the middle of *Thunderball*.

There have been expressions of shock and outrage over the exhibitions. Directors of the Seattle Museum of the Mysteries issued a statement declaring the exhibition demonstrates “a gross disrespect for the dead” and labeling it “a violation of basic human rights and dignity.” In England, Tory MP Teddy

Taylor remarked, "This will only appeal to ghoulish groups in our society. What possible benefit can a normal person gain from looking at dead bodies?" Also in England, a spokesperson for the Nuffield Foundation, a charitable trust in the United Kingdom, announced, "Human tissue should not be bought and sold or otherwise treated as an object of commerce. Body parts, anatomical specimens or preserved bodies should not be displayed in connection with public entertainment or art." A spokesperson for the British Medical Association said, "We feel uncomfortable with the money aspect of it." In Austria, the Dean of Mannheim objected that the exhibitions violate the sanctity of the human body for the purposes of commercial art. And from the art contingent, there has been little support forthcoming—David Lee, editor of *The Jackdaw*, an English newsletter on the visual arts, stated, "I will go and thousands of others will go too. But in the end it is a freak show."



It is notable that none of the objections quoted here, nor those observed by this writer elsewhere, give reasons for the outrage. The ghastliness is taken to be self-evident, which is to say that the arguments are made by fiat—without reasoning. Yet, there does seem to be something if not reasonable then at least predictable about such expressions of dismay. It seems as if one should not be surprised by them—it seems sensible that one would be shocked by this visual material, even if one cannot specify what there is in it that is shocking. There is the suggestion of something purely reactive here, something deeply rooted and not deliberate. And it is as in all things, the reactive is a mental lock, a willfulness not to think, a willfulness not to see. It is the vacuum gap of the mind.

So the question establishes itself: What about the viewing of preserved human corpses is shocking, shocking in a way that the viewing of manufactured models of the same structures would not be?

It is clear at the first degree of consideration that these specimens invoke

in the thoughts the mind / body dichotomy—they are virtually, in perhaps a reverse application of the contemporary meaning of the word and reflective of the near ambulatory postures into which the complete bodies have been maneuvered, a dramatization of the essential dilemma. As the chafing reactions make equally evident, a certain position with regard to the mind / body dichotomy is necessary to our equilibrium. The stability of the equation with which the two concepts are contemplated determines our stability in contemplating them—if the balance of halves is recalibrated, the balance of large numbers of people is disturbed. A nerve is being touched, which is to say a need is being disdained.

The reason for the sensitivity is clear: We die. More precisely, we know that our bodies die, and unless the dichotomy is maintained, and maintained as a parallel dispensation—such that the two do not intersect, do not coincide at any point, but retain each a status independent of the other, even given the need for a principle of interaction across the distance of categorical difference—we die with them. What is touched by the very suggestion of the mind / body dichotomy is not just a nerve, but the nerve, for as Schopenhauer observed in a remark that sets the “fulcrum absolute,” the discretionary fixed point of speculation without which speculation is not possible (and in this case, not so discretionary), to philosophy: “Indeed, without death there would hardly have been any philosophizing. . . . All religions and philosophical systems are directed principally to this end, and are thus primarily the antidote to the certainty of death which reflecting reason produces from its own resources.”

The reported responses from von Hagens to the outrage his version of the exhibition has provoked indicate a lack of awareness of the intrinsic sensitivity. His explanations regarding what he claims are the educational values of the exhibitions, the effort on his part to dispel the elitism of the medical profession and return to a time, as he sees it, in which the function of scientific inquiry was to promote the general enlightenment and during which dissection arenas held public examinations of the dead, possess a touch of blithe insouciance—in short, he gives little indication that he gets it. The tone of it all resembles the responses we often encounter from contemporary artists when they manage, as they seem to do with diminishing frequency now, to outrage the general sensitivities. (One may consult a list of Turner Prize winners for a typical roster; other line-ups will do as well.) They often respond with a “who, me?” attitude, as if not quite aware of what all the fuss is about. Their defenses and explanations are unconvincing, mere excuses tailored to the audience, the dropping of words that appear suitable for forgiveness, a vocal pantomime of penance, and particularly so in that their statements so often seem off the point—a deliberate or unconscious shifting of the question, discussing their intentions in place of their unwitting insults or abuses, coupled with a tone of naïve astonishment, which might entirely be sincere, that anything seems wrong to anyone. Other than in their implicit testimony to the insularity of the art world society—an inadvertent diagnostic, an unintended confession—these sensitive souls defend themselves by claiming a complete lack of comprehension of how anyone else feels: a distinctive confession on the part

of anyone claiming to be an artist.

There is testimony to a severe lack of conviction in this. The simple fact that they are not prepared to outrage, that they claim not to get it, distinguishes them from those who have in the past found the need to outrage to make a crucial point. Think of the Surrealists, the Futurists, even the Dadaists—they knew precisely what they were doing. And of course, we know how this situation arises, how such a falling-off is there: like professionals in any field, artists now follow the money, they do what the industry asks them to do, they attempt to master the game they wish to play in order to get along in the world, to make their way, to make their living. Young artists appeal to established expectations, knowing frequently nothing of them other than that they are established expectations. The dedication is circumstantial, a commitment to whatever standards and expectations presently prevail, to whatever it is that will get them into the sub-society in which they wish to dwell. Unlike the truly dedicated, who are not slaves to circumstance but the authors of it, elsewhere they would do or have done differently. Had they been born in another place, at another time, they would have done what would have served there and then, they never would have fallen upon what they now dedicate the only life they will ever have to accomplishing. Here is the herd instinct in full flower.

Of course, one has no business speculating about the personal motives of specific individuals, von Hagens or the organizers of the exhibition under consideration here—one cannot possibly know. It is sufficiently difficult to know one's own motives. However, the apparent tone of these defenses, the touch of blithe if bemused unconcern that seems to be there, is not anomalous—it is authorized by the age.

We live in a time of philosophical oblivion. In fact, we are in the business of philosophical smugness. We find the inherited dichotomies and the questions they entail to be quaint, as if we are smarter than the entire tradition of philosophical inquiry, as if we were naturally capable of out-thinking, by dint of our historical position, many of the greatest minds who have bequeathed us their most ardent intellectual efforts. Several months ago in these pages, I wrote about the naivety of disregarding Pascal's horror at the infinite spaces in which we figure so little, about the continuing, the permanent pertinence of his observations. The same should be said of Descartes and his conception of the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*. The mind / body distinction is not so easily dismissed, not so easily relegated to the scrapheap of historical reflection, not so readily dispelled with posturings about the folly of dualistic thinking, which, like poised cadavers, strike a pose of pretended intellectual animation but fail to argue an alternative formulation. To disregard out of hand Descartes' dichotomy is comparable to shrugging off Pascal's dread. It is simply obtuse, and, like our art, fails to comprehend how other people feel. Descartes speaks to a perception that not only has a certain self-evidence—the most rudimentary examination of the quality of circumstance demonstrates that the aspects of the mind are all categorically alike, as are the aspects of the body, and each group is categorically different from the other. Further, his perception



Right Left Anatomy
BODIES... The Exhibition

appears to be a necessary view of the species regarding its own condition.

The recognition of the mind / body distinction is not only necessary—necessary by all appearances to the emotional equanimity of the typical person—it is necessarily religious. For the Cartesian position postulates this world and then another world beyond this one, it posits something outside this world. And, as an intellectual formulation that requires a parallel arrangement of equal status, the dichotomy collapses, for the localization—the identification of my mind as *my mind*, tied to *my body* and no other, and vice versa—necessitates an intersection that violates the conditions of the formulation, and as a result, one of the two worlds becomes paramount. This world becomes a dependent of the other world—the mind, or what is now the soul, possesses the body as an attribute, until it doesn't, when it is free to waft to its proper environment. The mind becomes essence. In the end, the other world becomes the truth, this world the veil of appearances, and we have the core religious proposition, and the core metaphysical proposition, as Nietzsche employed the word. Thus, the

complaint concerning the violation of

the sanctity of the body, a complaint that ought to be a contradiction in terms, for the body is the mundane portion of the pairing. But the body obtains its sanctity from the mind, from that of which it is an attribute, from that which provides it its nature. And thus the shock at seeing the body opened to reveal mere machinery, immediately below the surface.

And as a religious proposal, the dichotomy is reactive, or if one likes, an article of faith. One can argue it forward to tease out the implications, but one cannot argue it backwards, to work through the premises upon which it rests. There

are no reasons behind it for there is no reasoning underlying it. It is a posture, an attitude, a willfulness not to think. As an article in the life of the mind, it is lifeless.

One can see this collapse throughout the exhibition. There, one is a mind, gazing upon bodies, as if we thinking, living beings—living beings among not mere models of us but actual cadavers, beings authentically like us but inanimate—were witnessing the bodies as existing elsewhere, in some other realm, as if on earth whereas we, the ones seeing them, are viewing them from the realm of truth, knowing them for what they are. We are at the eyepiece of the microscope; the body is on the slide, beneath our gaze. There, we look upon bodies as we would look upon anything else—from outside, from above, subject to our examination.

And so, with the inevitable collapse of the dichotomy—with the recognition that there must always be a collapse in the dichotomy, for the positing of a dichotomy implies a relation, a continuum of identity, an alignment of each half of the dichotomy exclusively with the other, a principle of alternatives as opposed to irrelevances, a hole in the wall between—philosophy breaks down. Thought resorts to thoughtlessness, to the refusal to reason out the conundrum. Something is wrong with the formulation.

The error is, as it must be, in the unexamined assumption. The assumption in the Cartesian dichotomy that goes uninquied is that of existence. In the initial position, each half of the dichotomy, both mind and body, is assumed to exist and to exist in a degree comparable to the other. Both are, and each is as thoroughly as the other is. The one quality both minds and bodies share is existence, and in that, and in that one attribute alone, they share an identity. The moment one recognizes the distinction between the two, one asserts the reality of each alone. Such is taken for granted, and the automatic proposition has implications, for it connotes that both mind and body are capable of existing alone, each independent of the other, if it could depend only from its own terms of constitution. Hence, the space is cleared for the supposition, at minimum, that the mind may well come to exist on its own terms, divorced of its body once it must be, that it may survive the body's death. But this assumption of factual circumstance does not denote demonstrable fact. We see in this exhibition and could see elsewhere bodies divorced of minds, but we have never seen living human bodies that are mindless, nor have we witnessed minds apart from bodies. The alternatives are hypostatized, and there is a literalism in this—proposed as separate, the mind and body are taken to be potentially extant as separate entities, taken for granted to be in fact as proposed in theorization, and that is not the same thing. Facts are not theorizations. There is a categorical difference.

Theorizations are values and variables in a developing line of thought and need no more be capable of reification than is the square root of negative one, as long as the ultimate result of the line of thought is an illumination of a heretofore inexplicable state of affairs. The dichotomy of mind / body is

credible and is not directly resolvable. Clearly, an approach differing from immediate reification is required.

An approach is available, for it presents itself upon the rejection of another unexamined assumption: that the mind / body dichotomy is a special circumstance, a problem unlike any other. Assume, rather, it is not. What we have then is a distinction between formal patterns of examination, two ways of viewing that which is not self-revealing and appears to possess contradictory qualities—two ways of mapping a problem.

Congenitally, we approach, conceive, and deliberate about our circumstances by two different strategies, what may be termed two different geometric models: we think laterally, and we think in depth, or vertically. The results of these alternate approaches are so different that we may be said to as much as live in two different worlds, for they render for us perceptible realms of utterly unlike entities, processes, calibers of existence, and principles of causal linkage whereby what we do and suffer, and the ways in which these matters come about, can be instigated, and can be prevented, are thoroughly in discrepancy.

We as much as live two lives, if it can be said under this consideration that we live at all. Much of our confusion, much of our standard disputation, can be traced to a category confusion, tracked back to an attempt to blend or reconcile the explanatory strategies of one realm with those of the other. Much of our misunderstanding occurs in the borderland between the two lives we live.

There are two worlds we simultaneously occupy, and which we can take with equal sobriety, with equal seriousness: the world of theorization and the world of sentiment; the world of facts and the world of emotional significances, of emphases, of values, of degrees of importance; the world of logical implications and the world of moods; of argument and of narrative; of what things mean and of what things mean for us. We are, perhaps by our very nature, incapable of seeing these two realms as thoroughly divorced from each other. At minimum, we take a moment of attention in one as signifying or symbolizing some moment of attention in the other. Generally, we take them as inextricably linked together, as superimposed if not as identical. Yet, they have little in common—they are not identical, not mutually intricated. They are parallel and of divergent provenance. They are the worlds of lucidity and sentimentality.

Theorization is thought in depth, vertical thought, the attempt to build models of underlying structures of causality that are capable of accounting for the ways in which observable events come about. The principle of explanation seeks its answer in unobservable recesses, taking the approach that the motivating factors for results in the world lie within, in the heart of the event. The theory builds on the basis of hypothesis, proposing a formulation of potential causal arrangements, a geometric arrangement of interacting parts, supposing a reason for what can be seen, and appropriately refusing to

assume a literal fidelity to what cannot be observed—as noted, not requiring a capability of literality regarding the internal machinery of causation. The causation is mechanical and efficient—mechanical in the sense of geometric analysis, even if the elements are immaterial rather than physically stabilized forms, and efficient in that what is proposed is a conditional necessity of inner events undirected by an intended result. The model proposes that, once the hypothetical is set into action, what would happen must happen. It is like attempting to explain the capabilities of a clock one has discovered and cannot pry the back from—one can build various dispositions of gears and pendulums and springs, but it would be folly to presume that any one of the workable constructions accurately reflects the inner workings of the found clock or the comparable turnings of the sun and moon and stars that, gauged by an accurate timepiece, have enabled sailors to navigate out of sight of land. Any supposition regarding the machinery of nature is a permanent hypothesis.

Sentiment is the thinking of emotional investment, and it is lateral. It works across the panorama of appearances, along the line of what our senses bring us, and it assumes what we witness interact with each other, thereby bringing about results. Of course, any explanatory approach will note interaction between different elements apparent to the senses, but what counts as an apparent element and as an apparent principle of interaction among the appearances of elements is dependent upon which approach is taken. The lateral approach can be termed thinking along the skin of perception. What it takes as apparent is that which appears to the uninflected human senses, primarily human sight, and the appearance that is paramount is the individual, independent, self-directed human being—the human being as an unimpeachable unit.

The human being thus becomes the measure of all things, the reference for all meaning. Things mean what they mean for us, they mean what they do to us, and how we value them is among their implications, principal among their implications. Thus, the causation sought for explanation is final—things are moved by the purposes they serve, the ends toward which they are aimed. And the principle of causation is energeticist rather than mechanical—there is a motive force directing eventualities; the automatic falling of dominos is not the issue of significance. Thereby, all perception serves as the foundation of value judgment, and all value judgment is determined by the import of things and events for our desires and purposes. The world is *our story*. This view of things works across the surfaces of what it observes, rather than digging for the inner machinery, an hypothesis of which would redefine by amplification the roster of accepted facts. Thus, the human being is not a set of organs and organization of tissues—when the focal length of the microscope is changed and the body dissolves into a colony of cells, something is wrong: the sanctity of the body has been violated, the soul is suddenly unapparent. Meaning is thus construed by identification, by projection, by anthropomorphization. We can recognize what there is to the degree we find it to be somewhat like us.

The roots of this approach to the world can be traced back to Aristotle, in

his definition of the soul as “the form of a natural body having life potentially within it. . . . it is ‘the essential whatness’ of a body.” Of course, what Aristotle means by “soul” is something closer to our sense of “identity”: that which makes a thing, in this case a natural thing, what it is, and thus an aspect that is an essence, what would be lost were that thing fashioned as something else. Yet, it is to the point that his immediate example is an axe, supposed as a natural body. Were it not fashioned by its nature as an axe, it would in fact not be an axe, but it is important to note that the entire proposition depends on an example of something that is defined by its human use—only we use axes and they are axes only in the orbit of our use of them and for them. From the supposition of a natural object with an innate human use tumbles a series of remarkable implications of thought, but that is a subject for another time. What matters here is that this approach is quite different from Plato’s geometric analyses of the laws by which, among other things, the stars and planets operate—the music of the spheres. As is so often the case, the two giants lay our options open before us.

It should also be noted that this is precisely the view of things that Nietzsche assaulted, in numerous places but perhaps nowhere so clearly as in section 142 of *Daybreak*. It is the human identification with the world that is the source of error. He tells us we are like the Danish king who “was wrought up to such a degree of warlike fury by the music of his minstrel that he leaped from his seat and killed five people of his assembled court: there was no war, no enemy, rather the reverse, but the drive which *from the feeling infers the cause* was sufficiently strong to overpower observation and reason.” Like the king, we infer the cause of things from the feeling we have of them, and the feeling comes from identification, what we now call projection: “Man has even applied this interpretation of all movements and lineaments *as deriving from intention* to inanimate nature—in the delusion that there is nothing inanimate.” We sense motives and monsters everywhere around us; we sense ourselves everywhere around us. In this view, the universe is us.

The difference between the lateral and the vertical approach is the difference between emotion and thinking, the first being implicitly projective and the other coolly analytic. It is the difference between the Romantic and the Classical in art, the first presenting the drama of the universe aimed at the isolated individual and the other a colder, more sophisticated, more reserved response to a depth of perception, which often struggles with a complexity to things beyond our comprehension and that labors to move the sympathies beyond an easy identification with anything observable, a “self-overcoming” that begins to appear not as an instruction to surmount our weaknesses of will and endurance but an attempt to leave behind our, so far, congenitally human-centered view of the world, what in some quarters is termed the “anthropocentric” view, to move beyond the sense that the feeling we have for things discloses their intrinsic causes and that the inanimate universe is staring back at us, that it is staring specifically and solely at we who stare at it—that that is the story we live. And it can be argued, in the beginning of an accounting of why so many Modernist artists claimed to be Classicists,

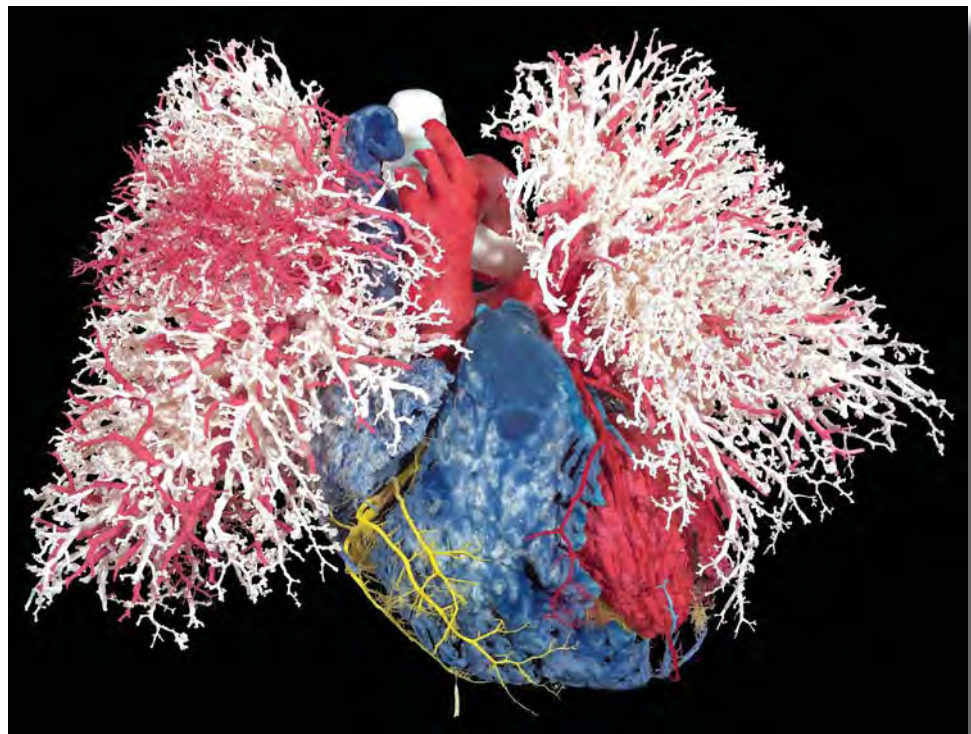
that Modernism was, or is, an attempt at the same self-overcoming, possibly instigated in many instances by the influence of Nietzsche. Abstract painting can be seen as the try at presenting the world beyond the vision through human purposes and the interpretation by human needs. And abstract literature can make often the same claim. The literary equivalent of the human proposition is the technique of anthropomorphization—the animation of the inanimate for the sake of a vibrant, animated portrayal. It is the stock-in-trade of mediocre writing, for all its appearances in works of excellence. The primary Modernist examples would come from Joyce: *Ulysses* can be viewed as a novel finally withdrawing all central dependence on anthropomorphization, and *Finnegans Wake* a proposition that the aesthetic inflection of portrayal and the animation of the inanimate is a strange dream, an endless nightmare.

It is the difference between culture and science, for science is the search for credible—meaning workable, serviceable—hypotheses of deep structures, and culture is the world we construct around us, the world of human purposes and imports: a credible proposition so long as one takes nothing of it as fact, which is the purview of the scientific approach. (Fate is not a fact; it is a feeling.) And it is the difference between Heideggerian Phenomenology and philosophy. Like science, and in the areas science leaves for it to operate, philosophy is the search for hypothetical deep structures. Phenomenology, as the identification of the nature of things with their self-presentation within the range of human perception, on the stage of the human drama—as *Dasein*—is the anthropocentric view, the vision of the universe as a human event, for, as has been argued in these pages before, it locates the range of objective facts (if they can be said in this view to exist at all) within the circle of human perceptions rather than localizing perception within the confines of the objective world. It is we who envelop the universe, and the error becomes clear when psychology is introduced into the considerations: This is the error of narcissism, of failing to recognize where one's mind ends and where the world begins.

Thus, the lateral view of things, the human-centered view, is a fairy tale, because it does not work, and it does not work because, to put it simply, facts are facts. We may perceive as we perceive, and claim ourselves the denizens of the world as we perceive it, but our bodies exist beyond that perimeter, we exist beyond that perimeter, and our actions can involve consequences that impinge upon our perceptions. They can alter the world of perception; they can decimate it, and us. We can know what we know, but we cannot be what we know, for a dichotomy is installed, entailed because the world of perception cannot be hermetically sealed. We exist beyond it, and the decisions we make, acted out in a world that is, in fact, not of our making, are capable of intruding upon what we perceive, of reconfiguring for us what we perceive. That is the lesson regarding Phenomenology—it cannot save us from ourselves, and in establishing the dichotomy between what our minds perceive and what our bodies commit as action, in separating the body from the mind such that the body is in a position for its actions and their results to invade the mind's world of perception, to breach that "world," Phenomenology is a Cartesian postulate.

And thus, Phenomenology leaves us to recognize that there is an entire world that feels real, and is not.

And it is a fairy tale, and a proposal of the comfort of religion—it is a version of the religious impulse itself—because it is the proposition of our very existence. Under the microscope, we cannot find ourselves. At one level of magnification, we are individual bodies. Change the focus and there are colonies of cells, or geometric associations of molecules, or something more vaporous still. We are a choice of magnification, which makes us a discretionary appearance, one among many possible in the same localization of space and time. That is the vertical view. The lateral view renders us in that it renders everything as being about us—we exist only in reference to ourselves, only as an arbitrary proposition. We are a circular argument.



The alternative to the naïve assumption of individual human presence, and thus to Phenomenology, is the conception of something existing that must, presumably, believe it is us in order to survive. *I think, therefore something is, and that something thinks it is me.* Or, as I once wrote in some other context: *I sometimes think the brain is a parasite living inside an animal over which it deludes itself into thinking it has control.*

Nietzsche saw this, as well. The realization that not only are we not the focus of the story of things, but that we do not exist in any unqualified sense, runs throughout his work. It is the tragedy in *The Birth of Tragedy*—the recognition of the impossibility of our own existence as individual beings, the recognition

of the inadmissibility of the *principium individuationis*, of the existence of any individual thing—and it more soberly, and far less soberly, emerges in the first section of *The Gay Science*, in which Nietzsche realizes the folly of all our tragedies, our values, our ideals, our seriousness, and sees the human comedy as a comedy serving the preservation of the species. “Even laughter may yet have a future. I mean, when the proposition ‘the species is everything, one is always none’ has become part of humanity, and this ultimate liberation and irresponsibility has become accessible to all at all times.” For Nietzsche, the animal, the beast, that must believe it is us is the species, and it can be complained this is a step too literal. (What unimpeachable facts do we have that even the species is real? Because we see there is one? And what makes it *one*?) But the point is much the same. The human dramas we live through as individuals serve a purpose of something other than us as individuals. And the force of the argument, the thrust of fact that demonstrates an achieved point to it all, is, unironically, a Cartesian one, again a revision of “I think, therefore I am”: “Still it is proven that [the most amazing economy of the preservation of the species] has preserved our race so far.”

And so the two approaches of the human-centered and the theoretical, the lateral and the vertical probe of hypothetical depths, are not revelations of two aspects of reality but two modes of comprehension, both inadequate to the challenge of the real, even of our own reality, or the reality of that which proposes us to ourselves. They are the mark of the inaccessibility of the real, and by them, considered in recognition of each other, we come upon not the limits of the world but the limits of our ability to conceive the world—modes of thought revealing of the edges and the characteristics of thought. It is all a Kantian exercise in the end, and a communication to ourselves that, as perceiving and thinking creatures, at least to all appearances, we live in a bell jar of hypotheses and delusions, and the world, including us, is somewhere else.

We cannot hypothesize and hypostatize simultaneously, or we will not continue to live. We exist now at a remarkable historical confluence. It is the folly, one among many, of cutting-edge philosophical thought, of Postmodern thought (if that term retains any meaning), that the Age of Reason is far in the past. But it is not. Reason as a common practice—theorization as, if nothing else, a tempering influence on the impulse to hypostatize our feelings about the world, to infer innate cause from feeling—is far from well rooted. The Age of Reason has barely begun, and we are clearly living through a surging of the Age of Faith. Perhaps the Age of Faith is in its death throes, but it is evident that we now exist at the intersection of the two, and a battle is raging.

It is a war between the opposing components of the dichotomy—the dichotomy in our means of understanding. It is the Cartesian moment writ large, as potentially an historical cataclysm. It is what we see in “BODIES... The Exhibition,” in the posed display of flayed cadavers—for in the final analysis, that is what we have—poised to pretend to be us and exposed to reveal what underlies us and is not us: the skull beneath the skin, the

machinery below the surface. It is a vision that throws us onto the cusp in our ability to think, hurls us into the gap in our understanding. To see it is to be possessed by death, for each side in the essential discrepancy is death to the other. The God vision is the self-reflection in a mirror grown to concave, and it is become an enormity. It is become a fury from within, for we have become capable of hypothesizing our own non-existence, and we may get it. That which Nietzsche thought proven is about to be tested, finally, and the result may be the tragedy he saw first.

* It should be noted that the series of exhibitions titled “BODIES... The Exhibition” is, according to press materials, unrelated to a series of similar exhibitions titled “Body Worlds” that are on display in other cities and are connected to Gunther von Hagens, who claims to have devised an at least similar-sounding technique for preserving human remains, a technique called “plastination.” The press materials for “BODIES... The Exhibition” call its preservation technique “polymer preservation,” claim the exhibition has been organized by Premier Exhibitions, Inc., of Atlanta, Georgia, and identify Dr. Roy Glover, professor emeritus of anatomy and cell biology at the University of Michigan, as chief medical director for the New York exhibition. Their precise statement: “Premier Exhibitions, Inc. is not affiliated with any other organizer of human anatomy exhibitions, including Gunther von Hagens, Gerhard Perner, or Genlife Biomedical. BODIES...The Exhibition should not be confused with ‘Body Worlds,’ ‘Body Exploration,’ ‘The Universe Within,’ ‘Bodies Revealed,’ or any other human anatomy exhibition.” This writer has been unable so far to locate a public accounting of the precise relationship between these two series of exhibitions or between these two business enterprises. In addition, it should be mentioned that the specimens used in “BODIES... The Exhibition” are reported in the press materials to come from Dalian Medical University Plastination Laboratories in the People’s Republic of China, a fact, or at least claim, that has caused some controversy since there are reports that the facility accepts unidentified bodies as well as body parts from executed Chinese prisoners. The organizers of the exhibition have denied these charges and asserted that all the bodies and body parts come from voluntary donors.

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Ecce Homo:

The Tragic Passion of Auguste Rodin

by Rainer J. Hanshe

Master Sculptor: Rodin in Istanbul

Hyperion, Volume I, issue 4, December 2006

HYPERION:
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS

*Ecce
Homo*



*The Tragic
Passion of
Auguste
Rodin*

**Master Sculptor, Rodin in Istanbul
Sakıp Sabancı Museum, Istanbul
June 13, 2006 – September 3, 2006**

by Rainer J. Hanshe

Note: The following essay does not engage in formal aesthetic analysis of specific works of art by Rodin; its dynamic or propulsive force is different. It commences with a theoretical prelude on passion and then embarks on a meditative analysis of Rodin's work born of an experiential encounter with it. It reflects upon the work as a revelation and expression of being and explores the multitudinous ways in which one can live with Rodin's art as an active force.

“

Art shows man his *raison d'être*. It reveals to him the meaning of life, it enlightens him upon his destiny, and consequently points him on his way.

The great artist, and by this I mean the poet as well as the painter and the sculptor, finds even in suffering, in the death of loved ones, in the treachery of friends, something which fills him with a voluptuous though tragic admiration.

When he sees beings everywhere destroying each other; when he sees all youth fading, all strength failing, all genius dying, when he is face to face with the will which decreed these tragic laws, more than ever he rejoices in his knowledge, and, seized anew by the passion for truth, he is happy.

—Rodin, *Rodin on Art*

“

Paganism is the deepening of appearances.

—Cioran, *Tears & Saints*

“

But, sure, the bravery of his grief did put me into a towering passion.

—Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

I

Passion is one of the signature affects, perhaps the primary one, of our era; it is panegyricized as the paramount attribute. Devoid of this potent affect, life appears meaningless, or so lacking in fervor that, without passion, the blood seems gelid. Of the dispassionate, it is said that they are 'dead'; it is as if they are without heat; they emit no energy and no light. In passion, not only do we find our selves, but, through it, inscribe our selves in the world. Through the expression of our passion, we communicate who and what we are, or at least some fragment of our selves, whatever grain of being we've come to know of our enigmatic natures. And we are a piece of nature, as

much animal as not; though many kill the beast in favor of the angel, and that is a dangerous erasure. To live with both is imperative. This split is not the revelation of an inner contradiction which should torment us as it did the pious, but, as Goethe and Hafiz knew, it should be an enticement and seduction *to* life. The passion of our epoch though is a pale shadow of what passion truly is, if one can at all deign to call ours passion. The fundamental quality or aspect of passion, that which gives it its true force, that which keeps it from degenerating into mere excitement or zeal and makes of it something much more formidable, something which either brings forth wisdom or reveals existence to us and imbues it with *gravitas*, is almost wholly absent from what we call passion. Without this primary ingredient, passion is meaningless; or rather, it isn't passion at all, just an intense desire, an excessive or strong emotion devoid of insight. What makes it something powerful enough to transfix those who encounter it in others is absent.

The unbridled expression of emotion, whether by an artist or those who imagine themselves to be artists, and there are all too many, is extolled as the right of the passionate. Artists are given license, or bestow upon themselves the license to express their passions without restriction, and this is considered an act of freedom, the mark of one completely devoid of boundaries. The zealous, unwavering, ruthless pursuit of a goal—typically fame, not expressive power—and the wanton, almost profligate indulgence of ceaselessly satisfying one's senses are other signs of those supposedly rich with passion. The latter isn't emblematic of passion at all though—it is hedonism and hedonism alone, hardly a form of the Dionysian as many are wont to believe. The sacred aspect of the Dionysian is generally absent; to turn Dionysus into the mere figurehead of excess is to dilute, to reduce, and, finally, to *deform* the Dionysian through eradicating one of its central components. This is not the sacrifice of the 'god,' only the desecration of him, and it reveals that the multitudes of hedonists are blind to the more complex configuration which makes up passion. The pursuit of the sacred in the epoch of the *requiem aeternam deo* is no longer an exigent concern, or, lamentably, a concern for an elect few.¹ In our age, passion is predominantly innocuous—the most mundane activities now qualify as things to be impassioned about. Passion, like love, borders on or rather is a dead affect; one long bereft of its original potency and value. To liberally indulge in one's passions isn't necessarily an act of freedom; more than anything, people are not the masters of their passions; rather, they are the slaves of them. What we are in the midst of, and have been, is the *banalization of passion*. Like God, passion is dead. Its ghost continues to haunt us yet, unlike God, it must be resurrected.

In the *Laches*, Plato outlined what he considered to be the four fundamental passions, which were joy, sorrow, hope, and fear; later thinkers would advance theories on passion out of these categories, but throughout the following epochs they would remain relatively the same. The earliest, most comprehensive extant account of the Stoic theory of the passions is contained in Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*. In his text, Plato's configuration is altered and grief and desire displace sorrow and hope as primitive passions;

this division of the passions was embraced later by Virgil, Augustine, and Boethius. Thomas Aquinas would advance a more streamlined and simple classification. In his *Summa Theologica*, he creates a very basic division between concupiscible and irascible passions. Other divisions expanded the list and included aversion and love. From the eleventh century onward, figures from the troubadours to Thomas Wright, Hobbes, Timothy Bright and Descartes and Spinoza would write extended treatises on the passions, some diverging from the established Stoic division established by Cicero. While each of these accounts conceived of the passions and of how man lived with them differently, bearing the weight of each of these affects and giving them their force was one extremely vital ingredient: *suffering*. In each category of passion, suffering is an integral if not basic component. If it is absent, passion doesn't exist, or is incomplete. True passion, authentic passion involves suffering. Not to suffer is to be devoid of passion, to live without the risk that makes life chilling. The terror we experience before the world, and the awe that makes us shudder, is lost without suffering. To be devoid of passion is not to be alive, to be without joy, for the joyful one suffers, too; the joyful one suffers because of a knowledge of life, yet in this suffering there is reverence—life itself is recognized as holy. Like Prometheus on the scabrous crag, the joyful one is painfully cognizant of the truth that one suffers for knowledge. Humanity exists on an obelisk of suffering and it suffers *for* life; all that is most exemplary in humanity, its morals, its philosophy, its sciences, its art, everything that has become part of its inner world, of the forces which guide and direct it, all of it was born of some exacting suffering. Socrates chose to perish in order to uphold certain ideals as others like Copernicus and Galileo and Descartes and Spinoza risked their sanity if not lives in pursuing the liminal bounds of the mind, at war with a complacent and dogmatic world opposed to such daring risks and transvaluations. Our greatness is born of our suffering; our triumphs, our sacrifices, our surrender to goals, “almost everything we call ‘higher culture’ rests on the spiritualization of, and giving depth to, cruelty” as Nietzsche recognized in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Without passion, that is, without cruelty and suffering, man is nothing. One might say, without suffering, life is meaningless and that it is suffering that is a sign of the actual meaning of our lives. One doesn't need to find a meaning for suffering—suffering is the meaning, just as joy, when we are joyful, is the meaning.

In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the earliest noted meaning of passion refers to Christ, and passion is commonly associated with Christ. It is related to physical pain and suffering, the main objects or instruments of the Passion being the cross, the crown of thorns, the scourge, the nails, etc. All are too familiar with the images of this myth and now we are being bludgeoned with it again and again and seem to be in the midst of another Dark Ages. While the *Via Crucis* or Twelve Stations of the Cross unquestionably involve suffering, it is *only* suffering, thus a perversion of passion. Joy is eradicated from the ‘Savior’s’ passion, which becomes a form of torture or punishment, something endured because of man’s ‘sinful’ nature. It is a path for ‘rectifying’ the world, not a passion *for* the world, not one which realizes the world *is*

holy but suffers to achieve holiness at the end of time. The world need not be rectified though; what must be overcome is the non-tragic, finite conception of temporality which Tertullian and the Christian empire inculcated and which has been reinforced over centuries and centuries. Today, distressingly, we are in the midst of a fervent religious revival, while even science and philosophy as Nietzsche revealed with stunning perspicacity can be religious, too. What is more unsettling is that Christians are still diligently working to convert the world, and this is no minor phenomenon. On the Mission Frontiers website, a stated solution for the current world crisis in the article “Finishing the Task” is to convert the entire world to Christianity. They note that they are “in the final era” of their missionary task, “which is to establish an indigenous church planting movement within the language and social structure of every people on earth.” The tragic reality for them is that there will “still be billions who would never come to faith.” What is vital is to make the gospel “available to every person on earth” since “Satan holds whole peoples in bondage” and “there will be” they note “a ‘*power encounter*’ between the armies of God and the powers of darkness. Conquering the ‘kingdoms of the world’ requires *an invasion* of God’s glory within each people.” Muslims, “tribal” people, Hindus, and Buddhists are according to them “challenging peoples” and “the most resistant” but, as they confess, they “are learning that when a people seems ‘resistant’ it may only mean our approach has been defective.”² These monotheist zealots still have not learned from history; it is not sufficient to believe what they wish to believe, but they must reinforce their belief through eradicating all other forms of belief and ‘saving’ the world. But the end of the world is not coming: there is no inferno, there is no purgatorio, and there is no paradiso. The divine is *man’s* comedy, and *we* are the world’s tragedy. If the end of the world is at hand, it is man who will bring it about and man alone. If that occurs, so be it; perhaps it’s time we perish. Another world will come in our wake. While we’re here, what we need to live with is a different *kind* of suffering. It is not a god who we must suffer for, *but our selves*. The Christ myth is too reminiscent of other deities to seem wholly authentic and original, and certainly far from true, just as the myth of Noah’s ark is directly adopted from *Gilgamesh*, which adopted it from the *Epic of Atrahasis*. If one is to speak of passion, to find the great exemplar of it, one must move beyond Christ and instead trace passion back to an earlier figure of suffering—*Dionysus*. He, one of the original figures of *sporagmos* or dismemberment, is also the rapturous figure who invokes ecstasy, the symbolic deity locked in an eternal dance with his agonistic counterpart, Apollo, and it is Apollo who measures the passions. We are eating the wrong god.

Since Tertullian, passion has denoted the suffering of a martyr and martyrdom as well as physical suffering and pain. It is probably with the father of the Latin Church, whose vehement condemnation of pagans is well known, that the prior association of suffering and passion with Dionysus was severed. Under Constantine the pagans would suffer ridicule, scorn, and persecution and late in the fourth century, the astrologer (what is today astronomy) Firmicus would exhort the emperors to strip the pagan temples of their adornments.

In *De errore profanarum Religionum* he proclaimed that they should let “the fire of the mint or the blaze of the smelters melt them down, and confiscate all the votive offerings to your own use and ownership. Since the time of the destruction of the temples you have been by God’s power, advanced in greatness.” The religion of the pagans was to be eradicated with extreme prejudice and they violently punished; “we know,” he says with wicked relish, “the dangerous nature of their crime, and we know what punishments are appropriate for delusion; but it is better for you to save them against their will than to let them follow their wishes into perdition.” The “severest laws of [the emperor’s] edicts” were to be employed to insure this task would be accomplished and the pagans were threatened with death and the confiscation of their property if they continued to practice their rites. In 391 Theodosius I would once and for all outlaw paganism; two years later, the Olympic Games would be abolished and Olympia would suffer vandalism and the ravages of history, not to be rediscovered until 1766. Pagan culture was dead and buried. The nails from Christ’s hands were the nails which secured the coffin of Pagan culture.

In the eleventh century, passion would be vigorously transformed by the troubadours, the first culture to rupture the tyranny of Latin and inaugurate the modern era, though they would eventually be decimated in the Albigensian Crusade. God was no longer the agent of passion—instead, passion was a flame which arose in the veins of each individual. Divine subjectivity was displaced and the free individual was born. The explicit meaning of *passio* in Old Occitan, the *lingua franca* of the troubadours, was violent love; while playful masters of *lo gai saber*, the troubadours were no strangers to suffering, cultivating it in their lives and works. But the legacy of the troubadours would be thrust into oblivion just as pagan culture was thrust into darkness. With the late Renaissance, though hardly a pure pagan era, Greek culture flourished again only to end in extreme excesses, resulting in the lamentable Bonfire of the Vanities. When Botticelli cast his own paintings into the inferno at the behest of Savonarola, Dionysus’ vines were saturated with bitter tears. The Greek revival would essentially begin again with Winckelmann and intensify in the late nineteenth century when German archeologists would begin digs in 1875, three years after Nietzsche wrote *The Birth of Tragedy*. While Winckelmann encouraged imitation of the Greeks, Nietzsche struggled to instigate a rebirth of the same kind of greatness in his own time through the *influence* of Greek culture, not an empty mimesis of it. The anti-Christ’s study of earlier epochs served as a force by which to measure his own age; knowledge was continually to be in the service of life, never an end in itself. At last, fifteen hundred years after their interment, the Olympic Games would begin anew, brought to life in Greece not by one of its natives, but by Pierre de Coubertin, a Parisian. Dionysus was once again in our midst, though his revival, again, would be short-lived.

Unlike the troubadours, mankind is blind to the importance of suffering, of infusing passion with suffering. The form of personal love or passion we inherited from the troubadours is certainly devoid of their violent or agonistic

suffering of the heart and, despite Nietzsche's texts and a seeming rebirth of Greek culture, the association of suffering and passion with Christ still persists. Our form of paganism, if we can even claim to have it, is just frivolous; it lacks the sacred dimension and without it we're just drunks. Not sacred practitioners, only decadent and indulgent sows. Paganism has been co-opted by the hedonists. Though the death of God was pronounced in 1882, people still live with Christ as if he were a revitalizing force, yet the suffering of believers is a perversion of existence, a sign of an insidious contempt for life. Outside of many of the faithful, who, perceiving them as sinful, extirpate their passions out of misjudgment, what many of the faithless want is pure satisfaction, the simple fulfillment of pleasures—one distorts suffering, the other evades it. But without what Nietzsche called the "discipline of suffering, of great suffering," the enhancement of humanity is not possible, and authentic passion is beyond us. The path away from Christ and towards Dionysus will not be clear. In evading our suffering, we also evade our deepest joy and life, the fullest, most encompassing, rich, variegated and profound life is distant from us. Gilgamesh, the joy-woe man, is not or is very rarely in our midst. The human, Nietzsche declared in *Beyond Good and Evil*, "necessarily must and *should* suffer" for out of that suffering it will be "made incandescent," it will be "purified." It is our duty to purify our selves not of sin but of what is human, all too human; purified of the need for a redemptive god. To ruthlessly resist pity is to resist every debilitating comfort we devise in order to endure, or worse, elude the tragic dimension of existence. To resist pity is to resist every placid illusion which only serves to weaken us. In resisting pity, we resist Christ and move towards our suffering, we embrace and love it, for that is what passion demands. No one can suffer for us; we must suffer for our selves. Our suffering though bears gifts from which all may receive rewards, and the most incandescent and resonant transfiguration of suffering is found in art. To restore and redeem passion, there is only one thing that we can do: *we must eat Dionysus*. In partaking of Dionysus we partake of our selves and regain our suffering.

II

When Rilke first wrote to Rodin before beginning his apprenticeship with the sculptor he referred to as his master, he confessed to him that his art "is such (I have felt it for a long time) that it knows how to give bread and gold to painters, to poets, to sculptors: to all artists *who go their way of suffering*, desiring nothing but that ray of eternity which is the supreme goal of the creative life."

As is well known, Rilke's time with his "master" altered his life; it had, conclusively, an immeasurable effect upon the poet. It changed the way he perceived the world, thus it changed the way he lived and the way he wrote. Such experiences are rare. Until his death twenty-four years after his apprenticeship with Rodin, Rilke would struggle to work not according to the

erratic whims of his muse, but according to new principles, more pragmatic, craftsman-like principles not contingent upon the vagaries of inspiration. Through traversing his own “way of suffering” Rilke cultivated the “bread and gold” that he received from Rodin while seeking the supreme goal of his creative life: the “ray of eternity.” In such poems as the “Archaic Torso of Apollo” it is evident that Rilke at times discovered it, yet not consistently. To do so is an extremely difficult task few may achieve, if at all, and the poet confessed that he failed “to find the courage to do the most obvious, and to simply work hard in pursuit of my inspiration.” What is significant is that, as an artistic model, Rodin acted as a force upon Rilke, compelling him to strive for something supreme. “Life,” the poet said, “is beginning for me, the life that will celebrate your high example and that will find in you its consolation, its justification, and its strength.” The excessive reverence if not idolatry of Rilke’s sentiment must be put in reserve; it is less Rodin though and more his work which provokes such excitability. It is the passion that it invokes that is instrumental.

Rodin has not only given sustenance of body and soul to painters, poets, and sculptors, he has given it to whomever has received his work, and, currently, it is being received in major exhibitions around much of the world. While the exhibit in Istanbul that is the concern of this meditation is now over, the *Musée Rodin* in Paris has made contributions to numerous other exhibits including the Tokyo *Museum of National Occidental Art* exhibit “Rodin” (7 March – 4 June 2006) and the Paris *Musée d’Orsay* exhibit “Rodin–Carrière” (10 July – 1 October 2006). The *Fondation Beyeler*, Swiss exhibit “Eros” (6 August 2006 – 18 February 2007), the *Royal Academy of Arts*, London exhibit “Rodin” (23 September 2006 – 1 January 2007), and the *Kunsthaus Zürich*, Swiss exhibit “Rodin” (9 February 2007 – 20 May 2007) also received contributions from the *Musée Rodin*, and those exhibitions are still current, with the last soon to open. The *Musée Rodin* also lent works to exhibits in Germany, Greece, the United States, Italy, and Cambodia. Nearly one hundred years after his death, his work remains not only absolutely modern, it continues to invoke awe, mystery, and adoration as well as astonishment. It speaks to each succeeding generation. It communicates and reveals something and there is a demand, if not need to see and to touch his work, if one is able to, as the blind were generously permitted to by *Sakıp Sabancı Museum* (SSM) of Istanbul. In engaging with these works, one continues to discover new things in them, to be mesmerized and provoked by them, to be affected in the depths and heights of one’s being. Standing before his work is like standing before a panoply of all the suffering and all the passions of humanity. It is a tragic song of life and SSM presented an expansive array of works in its exhibition “Master Sculptor, Rodin in Istanbul,” which ran from June 13, 2006 – September 3, 2006.

The exhibition, as stated in the press release, was comprised of “203 artworks selected from the collection of the Rodin Museum in Paris,” which included bronze, plaster, and marble sculptures as well as archival photographs, drawings, and objects from Rodin’s own collection of antique Greek and

Roman statues. Whereas their stated aim was “to promote wider public appreciation of the art of sculpture through the works of a renowned master” one left the exhibition far more enriched. What one comes to appreciate, and that is surely an insufficient word, what one is galvanized by is existence itself. One is charged by it, awakened to the splendor of the body, though not without knowledge of its fragility, awakened to the truths or an experience of the earth and, more so, of the cosmos. And that is what philosophy and art are ultimately after. It is what Nietzsche was in pursuit of, what Heidegger searched for, what Blanchot struggled to reveal. It is what Rodin gives to us in his sculptures. An immediate, more contiguous experience of the world. If art and philosophy do not open the world up to us, if they do not cast us *towards* and *into* it, what is the sense of either? Both must compel us to sacrifice our selves and enter the world, otherwise, we must abandon them for the world and make philosophy and art of our lives. As Nietzsche declared in *The Gay Science*, “What good is a book that does not even carry us beyond all books?”

Auguste Rodin is considered one of the foremost innovators of modern sculpture, beginning his work in the late nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth century, a herald shattering the moribund Romanticism of his own era and opening a plethora of doors to the future. In Rodin’s sculptures, an entire new manner of expression was given birth; in an unparalleled way it was bold, daring, and vigorous. Michelangelo’s work comes to mind with such a description, but, as Rodin himself noted, the Tuscan’s art was full of contempt, which is not a negation of his monumental sculpture or his majestic paintings, only a criticism of his non-tragic perspective. “I do not feel his contempt of life. Earthly activity, imperfect as it may be, is still beautiful and good. Let us love life for the very effort which it extracts.” To the chaste, Rodin’s work was scandalous, but to those free of such contempt, exhilarating, tonic, a return or rebirth of the pagan ethos that found in the body not something sinful but something to celebrate. As Huysmans said, it is not the pagans but “only the chaste who are truly obscene.” Rodin, hardly chaste, stated that he could not “work without a model. Seeing human figures nourishes and strengthens me. I have an infinite and almost worshipful reverence of the naked body.” That reverence was given free expression and the regularity with which Rodin’s sculptures were condemned reveals how daring and *sui generis* they actually were. The content of his work was not the only thing that brought it censure; its dexterous formal elements and the heterodox interpretation of certain human acts, such as his depiction of heroism in *The Burghers of Calais*, brought Rodin vigorous criticism, too. Yet, to him, wisely, such rejection only proved the work was full of merit. It confirmed that he truly was engaged in a radical transvaluation of artistic values, and they were an evocation of philosophical values, of a vision of life.

The innovativeness of his work has hardly been exhausted, if equaled, and it has marked indelibly not only the history of art and of what art shall come to be, of what it can be, but our memory. To see a Rodin sculpture, let alone to touch one, as the blind were fortunate enough to do, is to be forever touched and seen by his sculptures. It is to incorporate something into oneself that can

potentially enrich one, to live with something which might provoke metamorphoses, disrupt common perceptions, and compel us to see our selves anew. If it simply prods us to actually perceive our selves and the world, even if only momentarily, that is extremely valuable for it is rare that we escape quotidian perception. When meditating upon his work, one is taken out of and beyond the self and into the wider realm of becoming. One is broken from romantic sentiments, from idealism, and from narrow and limited forms of perception, if, that is, one intimately engages with his work and struggles to extricate oneself from such things. Rather “than dwelling, even if just periodically, in greatness,” Rilke demanded, “we must always carry around what is great in us.” With Rodin, there is much to embody and much to gain from such internalization. Along with Bernini, Michelangelo, and Phidias, Rodin is one of the most formidable sculptors of all time, and through internalizing his work, the magnitude of its expressive force can be experienced again and again, which is a sign of its aliveness. The space that was occupied by the ego is instead occupied by the art work and one may be significantly altered through such a disintegration of the self.

The French master not only worked independently, creating sculptures out of his own desire, but on commissions from the state as well as from private collectors. Yet, even Rodin’s commissioned work, as much as it was sometimes prey to the dictates of those commissioning it, remained overall the product of his imagination alone. Whatever alterations he made to his work were slight; the form and shape of them essentially remained intact—the work was manifest out of his vision. Throughout his life, Rodin worked on individual sculptures, monuments, drawings, sketches, dry point etchings, water-colors (most of them erotic), and works such as *The Gates of Hell*, into which earlier works would be incorporated and transformed and out of which a profusion of other works would be born. Each work was a possible occasion for new work and new work could intermingle with earlier work, through which entirely novel configurations were executed. Extremely industrious and disciplined,



Auguste Rodin
Two Female Nudes Face to Face, known as Mirror
D. 4065
Graphite and watercolor on paper, 32.5 x 25.2 cm
Gift of Rodin, 1916.
© Musée Rodin/Photo: Jean de Calan

Rodin would not focus on one sculpture at a time, but numerous, often taking on multiple commissions in the same year, continuing to work on some over a period of years. Of the 203 works included in the exhibit, twenty-two of them are plaster, two marble, and seventy-nine bronze; they range from early works such as *Bust of the Man with a Broken Nose* and *The Age of Bronze*, to later works like *The Monument to Victor Hugo*, *The Burghers of Calais*, *The Monument to Balzac*, and *The Thinker* as well as more statues derived from *The Gates of Hell*. This though, while a significant selection, is only a fraction of Rodin's *oeuvre*; aside from the multitude of sculptures, captive in the archives of the *Musée Rodin* are nearly seven thousand erotic drawings and water-colors, works which not even the most industrious of researchers have seen, let alone the general public, and the more monographs one views, the more works one discovers, too. It is highly probable that there are also sculptures which have never been photographed or exhibited.

In considering all of this work, one is simply overcome. Its effect is one of stupefaction. It is indicative of an overflowing, abundant, and copious reservoir of energy directed and formed by a prodigious imagination. Rodin is rich with the fullness of life. It bursts out of him like a geyser. Few artists deserve the cognomen titan. He does. Rodin worked, and everything was essentially sacrificed to work. No wonder Rilke was in awe of him. The sheer unending scope and variety of his sculpted figures is astonishing. Rodin articulates through them an array of uncommon postures, gestures, and expressions straining the human body to its absolute limits, giving animation to a breadth of experience most human beings never live out. Olympic athletes, dancers, and acrobats may live through a wide degree of them, but even they have not experienced some of the states of being which produce the conditions found in *The Burghers of Calais*. Most human beings simply won't, but that is not an indication the sculptures are alien to us. In Rodin's work, humanity comes face to face with its tragic reality, with the passion and suffering inherent in human existence. It is as if we are seeing manifest before us in palpable mass Oedipus, Antigone, and Hamlet. Eros and the Bacchantes come before us, too, and a host of other characters, all physical revelations of the play of man's soul. The fullness of this imagination, its inventiveness and diversity, appears inexhaustible and illimitable, and it reflects and expresses enduring truths about who we are.

What we find in this work, too, is devotion, a single-minded and purposeful devotion to a single task. It is the work of one who is making something of his life, the work of one struggling to become who he is, and in Rodin's struggle, humanity's struggle is evident. Its struggle to think, to breathe, to dance, to sing, to live with suffering, to transform; its struggle to come out of the granite of being and into the tempestuous flow of becoming, to overcome and strive, to laugh, love, and create, to be noble human beings and great friends, it is all there, as well as our defeat, our struggle before the inexplicable forces of the cosmos which often tear us to pieces. Rendered to bits, we are reformed and cast back into the world like Dionysus. And it is the force of the gods one comes face to face with in Rodin's sculptures again and again; that is,

the forces of the world metamorphosized into mythic figures, for there are no deities, only the planets.

In “Master Sculptor, Rodin in Istanbul” the first sculpture that one encounters, and it is one of Rodin’s most dynamic, is, as are many of the statues on the grounds of the *Musée Rodin* of Paris, outside the exhibition. In front of the Horse Mansion, which housed the exhibit, a bronze statue of a horse had been situated since 1952, “saluting the Bosphorus” as the press release notes. In place of it, Rodin’s *Monument to Victor Hugo* was situated for the occasion of the exhibit. It was the first time that the horse statue had been replaced; whatever its merits, the decision to replace it was wise, for the *Monument to Victor Hugo* is a stunning work to encounter unsuspected, and cresting the small hill on which the Horse Mansion rests, one comes upon the monument as if upon the statue of a god. Granted, that may seem hyperbolic, but Rodin himself compared Hugo to Zeus and said “there was something in Victor Hugo’s face that was reminiscent of Jupiter, Hercules, and Pan.” Indeed, a rather grandiose proclamation, but, *look at Hugo’s face*, especially Rodin’s drawing of it—is it not true? The grandeur and sublimity of the figures which Rodin saw in Hugo’s face are in the monument, and it is mesmerizing. Phidias’ sculpture of Jupiter at Olympia was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the World; struck by it, Theodosius I removed it to Constantinople to display in his palace. In 475 it was destroyed by a fire and, in many ways, contemplation of Jupiter ended. Over fifteen hundred years later, Rodin’s version of Jupiter returns to ‘Constantinople’ and he stands not like a sentinel but like Orpheus luring one into the exhibition. While it may not be a wonder of the world it is an impressive statue; considering the current religious climate, if it remains saluting the Bosphorus, may it not burn. Now is a time of conflagrations.

Before obeying the ‘god’s’ command, homage is due; at the very least, one must receive him and there is something grand and mythic in Hugo’s face. Rodin’s sketches express those sentiments, but the *Monument* communicates his awe with even more emotion and it is executed with geometric intelligence, which would become Rodin’s guiding principle. “The essence of sculpture lies,” he said, “in the geometry of forms rather than in the appearance of things.” Geometric form is precisely one of the things which makes the *Monument* so compelling; one stands before it as before an altar, but Hugo is hardly poised to listen to the confession of a sinner; what he is listening to is the muse; perched above him, an elusive, feminine figure whispers towards his ear the ineluctable secret of his art as Zarathustra whispered a secret into the ear of life.³ And what is the muse if not nature or the cosmos? It is not some mythological figure Hugo is listening to, but the cosmos, the energies of the world “bursting forth from nature herself” as Nietzsche stated in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and those are the energies that the artist must perforce honor and obey, sacrificing himself to nature. It is “intoxicated reality” Nietzsche elaborates, which “even seeks to destroy the individual and redeem him by a mystic feeling of oneness.” In Rodin’s monument, Hugo is firmly entrenched in nature, someone who subordinated himself to it; he is aware that humans are not “the true authors of this art world” but those who transfigure it, Apollonian



Auguste Rodin, *Monument to Victor Hugo*, after 1900
S. 6686
Bronze, 185 x 285 x 162 cm
Accession to the collections of the Musée Rodin, Paris, 1997.
© Musée Rodin/Photo: Jean de Calan

measurers who must shape the miasma that Dionysus spits forth into an intelligible and expressive form. Like Hugo, Rodin's ear was quick to the earth and the sculpture is evidence of an artist who possesses Dionysian wisdom. Of the statue Rodin said "I have gravitated toward this all my life." Such tension or force is evident in the design of the work; one can feel and see in it the very gravity that possessed and drove Rodin.

In contemplating the *Monument*, one is struck at once by energy not at rest; like the earth on which it stands, it seems to ceaselessly revolve. The writer's left arm juts

into the air like he were cutting space in two, stretched out to measure the circumference of the world; like the arm of Galatea in Rodin's *Pygmalion and Galatea*, Hugo's arm stretches out into infinity. It is perhaps one of the straightest lines in all of Rodin's sculptures, and this long, muscular arm seems to balance the very ground beneath it, commanding gravity, the palm open, pointing downwards as if above the cosmos. One half expects everything to begin orbiting around one while standing before the Monument as if one were up above the world, or rather to see at last with the naked eye the velocity of the earth as it soars through space at nearly seventy thousand miles per hour, simultaneously revolving at over one thousand miles per hour. Existence is hardly still. Life is full of velocity but it is rare we are cognizant of it. Rodin reveals what the common eye does not perceive, and when we do not consciously perceive, we are not in the world but out of time.

To those who do not seem present, who drift out of consciousness and into some state of blankness, it is said that they are "in space" or "spaced out." It is not only those who are absent from their bodies who experience this state, but all of us, and continually; it is more common than we admit and, surprisingly, the colloquial phrase reveals something about a philosophical condition—to be "spaced out" is not to be in time, which is not to be in the world. One of the means through which we can overcome this condition can be found in art, though that overcoming is only temporary; that however does not negate the significance of art's power. It illustrates that it is a practice which we must constantly engage in. Nothing is permanent or lasting, not even our wisdom, or rather, our ability to sustain and embody things; as we must work to remain conscious perceivers, we must continually strive to sustain and embody our wisdom. To exist, to retain certain states of being for longer periods of time, we must engage in disciplines, otherwise we will be perpetually adrift in space, spaced out of time. Along with philosophy, yoga, and meditation, art, which

is itself a form of meditation, if one exerts the same or a similar degree of concentration in contemplating the work that the artist did in executing it, is but one of the means by which we can move out of space and into time, and it is only when we are *in time* that we are potentially free, not blind perceivers, but conscious perceivers struggling to remain in a state of becoming. And that is when we truly exist.

In *Time and Free Will*, which was published several years after the execution of *The Thinker* and while Rodin was at work on *The Burghers of Calais*, Henri Bergson noted that one of the objects of art is

“

to put to sleep the active or rather resistant powers of our personality, and thus to bring us into a state of perfect responsiveness, in which we realize the idea that is suggested to us and sympathize with the feeling that is expressed. In the processes of art we find in a more weakened form a refined and in some measure spiritualized version of the processes commonly used to induce hypnosis.

If the artist is not conscious of this truth, it is known intuitively, and this form of hypnosis is not ordinary, but, as Bergson implies, unique, a “refined” and “spiritualized” form of hypnosis through which we are “lulled into self-forgetfulness, and, as in a dream,” we are able to at last think and see “with the poet.” It is through the rhythm and measure of art that our attention is held captive, and, in this captive state, we are more receptive, thus capable of experiencing what our personalities, out of fear or comfort or complacency, keep us from experiencing. It is self-forgetfulness that is vital; without this necessary depersonalization we will not permit our selves to be infected, not permit our selves to experience the contagion (Bergson uses this same word) with which the artist seeks to infect and thereby alter us. It is through this act that our thought and our will are absorbed in the eternity of the art work and it is then that, at last, we step into time. Normally, our perception oscillates “between the same and the same again, and gets rid of those customary incessant changes which in ordinary life bring us back without ceasing to the consciousness of our personality.” When we escape our personalities, we experience the world and share in the emotion “so rich, so personal, so novel” of the artist’s work; we “experience what [the artist] cannot make us understand.” In moving beyond logic, the artist propels us back, or perhaps forward *into* time from the space where we were adrift. It is then that “the barrier interposed by time and space between [the artist’s] consciousness and ours” is broken. It is an intimate communion and it is in this communion that an opening occurs. Instead of making us understand something, the artist provokes us to *experience* something, and through experience, we come to understand on our own, hopefully, which is more lasting and more effective than simply being told something. The first is a strict dispensation of facts;



Auguste Rodin, *Mask of the Man with a Broken Nose*, 1864
S. 755
Bronze, 31.8 x 18.9 x 16 cm
Accession to the Collections of the Musée Rodin, Paris, 1975.
© Musée Rodin/Photo: Jean de Calan

the second, a creative production which leads to real learning. The artist, or rather, the work of art is the Dionysian totem to which we must sacrifice our selves and what casts us back into nature, and, through his work, Rodin casts us again and again back into nature, time, and the cosmos.

Through the fragmentary, there is a direct and galvanizing confrontation with time in Rodin's sculptures. The placement of his numerous fragmentary works amongst his personal collection of Greek and Roman sculptures, themselves no longer whole works but embattled objects, was one of the most illuminating arrangements in the exhibition. It is an arrangement Rodin himself made when exhibiting his work and it was wise to repeat it. In viewing these works together, from the tender *Dawn* in its numerous manifestations to *Torso of a Walking Man*, the moving *Torso of a Shade*, *Walking Man with Column*, which is an

evocative sculpture that is a kind of precursor to Andre Masson's drawing of the Acephalic man, and the enormous and imposing *Cybele*, at first, it is possible to misconstrue Rodin's work for Greek or Roman sculpture.

The Man with the Broken Nose could be Democritus, Empedocles, or Marcus Aurelius, but he is none of those men, and the timelessness of Rodin's sculptures is accentuated through this context. His work is at once classical yet modern, for it is not the golden detritus of a glorious age that has survived millennia, although it bears a striking resemblance to such work. It is consciously designed work which only *appears* to originate from some earlier epoch. While the fragmentary nature of the ancient work is of course the result of the ravages of history, with Rodin's work that is not the case, though, in another sense, it is, for it is purposefully deployed to replicate history while it has other dimensions, too. Rodin did not begin expressing the fragmentary out of a systematic or theoretical position; his relationship to the fragmentary first arose intuitively. Out of that organic discovery he developed a conscious and deliberate practice, which, because willed, is all the more impressive and admirable; the intuitive is not of more intrinsic value as is too often purported—that is an outmoded prejudice. It is possible for even the most

pedestrian artist to accidentally arrive at a great idea and to execute it well, but to execute great ideas continually and with considerable force requires discipline, perseverance, and actual skill, not just the fortune of luck, and in that is the true test of 'greatness'. It is but one of the means by which one can measure it. For Rodin, the "art of the sculptor is made of strength, exactitude, and will. In order to express life, to render nature, one must will and will with all the strength of the heart and brain," which is to say, it is the configuration of both intuition *and* intellect that is vital. It is a matter of sense and geometry, of intuition and will. This is the lesson that was so important, and difficult, for Rilke. After it, relying on inspiration alone was too haphazard and accidental a form of work.

When attempting to perfect *The Age of Bronze*, one of the last decisions Rodin made was to remove the spear from the figure's hand in order to create a smoother line, for, as the sculptor noted, the object prevented the spectator from seeing the contours of the entire sculpture. In removing that object, Rodin did not detract from the sculpture, but intensified it; with the spear, it might almost seem conventional, too deliberately classic—without it, in removing it, the sculpture was transformed into something patently modern, something *future oriented*. In this manner it contains something which the Greek and Roman sculptures do not.

While one may momentarily mistake a Rodin for an ancient sculpture, it isn't possible to mistake the latter for Rodin. When studying the Greek and Roman sculptures of his own collection, Rodin often draped cloths over certain areas of the sculptures to accentuate the parts he was studying, stating that he chose to conceal that which was "ugly" in order to "better admire that which is beautiful—that is what I call sense of decency." Through these chance situations, Rodin discovered something vital out of which he developed a conscious practice. Thereafter he embodied history, revealing time in his work as part of its original form, creating works which appeared as if they were always already historical, that they were born with the ravages



Auguste Rodin, *Torso of a Shade*
S. 6135

Bronze, 100.5 x 73 x 49 cm
Accession to the collections of the Musée Rodin, Paris,
1990.

© Musée Rodin/Photo: Christian Baraja

of age, already triumphant totems signaling to the future, but because of their form and their expression, are *utterly modern*. There is something solid and seemingly permanent about sculpture as there is with our own bodies, but Rodin evokes the state of becoming that the world is through his use of the fragmentary. That sense of flux, of discontinuity, and of incompleteness is evident not only in the obvious fragmentary works, but in the other seemingly complete works, too. Rodin marked his sculpture, deliberately imparting the influence of 'chance and time' to them, revealing their fate instantaneously and in revealing their fate, our fate, too, is revealed. We are face to face with our fragility and our disintegrating bodies, with what is fragmentary in us—wholeness is no longer possible. We, and earlier ages, had to wait centuries for time and the barbarous gestures of vandals to reveal history upon the Greek and Roman statues in order to learn the lesson of the fragmentary. But Rodin imparts history to us in a single concentrated gesture. Later ages, and we are one of these later ages, stand before these sculptures as if thousands of years have already tested and worn them down, ravaging and whittling them to pieces even further. They are removed from chance and time through already being ravaged by the sculptor as if by chance and time. It is like Rodin

eluded chance and time through becoming them; whatever further ravages his sculptures suffer, it will be difficult to discern between what is Rodin's and what the workings of history.

What is the revelation of the work? The utter and irrevocable incompleteness of being, our piecemeal nature, our ravaged, impartial selves that struggle to firmly situate themselves like solid blocks of granite before the wind but resemble more crumbling shards of limestone. If one enters into the stone, one enters into the piecemeal fragments of one's own existence—the work demands that we do, that we permit our selves to disintegrate before it. In defending himself against those who criticized his work for being incomplete, Rodin stated,





I take from life the movements I observe, but it is not I who impose them. . . I obey nature in everything, and I never pretend to command her. My only ambition is to be servile and faithful to her. There is no recipe for improving nature. The only thing is to see. I do not correct nature.

Like Hugo listening to the Muse, Rodin's ear is keyed to the cosmos, he is obedient not to some theoretical concept, but to nature bursting forth from herself—it is an act of struggling to see; he knows that he is not the true author of the artwork, but only one who transfigures nature. He could not create whole, finished works. To do so would be to commit a gross lie, an amelioration of nature which would result in true ugliness. To Rodin, it is when the “artist [attempts] to improve upon nature” that he “creates ugliness because he lies.” The tragic artist reflects the world as it is and the world is not ugly, but horrifying, yet, if the artist “softens the grimace of pain, the shapelessness of age, the hideousness of perversion . . . he is creating ugliness because he fears the truth.” One cannot fear the truth of the world but must enter into it, enter into what is horrifying in order to discover the tragic truth of existence, for regardless of our dispositions, and it is our fixed dispositions that we are struggling to escape, nature reveals itself in our decaying bodies, which patiently break into fragments over time, while some of us disintegrate with alacrity. Thus, as a tragic artist, Rodin is too honest to veil, disguise, and temper nature to please an ignorant public. Out of his fidelity to the tragic, he refuses to promulgate idealized or Romantic expressions of existence; instead, he forces humanity to confront the implacable laws of the cosmos. In obeying nature, he obeys the laws of the cosmos, which reveal that man is not whole, nor complete, and he is aware that man never will be. “The mutilated gods have the air of martyrs” said Yourcenar, and we are the mutilated gods of Rodin's sculptures; he perceived the divinity in man, as when he saw Jupiter in Hugo's countenance, and he expresses that fractured divinity without reservation. It is not that we are ruined by sin, or that we are defective, but that we are incomplete. The caesura though is an opening, not a lack, a possibility, a gate through which we can walk and a bridge over which we can cross towards the future. In the incompleteness of becoming, in the fragmentariness of the cosmos, nothing is static and fixed, but replete with innumerable possibilities. We have not yet come to be but we struggle to become who we are, knowing all the while that we never can; we reach myriad stages, varying heights, and series of plateaus, but there is no end, no ultimate goal, it is an endless and processual road. The world is incomplete and we must continue to strive, to suffer with the passion of striving; as Rilke learned from Rodin, we must go our own way of suffering in search of our “ray of eternity,” and the suffering of all of our passions finds its ultimate and most incandescent expression in Rodin's *Gates of Hell*.



Auguste Rodin, *Project for Gates in Divided Panels*, circa 1880

D. 1970

Graphite, brown ink and gouache on ruled paper,

torn in several places, 19 x 15 cm

Gift of Rodin, 1916.

© Musée Rodin/Photo: Adam Rzepka

In Rodin's inferno, we truly go our own way, for we have no guide but our selves; it is alone that we go into the fiery abyss of 'hell,' which is the darkness of our very own hearts. Our passions are our flames, and if they do not burn us, that is, if they are not full of suffering, they are not passions; it is a fire that we must cultivate and tend. In creating the *Gates of Hell*, Rodin not only abandoned Virgil, he abandoned Dante, too. In fact, the *Gates of Hell* has nothing whatsoever to do with Dante or Christian theology. It is not that Rodin did not read the *Inferno*; he did and he was profoundly affected by it. Surprisingly, Rodin held poets in higher regard than sculptors, but, he "had no idea of interpreting Dante." What he was in pursuit of was something else entirely, and the *Gates Of Hell* are more informed by Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*, which Rodin was overcome by and read religiously, than they are by the Florentine poet's vision

of the world. The *Gates of Hell* is

not a medieval work; it is an absolutely modern one. Yet, even then, it was the immediate, palpable experience of life that guided the creation and form of the *Gates*. If sculpture is dependent upon literature for its meaning, then it fails and, in the end, Rodin would abandon literature entirely and go directly to bodies, to living forms for his inspiration. "My sole idea," Rodin emphasized, "is simply one of color and effect. There is no intention of classification or method of subject, no scheme of illustration or intended moral purpose. I followed my imagination, my own sense of arrangement, movement and composition. It has been from the beginning, and will be to the end, simply and solely a matter of personal pleasure." It is neither Dante nor Baudelaire but Rodin's own pleasure in the tragic that guides his formation of the work. In moving beyond the circumscribing domain of Christian morality, in surpassing Baudelaire's infernal vision of modernity, Rodin's *Gates* become portals for all of humanity. It is *Rodin's Inferno*, and his Inferno is not a reflection of some suffering that is the result of an ineradicable flaw or the punishment we receive from an implacable deity, it is the suffering of our own lives, a reflection of our passions and of the conflicting forces at play within us. They are a vision of our rendering of our selves, and in *The Thinker* is our reconfiguration; as the liver

of Prometheus is regenerated anew, so are we, but always to be torn to pieces again and again, to live with the suffering that is the passion of man.

The anonymous figure which presides over the *Gates* was originally intended to be Dante, but in abandoning literature Rodin transformed the figure into something entirely singular. Instead of the Florentine poet, *The Thinker* is more like a modern day Prometheus. It is the creator, naked and crouched on a rock, his feet contracted, his fist pressed against his teeth, fertile thoughts slowly unfolding in his imagination as he sits in focused contemplation. The tumultuous events below him reflect the play of his passions, and it is a tragedy. It is not Dante, nor is it a philosopher. It is Rodin the sculptor, and on the bottom right foot of the inner panel Rodin emblazoned an exact image of himself as thinker. *The Thinker* is the creator in focused contemplation, his imagination aflame; animated beneath his feet proliferates the world of the sculptor manifested with stirring vividness. And it is us, too; we are the multitudinous figures swimming on the violent surface of the *Gates*, entangled together, struggling with our passions, a swarm of Prometheans in the sea of the world. The thorns that stretch along the periphery above the gates is the unraveled crown of thorns which now stretch over humanity—Christ has been displaced from his cross. There is no need for redemption. The skulls have been removed from Golgotha; the hill has been leveled. The *requiem aeternam deo* has begun. In reclaiming our suffering, we release our selves from Christ and each of us, like *The Thinker*, presides over our own passions. It is our duty to become the masters of them. Rodin “once put sculpture in place of God throughout the *Imitation of Christ* . . . and it was right in every sense.” What this implies is that it is necessary that we become the sculptors of our own lives; we have no savior, nor do we need one. *The Thinker* is not an infernal juror, but one who is capable of self-mastery, of removing himself from his passions, of overseeing and transfiguring them into something intelligible; we must measure our selves against our senses and move out of and away from excessive subjectivity. Only then will we gain the equipoise of *The Thinker*, but that is not to declare that that state is without tension, for the body of *The Thinker* is torqued to reveal the incredible strain inherent in such a discipline; this is not tension as *tenseness*, as in clenched or overly tensed nerves or muscles, but tension as a degree of perfectly applied force. If the strings of a violin lack that *perfectly applied force*, they will be detuned. If the applied force is too intense, the strings will snap. It is a question of balance and grace, of sustaining enough tension in order to create music, and in the body of *The Thinker* is the music of his suffering. The sculpture articulates the tragic fact that our knowledge is born of cruelty and suffering; it is an ascetic practice that demands patience and sacrifice. Our sufferings are not moral though; there are no circles of hell in Rodin’s *Inferno*, nor is there a hierarchy of sinners. In fact, sin does not exist. As Hugo was not poised to listen to the confession of a sinner, none of the figures in this ‘hell’ are confessors. The suffering here is not like that of the figures in Dore’s etchings. In eliminating Christ, Rodin compels us to embrace and affirm our suffering, which is not the result of sin, but an affect born of each individual’s struggles in the sea of

the shadows and the darkness of the world, prey to passions that afflict and overwhelm them but that also give meaning to their lives—they suffer because of their passion and their suffering is a passion. There is no other world. There is no inferno, there is no purgatorio, and there is no paradiso. If they exist, they are not places; they are states of being. The source of everything as Rumi noted is within us, and the entire world springs up from that source. The doors to Rodin's *Hell* do not open; they are not portals to another realm, but an array of surfaces upon which man lives out his tragedy; that surface is a deep appearance and it is the surface of the earth upon which we remain. These closed doors proclaim that, without question, there is no other world; they declare: there is no escape. Nor should there be need for escape. It is this world where all collide. It is this world where 'hell' and 'heaven' coexist, eternally, in all of us, in all who are truly wrestling with their passions. The figures in Rodin's Inferno reveal this. They are not the emaciated figures of Dore's expression of Dante's reality, they are fleshy, plump, vigorous figures driven by passions. It is the domain of the pagans where Dionysus dances in the field. The figures of Rodin's Inferno are the energetic, gymnastic characters present in all of his works, characters who could also erupt directly out of Baudelaire's *Le Fleurs du Mal*. Or his *Parisienne Journal*. The tenebrous, murky darkness of the *Gates of Hell* is the same world found in the works of Hugo and Baudelaire, a cosmos where suffering and sorrow reign and are generated by passion. In his *Tenebres*, a book which Rodin most probably read, Gautier wondered, "And when will our passion be finished?" Later in the book he states that "God will never come." Our passion will not be finished; actually, it has just begun, for we have only recently recovered it. The *Three Shades* above the gate stand over *The Thinker* like Hugo over the cosmos, redirecting our suffering back into the world. It is an eternally returning configuration of passion that teems and billows like unruly tongues of fire that flicker and crack, shooting to and fro but always remaining within the confines of the blaze. The *Gates* for Rodin are an expression of all phases of love and passion, and in viewing them that seems indubitably clear. They are a veritable evocation of the forces of Eros, of seduction, attraction, surrender, and agony, the full scope and panorama of the terrors of love and passion. But *The Thinker* is the figure who organizes those passions, he is the wellspring out of which all of them are born; if he sat up and opened his eyes, if his inner tension dissipated, the entire multitude of oceanic figures would vanish. He knows that to be incomplete is to suffer, to be passionately alive, to know that we must continue to burn, to enter into contest with our selves and the world. Our bodies tremble with foreknowledge for they know where we are taking them, or rather, our selves tremble for, unconsciously, they know where our bodies are taking them, but it is the road we must traverse. Infinity, if it exists, is something we carry within us as Baudelaire said, and often our life is an attempt to flee that infinity. It is our duty however to go directly into it. It is inescapable. The tragic laws are decreed; our only hope is to rejoice in this knowledge, to be seized by the passion for this truth and in that, to find joy. "At times," Rodin said, the artist's "heart is on the rack, yet stronger than his pain is the bitter joy which he experiences in understanding and giving expression

to that pain. In all existence he clearly divines the purposes of Destiny. Upon his own anguish, upon his own gaping wounds, he fixes the enthusiastic gaze of the man who has read the decrees of Fate. His ecstasy is terrifying at times, but it is still happiness, because it is the continual adoration of truth.” Our joy is found in the very expression of our passion, which is the exquisite suffering of each of our lives. The adoration of ‘truth’ is the adoration of the tragic, an unflinching engagement with the cruelty of the cosmos, a cruelty that we must struggle to transform into ecstasy. It is the way of Dionysus.

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¹ Nietzsche was deeply concerned with the sacred, with reconstituting what sacredness is and configuring new forms of sacredness in the epoch of the *requiem aeternam deo*. “The profoundest instinct of life, the instinct for the future of life, for the eternity of life, is in [the word Dionysus] experienced religiously—the actual road to life . . . as *the sacred road*” (TI, Ancients, 4). Far from the strict positivist he is sometimes depicted as, Nietzsche was also deeply concerned with myth and understood acutely the importance of myth in life.

² “Finishing the Task. The Unreached People’s Challenge” by Ralph D. Winter and Bruce A. Koch, on <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/newslinks/finishing.htm>.

³ First, the figure of the hovering muse recurs throughout Rodin’s *oeuvre* and first appeared in an 1883 drawing. Second, in 1901, Jelka Rosen gave Rodin a copy of the French translation of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, of which Rodin said: “I am still reading Nietzsche and I find him a man of genius, often obscure but sometimes one understands him. I envy you for having arrived at his level.” At this time, Delius was composing *A Mass of Life*, which is based on *Zarathustra*.

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