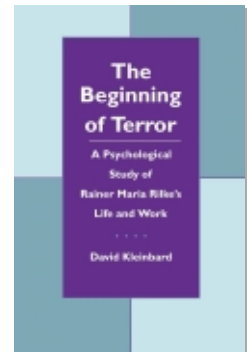




CHAPTER 8 Rodin

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CHAPTER 8

Rodin

I

In the summer of 1905, not having seen his old friend and “master” for more than two years, Rilke asked if he might pay Rodin a visit. The sculptor telegraphed a welcome and had his secretary write, inviting the poet to live with him at Meudon for the duration of Rilke’s stay in Paris, adding that the Frenchman was looking forward to the opportunity which this visit would give them to talk. Full of excitement at this prospect, eagerly anticipating being “allowed to share all his days,” the poet wrote to a friend that “the great man” was “dear as a father” (*Letters* 1:188 and 190). The relationship with this second father was no less important than the one with Salomé. During the years in which it evolved we see extraordinary changes in Rilke. He came to Paris in 1902 as a poet of obvious talent and technical skill. But, as he himself realized, most of his work, however promising, was superficial, unoriginal in feeling and thought, and facile in its music. During the next four years he developed into the author of the *New Poems* and *The Notebooks*, the first books which place him among the twentieth century’s major writers. A number of factors contributed to the changes in Rilke; the relationship with the sculptor was a central shaping influence.

E. M. Butler tells us that Rilke was introduced to Rodin’s sculpture as early as 1897.¹ The poet’s esteem for the sculptor is reflected in his early diaries kept at Schmargendorf (1898–1900) and Worpswede (1900).² Clara, Rilke’s wife, had studied with Rodin, and the poet’s marriage

probably intensified his interest in the sculptor and augmented his knowledge of the man and his work. In September 1902, having received a commission to do a monograph on the sculptor, Rilke went to France to meet him.

Rodin was one of the giants of modern art. His creative energies and the abundant productivity of his genius have been rivaled by relatively few great artists. But Rilke's idealization of the sculptor often seems to exaggerate his greatness well beyond any realistic assessment, and sometimes, in its excesses, the poet's overestimation of his "master" approaches absurdity.

One has only to read a few sentences of Rilke's letters to Rodin and his letters about the "master" to realize that his idealization of this father figure went beyond the admiration justified by the sculptor's great gifts and his accomplishments. Even before meeting Rodin in September 1902, Rilke expressed the belief that he might be the greatest of all living men: "Does anyone exist, I wonder, who is as great as he and yet is still living. . . . I have the feeling that, quite aside from his art, he is a synthesis of greatness and power, a future century, a man without contemporaries" (*Letters* 1:76). A letter to Clara, written more than three years later, shows that those years of intermittent closeness to Rodin had in no way diminished the sculptor's stature in Rilke's mind: "His example is so without equal, his greatness rises up before one like a very near tower. . . . He is everything . . . far and wide. . . . [H]e shows one everything" (September 20, 1905; *Letters* 1:192-93).

Rilke compares Rodin to "an eastern god enthroned," undisturbed by anything and anyone around him, completely self-contained and self-sufficient, the narcissist's ideal fantasy of self-realization, the antipode of the neurotic narcissist's feelings of empty and barren isolation. In the same letter Rilke says, "He moves like a star. He is beyond all measure" (*Letters* 1:191). Writing this letter, Rilke may have been thinking of the effigy of Buddha which stood on a little hill near Rodin's house in Meudon. The *New Poems* which express the poet's fascination with Buddha focus upon some of the same qualities attributed here to the eastern god and to Rodin. Rilke told the sculptor that he thought of this statue as the center of the world (*Letters* 1:194). Rodin was the center of his own world and, at times, to a large extent, of Rilke's.

In an August 1903 letter to Salomé the poet associates Rodin with the divine Creator in Genesis: "when he fashions a hand, it is alone in space,

and there is nothing besides a hand; and in six days God made only a hand and poured out the waters around it and bent the heavens above it; and rested over it when all was finished, and it was a glory of a hand" (*Letters* 1:118).

These effusions concerning the sculptor's godlike nature are often joined with the poet's radically contrasted sense of himself. The "very near tower" who "shows one everything" was a strong protector as well as a needed guide, teacher, and model, who filled all of these paternal roles superbly when Josef Rilke could no longer do so. Apart from his "master," in 1902 and 1903, Rilke felt "scattered like some dead man in an old grave," as he wrote to Lou (August 10, 1903; *Letters* 1:124).

Rilke's response to Rodin as a tower of strength must be seen in relation to the illness, the fears, the near madness of those early days in Paris. Letters to Lou written that summer and fall stress Rilke's inability to work, his weariness, his anxiety, his sense that he is moving in an inescapable circle rather than advancing, that his connections with the past are disintegrating and the future is a void. His life is filled with uncertainty (November 1903; *Letters* 1:133-34).

From the first Rilke saw Rodin as a shelter from his fears and as someone who offered direction to him when he felt homeless and lost (*Letters* 1:94 and 117). If you read these letters, written in 1902 and 1903, you can see that the poet found with the sculptor, if only temporarily, a home which could fulfill his long frustrated and resisted need for one that could take the place of the parental home which he had lost when his mother left his father and he was sent to military school. (He had tried and failed to create such a home in his marriage with Clara.) Remember the longings he expressed to Paula Becker in October 1900, suggesting that seeking a home was, for him, inseparably connected with his continuing search for a mother (*Letters* 1:46). For much of his life he could not find one without the other. Curiously, for a time, the sculptor supplied both needs.

In Rodin Rilke felt he had discovered a man who had become a home and a complete world to himself. "Deep in himself he bore the darkness, shelter, and peace of a house, and he himself had become sky above it, and wood around it" (*Letters* 1:118). These images and metaphors evoke the sculptor's power as the model of the existence which Rilke wished to achieve for himself, partly through association with the "master," studying and emulating him. They also support the conclusion that Ro-

din was a maternal as well as a paternal figure for the poet. Writing to Clara in September 1905, after returning to Meudon to live at Rodin's, Rilke compared his reception by "the master" to "the way a beloved place receives one." He elaborates this metaphor: the sculptor becomes "a spring" that sings and mirrors, "a grove," a rose-lined "path" (*Letters* 1:191). Like the images of the sculptor as "shelter," "house," and "wood" in the letter to Lou, here the mirroring spring, the grove, and the rose-lined path of the "beloved place" associate his host with feminine and maternal qualities, and this association is reinforced as Rilke tells Clara that Rodin had "the smile of a woman."

In his next letter to Clara, Rilke asks, "[W]hat are all times of rest, all days in wood and sea, . . . and the thoughts of all this: what are they . . . against the indescribably confident repose in his holding and carrying glance . . ." (*Letters* 1:192). This "holding and carrying glance," which gave rest and health and assurance more powerfully than anything else the poet could think of, brings to mind the benevolent mother who defends the child against nocturnal fears in *The Notebooks* and the Third Elegy. It recalls the mirroring gaze of the "good enough" mother which, as D. W. Winnicott observed, confirms the child's self-love and self-esteem, supporting his sense of his own reality and value, calming fear and doubt, assuring such a sense of well-being and confidence as nothing else can give.³ Was this "holding and carrying glance" an unconscious memory of Rilke's mother projected onto Rodin? Was it an unconscious fantasy of a benevolent mother (a wish fulfillment) projected? We can only raise these questions. But that Rodin was both mother and father to Rilke in an even more fundamental sense is made clear in an early letter from the poet to his new "master" in which he expresses gratitude for the gift of rebirth (*Letters* 1:88).

Rilke's subliminal association of Rodin with a mother has another kind of meaning. It reminds us that Phia was the original force behind René's aspiration to become an artist, as she read him poetry and encouraged him to write it.⁴ His father offered René very different ideal images of male power, success, and glory. For Rilke Rodin embodied the realization of Phia's aspirations and ambitions for herself and her son, while at the same time, though he was not a victorious general, he epitomized ideals of masculine mastery, achievement, and renown. In these terms one can understand the poet's response to the sculptor as "an

example given to my life, to my art" (*Letters* 1:88). Though his mother's esteem for poets and poetry ultimately had greater control over his mind and life than his father's ideal of an officer's career, his letters and poems show that the latter did have a strong influence upon the poet. While Phia dressed René as a little girl and encouraged him to play the part of a daughter, Josef drilled him like a soldier. Surely, the conflict between the parents' attempts to define their son's aspirations contributed to the confusion in René's mind about his sexual identity. In Roy Schafer's terms, the parents confronted René with "models for identification" which made "it hard for [their] son to integrate his own masculinity and femininity."⁵ Rilke's discovery of a second father corresponding to the ideal notion of himself as a great artist which originated with Phia must have helped the young poet to resolve the deeply disturbing conflict between the fantasies of self-fulfillment which his mother had fostered and the sense of himself as a male rooted in childhood identification with his father.

While Josef Rilke was pressing his son to take an ordinary job, Rodin was urging the poet to immerse himself in his chosen work. Rejecting the kind of job his father had in mind as a form of death in life, he eagerly accepted the sculptor's notion that devoting himself to the labors of his vocation all day, day after day, was the way in which to free himself from a life dependent on unpredictable fits of inspiration. He had come to Rodin to ask "[H]ow must one live?" The Frenchman's answer was to urge him to immerse himself in work. The young poet, who had found that a life dependent upon infrequent inspiration was often painfully empty, began to think that "to work is to live without dying." This discovery, made during his first days with Rodin, brought with it the delighted sense of rebirth which I have mentioned (*Letters* 1:88, 82, and 84). In his book on Rodin, Rilke mentions that the sculptor had worked for a decorator and then for Carrière Belleuse at Sèvres. His beginnings as a laborer and a craftsman had disciplined him and formed his values and attitudes (*WSR*, 143).

Obviously there was a vast difference between the constant labor which the sculptor urged upon his disciple and the bourgeois job which his father offered to find him. But there may well have been an unconscious association in the poet's mind between Josef Rilke's advice and example and Rodin's. Did Rodin, as a paternal embodiment of an ideal

of the self which had been fostered by Rilke's mother, provide a way of reconciling that ideal with values and attitudes concerning productive work which the father had urged upon his son?

As Rodin opposed his life of constant labor to dependence on fitful inspiration, Josef Rilke not only advocated a regular job but fought against the erratic, fitful emotional excitement which he thought Phia fueled in her son. Obviously, Rodin was a man much given to passion and impulse. But it was the other side of him, the steady worker, disciplined originally by poverty and jobs as a craftsman-laborer, which Rilke emphasized in writing about him, observing that the sculptor denied the existence of inspiration.⁶ Rilke's response to his second father's opinion on this point suggests unconscious identification with attitudes of Josef which he consciously rejected. In any event, for most of the rest of his life, as various commentators have pointed out, he was not able to follow Rodin's example and advice, apart from a few periods of sustained productivity, such as the years in which he wrote most of the *New Poems* and *The Notebooks* (1906-1910). At this time Rodin's example loomed large in his mind.

In the last year of his life, Rilke wrote to a young friend that Rodin's influence had helped him to overcome superficiality in his poetry by placing him under "the obligation to work like a painter or a sculptor before nature, understanding and copying inexorably."⁷ In the first part of his *Rodin*, Rilke gives high praise to the Frenchman's extraordinary powers of observation. "Keeping his eye constantly on the model and leaving the paper entirely to his experienced and rapid hand, he drew an immense number of movements which till then had been neither seen nor recorded, and it turned out they had a vitality of expression which was tremendous" (WSR, 114).

Following his master's example, the young poet began to observe people and things carefully. This was part of the process of learning to see which became a major theme of *The Notebooks*. The emphasis upon accurate observation of the external world, which he developed under Rodin's influence, markedly changed the nature of Rilke's poetry, as scholars have noted, with the advent of the *New Poems*. E. M. Butler argues that before he went to Paris, "the main impression produced by [Rilke's] letters, diaries and poetry is that of a mind in love with unreality and of a man evading as far as possible the insurgent claims of real life."⁸ Butler says that these tendencies came from Phia. Sieber, who knew Phia,

and Lou Andreas-Salomé, who met her, confirm her son's judgment that she lived amid unrealities—self-deceptions, counterfeit or inauthentic feelings and pieties, illusory perceptions of her son, affectations of religiosity, and pretensions to an aristocratic style.⁹

The crucial encouragement which Rodin gave to Rilke, in turning him outward, in making him look closely at things in the external world, and the results as we find them in the *New Poems*, bring to mind the observations of psychologists who argue that early in life the father's presence encourages the child to emerge from the narcissistic, symbiotic relationship with the mother and to come into contact with the world around him.¹⁰ The influence of Rodin, the artist "dear as a father," may have evolved out of, built upon, drawn strength and energy from, an early, now unconscious association of the father with interest in external reality and with emergence from the highly subjective womb of infantile narcissism into the multifarious surround.

II

Contrasting himself with Rodin, Rilke wrote to Lou in August 1903, asking, "Do I lack the strength? Is my will sick?" The letter expresses his feeling that "there is nothing real about me . . . I divide again and again and flow apart" (*Letters* 1:122). He describes Rodin as a man who "has left nothing in uncertainty and has given reality to everything" (*Letters* 1:123). One can see the appeal of such a fantasy of Rodin to the young poet, plagued by a sense of his own unreality, by uncertainty, self-division, severe anxieties, and the threat of psychic disintegration in the alien chaos of Paris. To Rilke, who felt at this time that he lacked vitality, energy, direction, and even the knowledge of how to live, Rodin seemed, as he later wrote to Clara, to send a "rush of forces streaming into one" and to exemplify "an ability to live of which I had no idea" (*Letters* 1:192).

What are the origins of his idealization of the sculptor? The first section of this chapter suggests the way in which Rodin became a father for the young poet and also, subliminally, a maternal figure. He embodied unconscious projections of childhood images and fantasies of both Rilke's parents and was the object of feelings transferred from these highly subjective childhood figures in the poet's unconscious.¹

Can we describe and define the parental figure of childhood fantasy which Rilke projected onto Rodin? In doing so, I shall avail myself of Heinz Kohut's insights. In *The Analysis of the Self* (1971) and *The Restoration of the Self* (1977), Kohut studies forms of what he calls narcissistic illness in which "the self has not been solidly established," with the consequence that "its cohesion and firmness depend on the presence of a self-object (or the development of a self-object transference)."² By "self-object" Kohut means "objects which are themselves experienced as part of the self," as the mother is in infancy. These are "archaic objects cathected with narcissistic libido . . . which are still in intimate connection with the archaic self" of infancy and early childhood. One such "archaic self-object," according to Kohut, is the highly idealized image of the parent as an omnipotent, perfect figure, which the "archaic self" is motivated to create partly by its need to preserve its own primitive narcissism and omnipotence by sharing in the idealized parent's power and perfection. The archaic self can feel all-powerful, lovable, and valuable in its fantasy of unity with this highly idealized parental figure. Hence, as Kohut argues, its idealization of the parent is narcissistic, the motivational energy comes from the infant's need for omnipotence, love, and self-esteem. According to Kohut, a child or an adult experiences another person from the perspective of narcissistic feelings and fantasies when the "expected control over such (self-object) others is . . . closer to the concept of the control which a grownup expects to have over his own body and mind than he expects to have over others."³

Kohut traces the extreme idealization of other people by adults suffering from what he calls narcissistic illness back to the beginnings of mental-emotional development in infancy. Very early in our lives, he says, "after being exposed to the disturbance of the psychological equilibrium of primary narcissism, the psyche saves a part of the lost experience of global narcissistic perfection to an archaic, rudimentary (transitional) self-object, the idealized imago." At this stage of development, "all power and bliss reside in the idealized object." Consequently, "the child feels empty and powerless when he is separated from it and he attempts, therefore, to maintain continuous union with it."⁴ Adults afflicted with narcissistic illness suffer from this infantile experience of emptiness and powerlessness in the absence of a surrogate for the "idealized parent imago." Rilke felt unreal, and he was plagued by self-doubt, uncertainty, self-division, and childhood fears in those early days in Paris.

He was drawn to Rodin by the feeling that the "master", "dear as a father," conferred reality and certainty on everything around him, sent his vitality into one like a mighty "rush of forces," held one in his "holding and carrying glance," which bestowed incomparable peace and rest, calm and shelter, and taught one, in one's helpless ignorance, how to live and how to work.

Often, according to Kohut, the unconscious fantasy underlying the relationship between the self and the idealized parental figure may be formulated as "You are perfect, but I am part of you." The adult who projects the godlike perfection of an idealized parent onto a surrogate feels that he can partake of the latter's omnipotence. Surely this was in large part the source of Rodin's effect upon Rilke when he first came to Paris.

Normally, during childhood, through timely, unexcessive disappointment and frustration, the idealization of the parent diminishes. Kohut suggests that, as this happens, the child redirects his idealizing love and esteem toward the superego. The superego thus becomes invested with this idealizing love and esteem, which help to establish its power and authority over us. "Traumatic disappointment" with parents, such as the sharp and bitter disillusionment which Rilke appears to have suffered with both his parents as a child, may undermine and disrupt the process by which the idealization of the parent imagoes is shifted to the superego.

Phia Rilke's "unreality," blind narcissism, and self-absorbed religiosity, which he repeatedly complained about in his letters; her withdrawal from her husband and son as her marriage deteriorated; her separation from them in 1884 when René was nine; her acceptance of Josef's decision to send René to military school, which seemed to him a kind of hell; his father's extreme stiffness and sterile conventionality; his crushing failure to find something better than a job as a railway official, which was such a come-down from his aspirations to a career as an army officer, suitable for a man whose family claimed noble ancestry; the parents' life of self-deception; their vulgar pretenses, which their son loathed—all these factors were, as the poet's letters reveal, sources of extremely painful disillusionment. Rilke recalled that "the worst coddling" in his infancy and early childhood made subsequent injuries and disappointments even more traumatic than they might otherwise have been (*Letters* 1:99).

Kohut observes that the child whose redirection of idealizing love and esteem to the superego has been undermined or disrupted grows into an

adult who continues to "search for external ideal figures from whom he wants to obtain the approval and leadership which his insufficiently idealized superego cannot provide." Such figures may be experienced through transference as the "archaic self-objects" required for mental, emotional equilibrium.⁵

Rilke's poems and letters give the impression that Phia, lacking empathetic responsiveness, fell far short of adequate maternal mirroring, an early and necessary source of the sense of the self's reality and identity, of body-self cohesion, of self-esteem, and of the capacity for controlling anxiety. Kohut theorizes that "traumatic disappointments" in the "mirroring self-object" and the "idealized self-object" may impair essential ego functions, which develop through introjection of, and identification with, parents. These include the capacity for soothing oneself, defenses against excessive and threatening stimuli, and the ability both to control and to gratify primitive (drive) impulses, thus relieving accumulating tension and anxiety.⁶

Traumatic disillusionment, Kohut argues, frequently causes repression of the idealized parent imago into the unconscious. Or it may be split off, isolated from and disavowed by rational, realistic thinking and perception. Lacking an adequately idealized superego and crippled by the impairment of ego functions, the child remains dependent on this (often unconscious) parental presence for approval, esteem, and guidance, for confirmation of his reality, identity, and psychic coherence, and for protection against dangers and demands from within and from outside. He must seek someone in the external world to embody the "idealized self-object."

For an adult who is still "fixated" on such a figure the absence of a surrogate may create "a threat to the organization of the self," "various regressions," "fragmentation," and exposure to the terrors of childhood, among them "disintegration anxiety," the fear of annihilation, and related fears of merging and being engulfed.⁷ Such anxieties and dangers abound in *The Notebooks* and in Rilke's 1903 letters appealing for help to his onetime mother surrogate, Lou Andreas-Salomé.

Kohut's relevance to my analysis of Rilke's initial response to Rodin may be summed up in a few words. An adult suffering from the kind of illness which Rilke portrayed autobiographically in *Malte* needs a surrogate "self-object," such as the one Rodin became for Rilke, to provide "the psychological cement that [maintains] the cohesion of the self." In

this way the surrogate helps the narcissistically ill person defend himself against anxieties such as those Kohut describes, including the hypochondriacal fantasies resulting from fragmentation, in which one may feel that "various parts of his body [are] isolating themselves and [are] beginning to be experienced as strange and foreign."⁸ Later in this chapter I shall explore the relationship between such frightening fantasies in Malte and Rilke's excitement on finding that Rodin could give an isolated part of a body, such as a hand, "the independence and completeness of a whole," and in so doing create a great work of art (WSR, 105; *Rodin*, part 1).

In *Object Love and Reality*, Arnold Modell develops another, closely related explanation of the kind of high-flying idealization we meet in Rilke's letters to and about Rodin and in his book on the sculptor. Originally, Modell says, the child invests one or both parents with omnipotence. Then he identifies with the parent(s) whom he has endowed with this quality. "The earliest core of identification that we can uncover in the analysis of adult patients is a core that is organized around such omnipotent fantasies."⁹ The child creates and identifies with an omnipotent parent figure as a response to anxiety and helplessness, according to Modell. The child's sense of having made the parent's omnipotence a part of himself is magical thinking. "The essence of magical belief is that the acknowledged perceptual separation of objects is mere appearance. The magical object created by the subject becomes, in turn, part of the subject's own ego."¹⁰

In projecting these early parental figures upon other people, Modell notes, an adult experiences the latter as symbolic objects and thus becomes immersed in another dimension of magical thinking, identifying the symbol with the object which it represents. For Rilke, Rodin was a symbol, in this sense of the word, representing the highly idealized parental figures the poet had created as a child. Rilke unconsciously experienced Rodin as being identified with the godlike father and mother whom he symbolized.

What is the motivating need responsible for this kind of transference, according to Modell? He observes that adults who create omnipotent parent surrogates often do so because they lack the "cohesive sense of identity" which enables us to feel real and alive and well-integrated. The lack of this nucleus of the healthy adult psyche goes back to childhood failures in a person's relationships with his parents, such as those I have

explored. Modell posits that a "cohesive sense of identity" is rooted in introjections of, and identifications with, "good enough" parents, those who are well integrated and intelligently empathetic in their love and in the guidance and control they provide in response to the infant's needs.

Early identifications with such parents develop a capacity for self-love and self-esteem and "facilitate" the essential functions of "ego control" that I defined while exploring Kohut's ideas. Parents whose failings are as marked and significant as those Rilke ascribes to his father and mother deprive their child of the opportunity to develop these essential capacities through identification with them. Consequently, Modell tells us, the child may "remain slavishly dependent" upon other people (as Rilke was dependent upon Lou Andreas-Salomé and Rodin) "to perform certain functions that have not been incorporated into their own egos."¹¹

I have explained the way in which an adult with such needs, experiencing a child's helplessness, uncertainty, and anxiety, because of his failure to develop sufficient psychic health and strength, will project onto other adults infantile fantasies of perfect, godlike parents who have the power, wisdom, and generosity to give him everything he needs, including affection; refuge and protection from dangers; confirmation of his reality, achievements, and value; and trustworthy models for living and working.

In this kind of transference, as Modell points out, one person endeavors unconsciously to gain power over another, to bring the other individual into accord with his own needs and desires. He feels, as he does this, that he is trying to control and manipulate a parent or a parental figure. Modell compares transference in such a relationship to a child's use of "transitional objects" which symbolize its mother. His example is taken from Freud. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud describes a game which he watched a little boy play with a yo-yo. The boy, whose age was one and a half, would throw the reel over the edge of its cot so that it disappeared, while he held onto the string. At the disappearance of the reel, the child let out a loud sound which Freud and the little boy's mother interpreted as meaning "gone." Then the child pulled the reel back into sight and said, with apparent delight, "There."¹² Freud says the boy is mastering his anxiety over his mother's absence by proving to himself that he can bring the spool back at will. The spool is a symbolic or transitional object, and the boy's thinking in the game is magical in the sense that he feels that his mastery over the spool, which

in his unconscious is identified with his mother, establishes mastery over her.

I have argued that Rilke experienced Rodin as a symbolic object, consciously seeing him as a dear father, unconsciously identifying him with both parents as idealized, omnipotent figures. The young poet called the sculptor "master." But his unconscious aim, similar to that of the boy with the spool, was to gain mastery over Rodin, to use him magically as a symbolic object in order to participate in his (illusory) omnipotence and his apparent mastery over his life and work, and thus to control his own (the poet's) anxiety and to defend himself against the threat of disintegration.

The ultimate form of such mastery over the symbolic object and the parental imagoes with which he is unconsciously identified is incorporation, total absorption. Through identification with the older man, Rilke hoped to make the sculptor a part of himself, to take Rodin's great mastery and creative power into himself, to absorb and incorporate them by means of closeness, study, and emulation. The two essays on Rodin, especially the first one, and the letters about Rilke's attempts to study him closely support this impression. The vivid, precisely detailed descriptions and all the energy of thought that went into understanding the sculptor as a man and as an artist reveal the effort to master Rodin and thus to engulf and incorporate him with the hoped-for result of becoming like him (or, in fantasy, of becoming him, yet remaining oneself), and thus overcoming all the misery and fear and illness, the sense of unreality, uncertainty, and self-division that plagued the poet at the time.

In his efforts to master the sculptor, Rilke had as his model Rodin's endeavors to obtain full and precise impressions of such subjects as Balzac and Victor Hugo. Writing about Rodin's preparations for his figure of Hugo, Rilke says the sculptor would hide himself in a window niche in a Paris Hotel to watch the French poet at his receptions, getting down on paper "hundreds upon hundreds" of Hugo's motions and facial expressions (*WSR*, 120).

III

The feeling of insecurity, self-division, and unreality which Rilke experienced during the years 1902-3 and the perception of Rodin as someone

who possessed the sense of reality and psychic strength, unity, and vitality which he lacked drew the poet to the sculptor. But this contrast in Rilke's mind had negative effects, as well. The Frenchman's strengths at times intensified Rilke's already painful sense of his own psychic weakness and instability. Writing to Lou that Rodin "has left nothing in uncertainty and has given reality to everything," the young poet wondered if his own will was sick, lamenting to Lou that there was "nothing real" about him and that he was continually divided from himself (*Letters* 1:123 and 122).

He confirms Salomé's insight that Rodin was an overwhelming example. The "fearfulness" arising from this relationship seemed to focus on "the close proximity of something too hard, too stony, too big" (*Letters* 1:123). Following classical Freudian analysis, I am inclined to interpret Rilke's language here as an expression of an unconscious sense of a father's immensely superior phallus. A subsequent passage in the same letter supports this interpretation. Rilke says that his lack of the essential gifts which he attributes to Rodin impels him to try to discover "the tool of my art, the hammer, my hammer, so that it may become master" (*Letters* 1:124). In dreams, folklore, work songs, literature, and the visual arts, tools and weapons may express unconscious associations with the phallus. As Norman Holland indicates in *The Dynamics of Literary Response*, it may also become identified with the capacity for using language and various kinds of potency which follow from that. The example which Holland chooses is from *Two Gentlemen of Verona*: "That man that hath a tongue, I say, is no man/If with his tongue he cannot win a woman." Here wit consciously makes the tongue phallic.¹

Dreams, which express through displacement and condensation unconscious connections between the phallus and weapons or tools, often reflect the tendency of young children to feel that the father's phallus is frightening in its size and power. Rilke's painful sense that his own more abstract medium did not have the vital physical presence of Rodin's sculpture and his feeling that he lacked "the tool of my art, the hammer, my hammer" suggest that in his mind his impotence as an artist was unconsciously connected with a fear of sexual and emotional impotence, which closeness to the father-master in Paris intensified.

These fantasies in the poet remind me of the *Letter to His Father* written by his contemporary and compatriot Franz Kafka, in which a son remembers his feelings as a boy when, on a swimming expedition

with his father, they came out of the cabin for changing clothes. He compares his own body to a skeleton in its pitiful contrast with his father's large, strong, powerful physique and recalls his humiliating inability to learn how to swim despite his father's efforts to teach him. The father persisted and the anguished son felt increasingly desperate as he continued to fail.² Here we find open expression of the sense of physical impotence in relation to the father which is latent and oblique in Rilke's writings about Rodin.

Later in the letter Kafka connects his fundamental uncertainties concerning his very existence, his worth as a person, and his abilities with his doubts about his body. His need "to be provided at every instant with a new confirmation of my existence" is the craving at the core of so much of Kafka's writing, beginning with the *Conversation with a Suppliant*, in which the suppliant explains that he needs to be seen in order to feel that he exists.³ In the letter Kafka traces the sense of being physically and psychically nothing, nonexistent, back to a terrifying experience in which his seemingly gigantic father came into his room at night when Franz was a small child, carried him out onto the balcony, and left him there, making the child feel that he counted for nothing in his father's eyes.⁴

Surely, the feelings expressed in Rilke's letter about the impossibility of making things physically, the pain in his body created by this impotence, and the sense of being up against something "too hard, too stony, too big" were closely linked with his fantasy that "there is nothing real about me," in much the same way that Kafka's feelings about his body, his sense of its skeletal insubstantiality and smallness, were connected with his fantasy of his own nothingness. Although there were large differences between the two older men and the two relationships, Rodin's negative effects upon Rilke for several years, as described in the poet's letters, are comparable to Hermann Kafka's effects upon his son.

Rilke's medium, language, seemed so much less real in its essential abstractness and in its greater distance from the world of physical objects, than Rodin's sculpture. The highly subjective nature of the young poet's early work may have exacerbated his sense, when he first came to Paris, of the unreality of his language in comparison with Rodin's *objets*. This painful sense of the contrast between the two media was connected with the poet's anguish over his comparative lack of fluency in French when he first arrived. In a letter written to Rodin shortly after his arrival, he

begins by equating his French with "sickness." His words, he says, are "dead" (*Letters* 1:87). In his room he meditated on the language that he would use with Rodin, who could understand little or no German, but in the master's presence he found himself impotent in his own medium, at a loss for words. Eventually he was to master French to the extent that he could write poetry in it. And by 1905-6 he was doing Rodin's correspondence for him.

The argument of this section can be brought to a focus with the insight that Rilke's dependence on Rodin for his sense of his own reality at times intensified his anxious feeling that he was unreal. This is one unfortunate consequence of such fantasies of ontological dependence upon others.

IV

In the second part of *Rodin*, Rilke discusses the child's earliest possessions in a passage which anticipates his essay on dolls. He is attempting to clarify his special use of the word "things." He asks the reader, and perhaps himself, to summon up to mind some object from his or her childhood which, in memory, seems to have been singularly close, kind, just, necessary, not frightening, not confusing, and he wonders if we owe to just such an object any "confidence and the sense of not being alone" felt during early childhood (*WSR*, 131). Here, as in the essay on dolls, which was written years later in 1914, Rilke's thinking brings to mind Winnicott's concept of transitional objects.¹ The poet's description of the child's experience suggests that the cherished object is unconsciously identified with a benevolent, loving mother, like the one we find in the Third Elegy and *The Notebooks*, protecting the child from his own fears at night.

Winnicott observes that "transitional objects" may stand for the mother's breast, though, at the same time, the child is aware that the blanket, for example, is not the breast. The beloved blanket is pervaded with subjectivity, experienced as part of the child, yet also felt to be something else, a possession. It is never completely subject to "magical control," unlike an "internal object," such as a conscious or unconscious representation of the mother in the mind. But it is not felt to be beyond control in the way that the child comes to experience "the real mother."

If all goes well, the child's sense of control over a "transitional object" diminishes gradually, as the object gradually loses the meaning it has acquired through transference, and the aura of projected subjectivity fades. In Rilke's 1914 essay on dolls ("*Puppen*") this loss is as painful and devastating as the experience of Phia's withdrawal and desertion. In this respect the strange reflections on dolls reveal a process of development which contrasts sharply with the gentle diffusion and dispersion of the soothing, satisfying, reassuring experience of transitional objects that, according to Winnicott, ordinarily leads to mental health in children. The brilliant piece on dolls, which may have been influenced by Kleist's essay "On the Marionette Theater," is one of Rilke's writings in which we can see clearly the intersection of genius and abnormality. When the poet read the essay to Magda von Hattingberg, his "Benvenuta," she could not bear it.²

In *Rodin*, Rilke goes on to make another point about those things which are so meaningful to us in childhood. That early object, because it comes to represent in the child's fantasies "any and everything," helps to prepare him for "contacts with the world" (WSR, 131). Winnicott observes that transitional phenomena, in which subjective and objective realities fuse, reshaping each other, give the child a sense of his power and freedom to create (more precisely, to re-create) the world around him.³ Like Winnicott, Rilke saw the cherished objects of early childhood as the prototypes of works of art. He was interested particularly in things which, like the child's dearest possessions, demand dedication, trust, and love from the artists who make them (see WSR, 132).

Central in his study of the sculptor is the idea that through the figures which he created Rodin assumed control and took "possession of the world" (WSR, 143). For Rilke, who in 1902 and 1903 felt that he lacked reality and that he might be misreading, to an alarming extent, his strange new surroundings, as did other lost people in the chaotic streets of Paris, the master's ability to possess the world through his sculpture must have seemed enviable.

As I have indicated, the terms the poet uses to describe the child's experience of his early possessions reveal that Rilke had an intuitive sense of the fact that the child unconsciously identifies these things with his mother. The curious corollary of the argument that such things are the precursors of the objects artists create is that the latter can give their

maker the "confidence" and "the sense of not being alone" which originally should come from a mother. For this artist nothing else was so close, intimately known, and necessary as his own poems.

In these terms we can understand Rilke's vision of Rodin: surrounded by his own creations, enjoying their extraordinary life, which mirrored his own, and their responsiveness to him, the sculptor was constantly delighting in such kindness, devotion, and affection as transitional objects can give to a child, in whom they are unconsciously identified with a benevolent mother. With these ideas in mind we can grasp Rilke's sense of the sculptor's joy and of Rodin's belief that life was miraculous (see *WSR*, 147).

Rilke imagined that one of the most important functions of Rodin's sculpture was to act as a protection against all disturbance and danger. "His work stands like a great angel beside him and protects him . . . his great work!" (*Letters* 1:85). He lived in his sculpture as in a sheltering wood (*Letters* 1:121). In this respect one can see at least an unconscious association between the sculptor's work and a protective mother such as the one Rilke describes in *The Notebooks* passage concerning the child's nocturnal fears. To a poet plagued by the anxieties which he depicts in *Malte*, deeply troubled through much of his life by his mother's withdrawal, it seemed that the ability to produce works of art offered one a way of mastering the fears which threatened to tear him to pieces when he first came to Paris. Rodin epitomized this means of mastering anxiety. The Frenchman had created a whole world with his sculpture, a world in which he could be completely at home and sheltered.

Rilke's inability to produce work he could value during certain periods of his life was linked in his mind with his failure to master his worst fears (of disintegration and annihilation). If only he could write worthy poems or prose, he would not fall prey to anxiety, he would not disintegrate. He yearned for the ability to convert his fears into works of art, "real, still things that it is serenity and freedom to create and from which, when they exist, reassurance emanates [so that] nothing would have happened to me" (*Letters* 1:115). Reading the letters to Salomé written in the summer and fall of 1903, we can see that his failure at times to create such "real, still things" as Rodin was constantly producing resembled a child's inability, when frightened by his mother's absences, to demonstrate his mastery to himself with the help of such objects as the boy's spool in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

The poet decided that Rodin's repudiation of his belief in inspiration ironically arose from the never diminishing strength of the divine afflatus in the sculptor, his "uninterrupted fertility" (WSR, 143). This argument suggests an unconscious fantasy that the benevolent maternal presence Rilke desperately needed at times was always there for the sculptor. In Rilke's fantasy Rodin had made a fertile mother an essential part of himself and had thus attained to the hermaphroditic motherhood which Rilke yearned for in *The Book of Hours*. The "master" was a man endlessly capable of maternal procreation, who was also blessed with an enduring capacity for mothering himself, for defending himself against all danger and fear and loneliness.

Rilke's conception of the artist's work (the activity) and his works (the objects) as defenses against disturbance and anxiety takes various forms. He imagines himself lifting his whole life "into a peace, a solitude, into the stillness of deep workdays" (*Letters* 1:126). In a related fantasy, creative activity becomes "the powerful flow of a stream" with a "great roar," which would not allow any of the external or internal disturbances that have plagued him to be heard or to get through. As this massive stream of creative energy, ideas, activity, and achievement would provide undeniable confirmation of his own reality, vitality, and value, which human relationships had failed to give him, he could afford to neglect the latter and leave behind the sense of his unreality and impotence, the anxieties, and the illness which his entanglements with other people often seemed to intensify. Watching Rodin, he concluded that many great artists had largely discarded their ordinary lives to live in their work (see *Letters* 1:84 and 126).

The sculptor had said to him, "[L]es amis s'empêchent. Il est mieux d'être seul" (*Letters* 1:84). This is from a letter which Rilke wrote to Clara, soon after he left her and Ruth to come to Paris. And it is clear that he understood these feelings. In his conversation with the Frenchman, the poet spoke of his sadness at separation from his daughter. But he was obviously gratified to have found a "master" who gave him the strongest possible support for choosing his work over his life as husband and father in Westerwede. And to Lou, his lifelong friend, once his lover, for years a surrogate mother, he wrote, expressing a belief which he thought Rodin's life validated, "[I]n one of my poems that is successful, there is much more reality than in any relationship or affection that I feel" (*Letters* 1:121).

Through emulation and identification, by mastering the master and making Rodin part of himself, by modeling his own life upon the sculptor's, he could free himself from the long periods when inspiration and fertility were absent, and also enable himself to produce works of art which might perform the primitive functions of transitional objects. He too might experience the joy which belonged to the sculptor but often eluded him, as it does most of us. His own work would afford him the only companionship he would need, as an infant needs and desires no one but its mother or the object (doll, bit of blanket, rocking horse) which takes her place.

Rilke's letters and various accounts of his life show that he used his work as an excuse for a solitude which could be conducive to creativity, as it was at Duino in 1912 and at Muzot in 1922, and that at times the work could provide such satisfaction and fulfillment as human relationships rarely or never gave him. But, as I have shown, his frequent self-isolation and his distancing of other people also aggravated his sense of his unreality and barrenness at times when his poetry, fiction, essays, and letters would not come and could not help him. In this respect, obviously, he differed from Rodin.

Rilke saw Rodin's sculpture, like its maker, as an ideal image of the solitary self-sufficiency which he longed to develop. A work of art, he argued, should be "untouchable, sacrosanct, separated from the influence of accident or time" (WSR, 94). I have mentioned the poet's likening of his "Maître" to an eastern god, his implicit association of the old man with the effigy of Buddha, on a hill near the Villa in Meudon, and his *New Poems* on the Buddha with their idealization of perfect self-containment. Rilke's desire to create objects endowed with this quality is evident in *Rodin* and the letters to and about the sculptor. Underlying his longing to write poems which would radiate such perfection was the fantasy that the poet, through identification with his poems, would attain to the ideal qualities of the works he created, as it seemed to him that Rodin had done. In his fantasies Rilke shared the assumptions of many great artists, who see themselves in the mirror of their works, associating themselves with the "immortality" of their creations.

The early diaries include a meditation, written before he met Rodin, in which Rilke observes that a figure by the French master stays always

within an uncrossable magic circle. As with reflected images in a fountain, the spectator cannot approach nearer than a certain distance if he does not wish to lose sight of the object.⁴ The metaphor of the magic circle, separating and distancing any spectator from the statue, and the notion that any attempt to come closer will only conceal the essential mystery of the object may be seen as displacements of Rilke's need to prevent anyone else from coming too close to him or seeing him too clearly.

According to Arnold Modell, the fantasy of complete self-sufficiency in isolation, reflected in Rilke's thoughts about Rodin's sculpture, may arise from a need to deny dependency upon other human beings in order to defend oneself from the fear of losing the persons on whom one feels most dependent. In Rilke the source of such fears must have been the memory or fantasy of early parental neglect and emotional withdrawal. Modell argues that this defensive fantasy of perfect self-sufficiency may also be a reaction to the intense emotions aroused and the tensions caused by contact with others. This analysis focuses upon schizoid illness and recalls Rilke's notion that "a dark, deceptive vapour" separated him from other people and his closely related image of the bird feeders in *The Notebooks*, "with a large transparent space around them, as if they were standing under a glass dome" (78).⁵

Modell observes that schizoid individuals' illusions of self-sufficiency and protective encapsulation "rest upon a belief in their own omnipotence. That is to say, they can be an omnipotent object to themselves; they can provide all the sources of gratification, create their own protective shield against the dangers of the environment. They can be a transitional object to themselves."⁶ Or they may imagine that they can create the transitional objects which would assure their narcissistic self-sufficiency and omnipotence. I have traced a network of such fantasies in Rilke's thoughts about Rodin and his art and have shown that they are self-referential, that he projected onto the "master" and his sculpture a state of existence to which he wished to attain through his own creativity.

V

The relationship between Rilke and Rodin entered a new phase when, at the sculptor's invitation, the poet decided to live with him at Meudon, beginning in September 1905. From then until May 1906 he dedicated

much of his time to helping his friend, writing his correspondence for him. Even when he was away from Meudon during this period, Rilke was often preoccupied with Rodin, lecturing about him and his art.

Writing to the sculptor from Prague in October 1905, Rilke cast himself in the role of an apostle preaching his Master's saving Gospel: "all who live need you, the good news of your existence is the Gospel."¹ At home in Meudon and abroad, during this period the poet showed loyalty, love, and devotion that were all any surrogate father could have dreamed of receiving from a son.

While in Prague to give his lecture, he visited his aging father for the last time. His relationships with the two fathers were never more obviously connected. The burdensome tasks which he performed for the sculptor were an indirect and magical way, through unconscious transference, of showing devotion and loyalty to Josef. His idealization of the dear father in Meudon must have helped him redeem and restore Josef's faded, frayed, and much diminished image in his own mind.

No doubt he felt that he had long neglected his sick and aging father in Prague. The tasks he performed for Rodin were probably also means of undoing or expiating this neglect. The defense of "undoing" involves a kind of magical thinking. Like many rituals of expiation, it is based on fantasies of causal connections between acts which are not causally related. In this case the task of "undoing" involved projection of a father's image onto another man and transference of feelings from the one to the other. The ultimate aims of "undoing" are to dissolve all injury done in fact or fantasy, to release one from guilt, and to allow one to believe that the person he thinks he harmed no longer blames him and will not punish him. Often, most or all of these thoughts are unconscious.²

The relationship between Rilke and Rodin broke apart on May 11, 1906, when the sculptor dismissed him from his correspondence-writing tasks and sent him packing "like a thieving servant," the poet's comparison in his farewell letter to the Master, written the following day (*Letters* 1:211). The heavy burden of Rilke's secretarial labors and his responsibility for constantly reminding Rodin of distasteful obligations had created tensions between the two men (see *Letters* 2:359). Rodin was in a rage because, without consulting him, Rilke had sent answers to two of the sculptor's correspondents, who had addressed letters to the poet. In one of these exchanges, Rilke had added a postscript to a letter prepared in

consultation with the sculptor. His crimes were miniscule. Rodin had introduced Rilke as a friend, not as his secretary, to one of these correspondents, William Rothenstein. Deeply hurt, the poet complained in his farewell to Rodin, written the day after his dismissal, that he had been invited to Meudon out of friendship, that the sculptor's suggestion he perform some of the tasks a secretary might do, as Rodin had explained it, had been a way of providing him with some time of his own to do his writing.³

Probably Rilke was eager to leave Rodin when he returned to Meudon at the end of March 1906, two weeks after his father's death. On April 7 he wrote the letter to Karl von der Heydt, a friend and benefactor, from which I quoted in the preceding chapter, saying that he lacked only the liberty to be himself and was ready and eager to write, believing that he might be able to do "something that may perhaps never come again like this" (*Letters* 1:202). His lack of privacy and his tasks at Meudon were suffocating him.⁴ It seems very likely that Josef's death fostered the poet's desire to get away from Rodin.

Eliza M. Butler argues persuasively that Rilke's correspondence during the months of service to Rodin reveals an increasing sense of self-sacrifice approaching martyrdom, and this may have shown itself in his demeanor, irritating the Master and finally provoking him to his outburst in May 1906.⁵ He suspected that he had communicated his need for liberation to Rodin. On May 11 he wrote to Clara, saying that Rodin must have understood what he was going through (*Letters* 1:209).

When Rilke returned to Rodin after his father's death, he appears to have been moved by a curious mix of conflicting feelings. After von der Heydt, responding to his expressed needs, offered to support him for a year and let the poet live on one of his estates, he wrote to say that he could not leave the old sculptor in his sickness and weariness (*Letters* 1:204). Abandoning his second father, ill and weary as he was, so soon after Josef Rilke's death, would have intensified any guilt the poet felt about not having cared for Josef during his old age. In giving up his work for Rodin, he would also be ending this means of undoing whatever injury he had inflicted upon his father by neglecting him and by causing him such painful disappointment and anxiety for so many years.

But these motivating forces conflicted with others equally strong or stronger. Josef Rilke's death probably made Rainer feel that he no longer

needed a father and no longer wanted to be any father's son. Malte's reaction to his father's death and to the perforation of his heart, taken together with the passages concerning fathers in *The Book of Hours* that I explored in the preceding chapter, supports this conclusion.

The need to resolve guilt and undo harm through the transference relationship with the sculptor may have diminished because of the poet's efforts toward the end of Josef's life to win his father's approval and to inspire his confidence and hope that his son would be a great success in his chosen profession.

The changes in Rilke during the years 1902-6 and his response to his father's aging, illness, and death suggest that Rodin's supportive, confirming, affectionate fathering had provided him with an ideal model of a father as a highly successful, gifted artist, whom he could introject and with whom he could identify himself. As a result he had gained a stronger sense of his own identity, value, and direction as an artist, as well as greater confidence in his own inner guidance. By May 1906, as I have pointed out, he had written a few of the finest of the *New Poems* and was bursting with readiness to do new work.

Considering his state of mind when he had come to Paris in 1902, we can see how much he had developed through the transference relationship with Rodin. All the inner strength and maturity he had gained through this relationship had made him ready to accept the loss of Josef, the finality of his father's separateness and absence in death. As he realized that he had reached this point, he must have understood that he was also ready to accept the separateness and the loss of the second father whom he had so desperately needed when he came to Paris. Offering insights which clarify this change in Rilke, Modell observes that the internalization of an affectionate parent can enable a person to love and be a parent to himself, and that these developments, along with the growth of a person's sense of his differentiation, can foster his ability to accept the loss of persons he loves, particularly parents.⁶ Modell also remarks that where strength and health are lacking, due to childhood failure to identify with "good enough" parents, psychoanalytic therapy "can provide in part the experience of 'good enough' parental care, and an identification with the analyst can become a permanent part of the patient's ego."⁷ I suggest that something like this happened in Rilke's transference with Rodin. And perhaps Josef's death enabled the poet to feel that the psychological "work" which had so badly needed doing when he first

met Rodin had been accomplished through his intimate and evolving relationship with the Master.

In June 1906, a few months after his father's death, the month after his break with Rodin, Rilke wrote a poem entitled "The Departure of the Prodigal Son" ("Der Auszug des verlorenen Sohnes"). It reveals that the poet was not in a triumphant mood of expectation at the time. In the poem the speaker longs to get away from a confused existence in which what has seemed his and still sticks to him like thorns really does not belong to him. He feels incapable of understanding and incomprehensible to others. Realizing that his journey will make his existence more uncertain and precarious, he nonetheless longs for a distant land where nothing has any familiar relationship to him and to what he has known and hopes that this land will provide him with an environment which is free from emotional involvement in anything he does. This, he knows, will mean taking a great deal upon himself. Ultimately, it may mean dying alone. It may force or allow him to let go of all that he has held as possession and/or as oppressive burden. Anticipating his mental and physical journey, the speaker can only ask if it may afford him access to a new life, in which he will be able to perceive with sudden clarity and nearness, as if beginning again, in a mood of reconciliation, things to which he has been blinded by familiarity. Here is the poem in German:

Der Auszug des verlorenen Sohnes

Nun fortzugehn von alledem Verwornnen,
 das unser ist und uns doch nicht gehört,
 das, wie das Wasser in den alten Bornen,
 uns zitternd spiegelt und das Bild zerstört;
 von allem diesen, das sich wie mit Dornen
 noch einmal an uns anhängt—fortzugehn
 und Das und Den,
 die man schon nicht mehr sah
 (so täglich waren sie und so gewöhnlich),
 auf einmal anzuschauen: sanft, versöhnlich
 und wie an einem Anfang und von nah;
 und ahnend einzusehn, wie unpersönlich,
 wie über alle hin das Leid geschah,
 von dem die Kindheit voll war bis zum Rand—:
 Und dann doch fortzugehen, Hand aus Hand,
 als ob man ein Geheiltes neu zerrisse,

und fortzugehn: wohin? Ins Ungewisse,
 weit in ein unverwandtes warmes Land,
 das hinter allem Handeln wie Kulisse
 gleichgültig sein wird: Garten oder Wand;
 und fortzugehn: warum? Aus Drang, aus Artung,
 aus Ungeduld, aus dunkler Erwartung,
 aus Unverständlichkeit und Unverstand:

Dies alles auf sich nehmen und vergebens
 vielleicht Gehaltnes fallen lassen, um
 allein zu sterben, wissend nicht warum—

Ist das der Eingang eines neuen Lebens?
 (WDB 1:247-48)

It seems likely that "Der Auszug des verlorenen Sohnes" reflects Rilke's sense of his relationship with Rodin at the time it was written. The title connects it with his version of the Prodigal Son parable in *The Notebooks*. This connection suggests that the threat of engulfment and the kind of impingement Rilke felt while living close to Rodin echo in his conception of the Prodigal Son's experience with his family at the end of the novel. The culminating section of *The Notebooks* precisely defines the ways in which a family can produce the blindness and confusion of which the poem speaks. The child can completely submit and become one of them, losing all sense of what spontaneous impulse, intuition, and reason tell him is true perception, authentic feeling, and honest thought. He can try to mask himself and constantly divide himself between true self and false. But this, as Malte suggests, this constant deception of family and friends may seem a form of corruption. Psychologists tell us it may also produce severe mental illness if the false self becomes compulsive, if the self-division amplifies into a pervasive structure of the psyche. Or the child can go far away, as Malte and the son in the poem do, to live as more or less a solitary.

VI

Rilke was eager to get away from Rodin in April and May of 1906. But once the break came, he tried to suppress his resentment and to protect his admiration and affection for the old man. Reading the letters he wrote

at this time, one cannot help seeing that he needed to believe that the breach would be healed. He wanted to protect the image of the artist-master-father who had played such a crucial role in fostering his development as a man and as an writer. No doubt he still felt closely identified with the great sculptor.

Insofar as it had strengthened his self-esteem and his sense of his identity, purpose, and direction, the relationship with Rodin had helped to free him from infantile dependence on his father and from infantile anger toward Josef. Though at first Rodin had fulfilled a desire for a powerful father, as the relationship fostered Rilke's maturity and, thus, his independence, it enabled him to allow Josef to be himself in all his limitations, and to love him nonetheless. The poet's desire to preserve the redeemed and restored image of Josef after his death, which surfaces in numerous letters, must have impelled him to suppress negative feelings toward Rodin, as the two fathers were intimately connected in his mind.

I have quoted the letter Rilke wrote to Clara the day Rodin dismissed him (May 11, 1906), when he saw his expulsion from Meudon as an act motivated by intuitive understanding. The next day, writing to Rodin as "My Master," after complaining that he had been sent away "like a thieving servant" the poet went on to justify the old man's behavior as part of his instinctive wisdom in repelling whatever "seems harmful." The language here reflects Rilke's ambivalence. The "seems" casts doubt on the sculptor's judgment. The disciple's justification of his Master's behavior is two-edged; it is preceded by assertions of selfless devotion and self-sacrifice which make Rodin's self-protectiveness look extremely ungrateful, as the poet recalls all the time he has given up for the sculptor, while neglecting his own work.

In this farewell message he also protested that he was more loyal and devoted to Rodin than anyone else and that there was no one else his age anywhere more capable of understanding the old man. And he did his best to defend himself and the sculptor from the resentment evident in the letter with an absurd, if familiar, piece of idealization, an apotheosis of the Master in which he compares Rodin to Christ and himself to the apostles left behind on earth without their Savior (*Letters* 1:211-12).

By the following summer more realistic perceptions of Rodin had made inroads on the poet's idealization of the Master. In June 1907, writing to Clara about the lecture he had first given in the fall of 1905, he said, "I am already beginning to see too that many of its perceptions

belong perhaps to the demands Rodin taught us to make, not to those which his work realizes in each case" (*Letters* 1:288).¹ He had just completed the first part of the *New Poems*; the sense of his own achievement, his mastery, must have helped him to see the old master with this new intimation of skepticism.

In September 1906 he had written to Karl von der Heydt that his second study of the sculptor would be his next project, but had been unable to bring himself to do it during the intervening time. Now, a year later, realizing that he had nothing new to say about Rodin, he decided to use the old lecture with little or no revision. He had been putting his time and energy into his *New Poems*. But he was also aware that, as he had become more detached from and critical of Rodin, a new essay on the sculptor might seem inconsistent, self-contradictory, a reflection of his confused thoughts and feelings about the old man (*Letters* 1:288).

Perhaps he also feared that a thorough clarification of his new feelings and ideas about Rodin might prove very painful, forcing him to face thoughts against which he wished to protect himself and the father-sculptor with the help of his confusion. In achieving clarity which could destroy the image of Rodin he had developed for so many years, he might undermine the strength and creativity which that image and the relationship had fostered.

The poet was in transition. Even as the extreme idealization of the paternal sculptor was deflated and a critical, independent, more realistic view of Rodin developed, Rilke defended the relationship, the attitudes, and the viewpoint that had been, or seemed, essential to his survival and his growth.

Early in November 1907 Rilke received a letter from Rodin just as he was about to give a reading of his own work in Prague. I described this occasion in an earlier chapter. His native city depressed him. He felt dismay as he realized that the dreadful old women who had wanted to devour him when he arrived had lost their appetite on hearing him read. Very likely his misery on this occasion centered on his mother, who was at the reading; all encounters with her during his adult life were very painful.

In these circumstances the first gesture of *rapprochement* from the man who had been a second father to him and whom he had also experienced as a maternal figure was especially welcome. Writing to Clara, he em-

phasized his own happiness on receiving the letter from Rodin (*Letters* 1:323). A week later, in Vienna, where he was arranging for the exhibition of sixty of Rodin's drawings in Hugo Heller's bookstore, Rilke got a second message from the old man. The sculptor had read an extract from part 2 of Rilke's *Rodin*, which had just been reprinted in the magazine *Kunst und Künstler*, and had found it "très belle." This new letter was full of affection. Delighted, scarcely able to believe that he could be the object of such feeling in Rodin, he read it time and again. He was particularly pleased by the Frenchman's invitation to visit when he returned to Paris (*Letters* 1:328).

A year and a half had passed since the break between the two men. In that time there had been an outpouring of the *New Poems*. Strengthened in his sense of his own unique genius, the poet must have greeted the old master's invitation to come to see him with the knowledge that Rodin's strength could no longer threaten to overwhelm his own sense of self and his artistic independence, that he was no longer so susceptible to manipulation or exploitation. He was not nearly so needy as he had been in 1902–3 and had left behind the helpless dependency which had made him so vulnerable to Rodin's power. These changes, which his earlier relationship with the sculptor had encouraged and which the break between them had let him confirm for himself, enabled him to respond with love and admiration, free from anxiety. His reply also reveals the feeling of equality which gave him the confidence to welcome reconciliation, trusting that he could now renew the friendship without fear of being overpowered: "I have an infinite need of you and your friendship, and I am proud that I have advanced sufficiently in my work to be able to share your glorious and simple desire for truth."²

VII

Rilke returned to Paris on May 1, 1908, but he put off seeing Rodin, writing to the sculptor after his arrival that he had to shut himself up with his work.¹ On August 31, having finished the second part of *New Poems* and moved into quarters in the Hôtel Biron, the Louis XIV villa which was to become the Musée Rodin, he invited his friend to come to see him.² Describing this visit to Clara, he foresaw that in the future he would be "as kind to him as I always was" (*Letters* 1:331).

This account of his meeting with Rodin reveals the complexity of Rilke's feelings about the sculptor at the time, his conflicting perceptions and attitudes. An emphasis upon Rodin's "dear, earnest need" of him reflects not only the desire to repay and to undo but the wish to be needed. The poet focused on the reversal of their positions, his own increasing power over the older man and the latter's loss of power over him. Later letters show a growing consciousness of these changes.

On this occasion Rilke read Rodin some remarks of Beethoven to his friend Bettina von Arnim. The composer had told von Arnim that his must be a solitary life, but he knew that in his art God was singularly close to him and that anyone who truly understood his music would become free of the wretchedness which weighed down other people (*Letters* 1:331-32). For Rilke Beethoven had become a model: the poet aspired to such superb confidence in himself and his art. The next letter to Clara shows that his sense of himself at this time, with the *New Poems* completed, was scarcely less exalted than the composer's. This letter expresses the notion that he had always been close to "the divine." He was anticipating the time when he would prepare a "potion in which all is condensed and combined, the most poisonous and most deadly," and would "take it up to God, so that he may quench his thirst and feel his splendor streaming through his veins" (September 4, 1908; *Letters* 1:336).

Never before had he been more self-confident. The idea that human genius is the source of God's vitality and splendor had evolved out of a number of sources, among them a Russian conception of the Deity, as Rilke understood it. According to Leppmann, "this God suggested rather than portrayed on icons" was "waiting to be created by the people themselves in a state of childlike naiveté (or, in moments of grace, by the poet)."³ As Leppmann points out, *The Book of Hours*, reflects the influence of this idea. In the first part of *The Book of Hours* the speaker describes himself as helping to build God, as if the Deity were a great church.⁴

It is a commonplace of psychoanalytic theory that God is an unconscious projection of the superego, a part of the self identified with the father. Rilke too thought of God and gods as projections of parts of the psyche (see *Letters* 2:147-48). Rilke's development in the *Book of Hours* of the idea that human beings build or create God expresses a lingering reverence for the Deity, which was probably reinforced by his travels in Russia, but it also suggests a rebellion against the father's primacy and

authority. In this respect it calls to mind Simenauer's explication of the son's creation of the father, Kierkegaard's argument that a truly creative individual must become his own father, and Nietzsche's belief that such an individual must become his own creator, giver of the laws by which he lives, and his own ultimate judge, as well as the German philosopher's analyses of the human creation of God and other gods.

In his September 4 letter to Clara, Rilke envisioned making God "feel his splendor streaming through his veins" by feeding Him a "potion in which all is condensed and combined, the most poisonous and most deadly" (*Letters* 1:336). Implicit here is a conception of art indebted to the influence of Baudelaire's "Une Charogne," Flaubert's "St. Julien l'Hospitalier," and Cézanne's paintings (see *The Notebooks*, 72, and *Letters* 1:314-15). But the notion that one can bring God to life and make him splendid again by quenching his thirst with deadly poison suggests an underlying thought that a person must kill the old God and the old father in order to bring new ones to life as a father to himself, recognizing and owning the divinity within him, creating his own life and character, bringing himself to new birth as the father of his work. From the classical psychoanalytic perspective such a fantasy has its roots in the oedipal son's desire to destroy and to supplant the father.

At this moment in his life the poet thought of himself as Godlike, as one "sent out . . . to be amidst the human," like Christ. As he goes about his tasks of seeing everything and rejecting nothing in the world, gathering the components of the "potion" that will make God feel splendid and vital, "the tree trunks round about stand and worship" (*Letters* 1:336).

Rodin had rented a large part of the ground floor of the Hôtel Biron. Responsible for the sculptor's discovery of the place, pleased by Rodin's immediate response to it and by the old man's decision to share it with him and other artists, Rilke rushed out and bought a wooden figure of St. Christopher. Presenting his gift, he told Rodin, "C'est Rodin portant son oeuvre, toujours plus lourd, mais qui tient le monde" (*Letters* 1:333). ("This is Rodin, bearing his work, ever heavier, but containing the world.") It scarcely needs to be said that Rilke was praising his old master as the man uniquely chosen to carry God, the Creator, here represented as the Divine Child, as well as the world.

If Rodin had nursed any sour doubts of Rilke's continuing admiration

and esteem, this gift and the praise that went with it must have laid them to rest. Surely the feelings the poet expressed on this occasion were as genuine as the love and concern which he had shown for his father in the last year of Josef's life. Several times Rilke was to assure Rodin that the Master could take pleasure in his younger friend's genius and fame, as they were, in large part, due to the sculptor's example and teaching. Perhaps, these assurances were attempts to veil competitiveness and to defend himself against jealousy and resentment. But seeing them in the context of the evolving relationship, one cannot reduce the generosity, filial gratitude, and admiration expressed in the letters at this time to cant or an unconscious defense against opposing feelings (in psychoanalytic terms, "a reaction formation").

The differences between Rilke's view of women and Rodin's contributed to the poet's increasing awareness of the sculptor's failings and limitations. For Rodin, "woman is the obstruction, the snare, the trap on those paths that are most lonely and most blessed." She is "*beneath*" the spiritual. She does not want anything beyond the sensual and material satisfactions which she demands and is "like a drink which flows through him from time to time: wine" (*Letters* 1:332). Rilke came to believe that this view of women had always been an obstacle between them. The poet tried to persuade Rodin that he had a drastically limited understanding of women by talking about Marianna Alcoforado (1640-1723), a Portuguese nun whom he mentions in *The Notebooks* (134) as an example of the intensity of unrequited love, transcending its original object, transfiguring the woman who nurtures it in herself. Rilke translated eight grieving letters thought to have been written by her to the unresponsive Marquis de Chamilly. He thought of her as "that incomparable creature, in whose eight heavy letters woman's love is for the first time charted from point to point, without display, without exaggeration or mitigation, drawn as if by the hand of a sibyl" (*SP*, 318). She was one of the abandoned women, celebrated in the first Duino Elegy, "whom you found so much more loving than gratified" lovers. The poet's ideas on this subject were probably incredible to the old man. What could he think of this view of woman's love, which expressed a preference for the kind that grows into "icy magnificence" as "lamentation" in loneliness and rejection? How could he see that the love in these eight sorrowful letters soared and grew far beyond its object, the contemptible (in Rilke's eyes)

Marquis de Chamilly, and achieved beauty and majesty? (*The Notebooks*, 134; *Letters* 1:228).

Rodin's disbelief and incomprehension in their discussions of women established their separateness in Rilke's mind beyond any doubt. And then there were the consequences of Rodin's incomprehension. His ego-centric oversimplification of women was already getting him into trouble and would prove disastrous, would leave this god in ruins, make him grotesque in old age, turn him into a fool. Though this had not yet happened in the fall of 1908, Rilke sensed what the future would bring. "The moment was sure to come when he would see the miscalculation in his prodigious sums" (*Letters* 1:332-33).

Writing to Clara, the prodigal disciple, now returned to his master, asserted his sense of his invulnerable independence and strength. "And I am inexorable and yield nothing of my Nun." His distinctiveness, his independence, his separate reality had at long last gotten through to the older man, who but a few years earlier had overpowered and intimidated him and, in self-absorption, had scarcely seen him except as a young artist whom he was molding, as a reflection of his own genius. Now, he thought, the sculptor had heard what he said, even if it could not change him (*Letters* 1:333). Rilke need no longer fear depersonalization or engulfment by the the old man. Hinting that Rodin was in trouble because of his blindness to the complexity of women, he regretted that his friend would not benefit from his own wiser understanding.

Reducing this old father surrogate to manageable size, he saw him as being "like a god of antiquity bound to the rites traditional in him, even to those which are not meant for us and yet were necessary for the cult of his soul in order to mold him" (*Letters* 1:332 and 333). Rodin is no longer Christ or the Buddha. He is still a god, but not one of our gods. He belongs to the past. He is not one who molds, but one who is molded by those outmoded attitudes, customs, and patterns of behavior which Rilke calls "rites traditional in him." The language of this passage and its context suggest the old man's helplessness in the snare of his blinding misconceptions.

This metamorphosis of the Master into "a god of antiquity," (an antiquated god?), not omnipotent, but "bound" to "rites . . . which are not meant for us" (because they are outdated?), brings to mind the Wagnerian perspective on the gods in their decline. It recalls as well the passage in the "Book of Pilgrimage" in which Rilke wonders if a father does not

mean "past years," "obsolete gestures," and "dead fashion," and concludes, "If he was a hero for his time,/ he is the leaf which falls when we grow."⁵

Once frightened and intimidated by Rodin, the poet began to feel anxiety on his behalf. He was particularly troubled by the sculptor's relationship with an American-born marquise, later Duchesse de Choiseul, whom Rilke seems to identify with the vulgarity of the recordings of music-hall performances which she played for the two of them. The old man, who was becoming increasingly childlike, needed her to get him down from the summits where in earlier years he had spent most of his time (*Letters* 1:352).

It is easy to comprehend some of the motives behind the fantasy of Rodin as a dependent child. Rilke's extreme dependency on Rodin at first, as well as the master's real and imagined superiority, sometimes made the young poet feel all the weaker and all the more uncertain, insecure, and unreal. This childlike, almost infantile dependence and the gross overestimation which accompanied it must have been humiliating and galling in retrospect. Rilke's sense of reversal was a defense against such painful memories.

We have looked at the letter to Lou in which he admitted being frightened by "the close proximity of something too hard, too stony, too big." Writing to Clara just after Easter 1906, at a time when the underlying tension between master and disciple was growing, he imagined the sculptor as a destroyer, a bird of prey. He was describing Rodin's work on a bust of George Bernard Shaw while the playwright sat for this portrait. Shaw was amused by the sculptor's "decapitation" of the bust with a wire. Struck by Rodin's extraordinary swiftness as he grasped and modeled one face out of a multitude of impressions, Rilke thought of him as having a "bird-of-prey-like clutch" (postmarked April 19, 1906; *Letters* 1:207).

"Decapitation" is humorous. Rilke shows an awareness of Shaw's congenial sense of irony and comedy, and at first his own account is playful. But the metaphor of Rodin's "bird-of-prey-like clutch" leaves humor and irony behind. Considering Rilke's experience with Rodin at this time, the old man's exploitation of his helpfulness and, perhaps, foreshadowings of the brutality with which he dismissed Rilke ("like a thieving servant"), I suspect that the letter reflects the poet's sense of the destructiveness in this old father.

What was happening in the relationship between Rodin and Rilke, as the letters portray it, calls to mind two stories by that other native of Prague, Kafka: "The Judgment" and "The Metamorphosis." In "The Judgment," which was Kafka's first major story, the once powerful father appears to have become an old invalid, in some ways as helpless and needy as an infant, while his son, Georg, now in charge of his business, makes it prosper. Suddenly, as Georg, who is contemplating marriage, puts him to bed, the old father accuses his son of trying to cover him up, to bury him. Boasting that he could sweep Georg's bride from his side, he stands up on the bed, a giant touching the ceiling, and condemns his son to death for the sin of wishing to get rid of his father, to supplant him. "The Metamorphosis," written the following year (1914), expands upon the implications of "The Judgment" and provides a much richer, multilayered picture of the psychology of family relationships.

In "The Metamorphosis," Gregor Samsa, the son, supports his aging, decayed father, his mother, and his sister. Gregor's job engulfs him with its demands. He has no sources of pleasure, except a picture of a woman in his room and his hope that he will be able to send his violin-playing sister to a conservatory. Relief from the crushing burdens of work comes only when Gregor turns into an insect. This metamorphosis reverses the positions of father and son. Now the son, as an insect, is completely dependent upon his family and a painful burden to them. The story's interest to an interpreter of Rilke's relationship with Rodin comes from what it subtly reveals about Gregor's motivation in taking on the enormous burdens of the job which has engulfed him. (Obviously, I am thinking of the tasks which Rilke's secretarial duties for Rodin imposed upon him between September 1905 and May 1906.) Forced out of his dependent invalid state, the father in the story becomes a murderous figure for his son. One can well understand the son's need to keep the father as dependent as a child.

"The Judgment" supports this interpretation. It expresses a son's fantasy that the father is murderous and that the father's helpless, childlike dependency allows the son to prosper and to keep this father under control, and thus to remove the danger. It contemplates the possibility that these loving ministrations to a helpless, old, invalid father may hide a desire to reduce him still further, to nothing, to obliterate him, if only because he is so dangerous.

No doubt, the letters which bear witness to the old man's decay and ruin in the next few years—such as one written in November 1909 to Clara, describing Rodin as a child who must be led down from the heights, which had become precarious for him in his weakness, by a woman with vulgar tastes—those letters express genuine fear and tenderness for the sculptor as well as the poet's continuing, if unconscious, need to defend himself from the dangerous paternal figure, still very much alive in the unconscious mind, reflected in the terrifying angel of the First and Second Elegies, whom the poet wards off in the Seventh:

Wer, wenn ich shriee, hörte mich denn aus der Engel
Ordnungen? und gesetzt selbst, es nähme
einer mich plötzlich ans Herz: ich verginge von seinem
stärkeren Dasein . . .

.....
... Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich.

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels'
hierarchies? and even if one of them pressed me
suddenly against his heart: I would be consumed
in that overwhelming existence. . . .

... Every angel is terrifying.

(From the First Duino elegy [1912], *SP*, 150 and 151)

Glaub *nicht*, dass ich werbe.
Engel, und würb ich dich auch! Du kommst nicht. Denn mein
Anruf ist immer voll Hinweg; wider so starke
Strömung kannst du nicht schreiten. Wie ein gestreckter
Arm ist mein Rufen. Und seine zum Greifen
oben offene Hand bleibt vor dir
offen, wie Abwehr und Warnung,
Unfasslicher, weitauf.

Don't think that I'm wooing.

Angel, and even if I were, you would not come. For my call
is always filled with departure; against such a powerful
current you cannot move. Like an outstretched arm
is my call. And its hand held open and reaching up
to seize, remains in front of you, open

as if in defense and warning,
 Ungraspable One, far above.
 (From the Seventh Duino elegy [1922], *SP*, 190 and 191)

By the end of 1911 Rilke was appalled at Rodin's "simply going wrong" at the age of seventy. Unharmful by dozens of similar nemeses in the past, he had been so easily trapped by the affair with the Duchess that was "making his old age into something grotesque and ridiculous" (*Letters* 2:33). The man whom the poet had made his model, father, and master had become a ruin in the snares of his own folly. What had happened to Rodin frightened him: "What am *I* to say, with the little bit of work out of which I keep falling completely, if *he* wasn't saved?" Perhaps the fact that as a child he had been deeply affected by his father's failures and all his life had been forced to struggle with them reinforced the sense of danger he felt as he witnessed the final stages of Rodin's slippery slide. This is not to negate what I have said about the desire to cut the old man down to human size and about the way in which Rodin's decay and his need for help and support were welcome to Rilke. Opposing motives were at work in the poet.

The relationship took a turn for the worse in January 1914 when Rodin broke his promise to let Clara do a bust of him, a project which the poet had encouraged in order to help his distanced wife. At this point Rilke was reluctant to see the old man (*Letters* 2:108).

Finally, there is the retrospective view, from a much greater distance, several years after Rodin's death in 1917, when Rilke had fully come into his own with the completion of the *Elegies* and the writing of *The Sonnets to Orpheus*. In a December 1922 letter to his Polish translator, Witold Hulewicz, the poet confessed that in writing his book on Rodin (the first part of the book was twenty years behind him and the second nearly as far away) he had "lacked distance." Looking back, he thought that if he were presently doing his studies of the sculptor, his strong admiration would have to struggle against his sense of Rodin's deterioration and the disasters that had overwhelmed him. His emphasis in these comments is upon critical detachment and the difference between his youth ("my all too youthful attitude") and later age (*Letters* 2:312).

In October 1924 Rilke made a final evaluation of Rodin's influence,

which shows the clarity and objectivity of distance and supremely self-confident mastery. The Frenchman's effect upon him, he said, had "outweighed" all literary influences and made them "superfluous." Contrasting Rodin with Tolstoy, who had abandoned his art, Rilke recalled that the sculptor had "assented fully and actively to the inner mission of his creative genius, the infinite divine play," so that it had "looked for a while" as if he had not only mastered his art, but, with all the insight that had come from the interplay of his shaping imagination and work with the clay, bronze, and marble, he had also taken possession of everything he had aspired to reach: "And so it may be too, not only for the artist of highest intent, but for the simple craftsman, if only he has once bitten open the kernel of his métier: the intensity arrived at within his characteristic achievement appropriates to him . . . everything that is and has been which corresponds to the same degree of intensity" (*Letters* 2:359-60).

Was this a return to the old idealization of "the Master"? It was very high praise, but expressed in careful, measured language. The phrasing "looked for a while" tells us that the poet was not sinking back into the uncritical youthful frame of mind which he had rejected long ago. In this letter to Hermann Pongs, who was writing about him and teaching his work, he glossed over unpleasant matters. He did not even mention that Rodin had dismissed him, but explained the break by saying that he had been placed in the position of giving Rodin "irksome reminders" of tasks such as answering letters, and that his doing so had distorted their friendship. He transformed what had happened in May 1906, saying only that he had returned to Paris as master of his own life, and that his relationship with the sculptor had fallen "back into [its] earlier channel" (*Letters* 2:359). Was the poet rearranging his life to keep the painful twists and turns, the moments of weakness, away from curious eyes, because he thought they were comparatively insignificant in the context of the whole relationship and all it meant to him? It does not seem likely that at this time he was suppressing all memory of the actual events.

In any event, in 1924 he no longer needed to focus upon Rodin's decline and weakness. With complete confidence in his own mastery and achievement, he could rejoice in the relationship which had meant so much to him as a person and as an artist. Now his praise came not from a weak, sick man's need to idealize a new father in order

to participate in his omnipotence, but from the sense that he too, like his old master, had "assented fully and actively to the inner mission of his creative genius, the infinite divine play," with awesome results.

VIII

In the winter of 1905-6 Rilke wrote "David singt vor Saul" ("David Sings before Saul"). I don't wish to reduce this poem to an allegory. It has an extraordinary life and significance as a work of literature which far exceed whatever autobiographical meaning one may find in it. But one can see how Rilke's experience with Rodin at this time consciously or unconsciously shaped the relationship of the old king and the young harper in the poem, which I reprint here before offering an interpretation:

König, hörst du, wie mein Saitenspiel
Fernen wirft, durch die wir uns bewegen:
Sterne treiben uns verwirrt entgegen,
und wir fallen endlich wie ein Regen,
und es blüht, wo dieser Regen fiel.

Mädchen blühen, die du noch erkannt,
die jetzt Frauen sind und mich verführen;
den Geruch der Jungfrau kannst du spüren,
und die Knaben stehen, angespannt
schlankt und atmend, an verschwiegnen Türen.

Dass mein Klang dir alles wiederbrächte.
Aber trunken taumelt mein Getön:
Deine Nächte, König, deine Nächte—,
und wie waren, die dein Schaffen schwächte,
o wie waren alle Leiber schön.

Dein Erinnern glaub ich zu begleiten,
weil ich ahne. Doch auf welchen Saiten
greif ich dir ihr dunkles Lustgestöhn?—

II

König, der du alles dieses hattest
und der du mit lauter Leben mich

überwältigst und überschattest:
komm aus deinem Throne und zerbrich
meine Harfe, die du so ermattest.

Sie ist wie ein abgenommner Baum
durch die Zweige, die dir Frucht getragen,
schaut jetzt eine Tiefe wie von Tagen
welche kommen—, und ich kenn sie kaum.

Lass mich nicht mehr bei der Harfe schlafen;
sieh dir diese Knabenhand da an:
glaubst du, König, dass sie die Oktaven
eines Leibes noch nicht greifen kann?

III
König, birgst du dich in Finsternissen,
und ich hab dich doch in der Gewalt.
Sieh, mein festes Lied ist nicht gerissen,
und der Raum wird um uns beide kalt.
Mein verwaistes Herz und dein verworrenes
hängen in den Wolken deines Zornes,
wütend ineinander eingebissen
und zu einem einzigen verkrallt.

Fühlst du jetzt, wie wir uns umgestalten?
König, König, das Gewicht wird Geist.
Wenn wir uns nur aneinander halten,
du am Jungen, König, ich am Alten,
sind wir fast wie ein Gestirn das kreist.

King, do you hear how my string-music casts
distances through which we're moving?
Confused stars float up to us,
and finally we fall like rain,
and flowers come up where this rain fell.

Girls blossom, whom you knew once,
who now are women tempting me;
you can scent the odor of virgins,
and the boys stand, tense,
lean and breathing, at secret doors.

That my sound could bring it all back to you!
But my music's reeling drunk;

Your nights, King, your nights—,
and how fair they were, the ones your creativity ravished.
o how beautiful were all bodies.

I believe I can accompany your remembering
as I can sense it. But on what strings
do I touch for you their dark groaning pleasure?

II

King, you who had all this
and who with loud life
overpower and overshadow me:
come down from your throne and shatter
my harp, which you're wearying so.

It's like a tree picked bare:
through the branches which bore your fruit,
a depth now looks as of days
which are coming—, and I scarcely know them.

Let me sleep no longer beside the harp;
take a look at this boy's hand:
do you think, King, that it still can't
span the octaves of a body?

III

King, you conceal yourself in darkneses,
and still I have you in my power.
Look, my strong song is not torn,
and the space around us both grows cold.
My orphaned heart and your confused one
hang in the clouds of your anger,
raging, bitten into each other,
clawed together into one.

Do you feel now, how we transform each other?
King, King, weight becomes spirit.
If only we cling to each other,
you to youth, King, I to age,
we're almost like a circling star.¹

Reading the poem with the relationship between Rilke and Rodin in mind, I find that its conclusion reflects the poet's feeling at this time that

he and the sculptor needed each other, that, as youth and age, they had much to give each other. It reveals the younger man's desire to cling to the older one. Yet the last part of the poem also focuses upon the anger in both of them, in powerful images, reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno*: "raging, bitten into each other/, and clawed together into one" recalls Ugolino and the Archbishop Ruggieri in cantos 32 and 33 of the *Inferno*, where Ugolino gnaws at Ruggieri's brain in hatred and they are frozen together in the ice at the bottom of Hell, so that one head seems a helmet on the other. If I am right in thinking that this poem indirectly expresses Rilke's feelings and his sense of Rodin's at the time, the anger and tension must have developed well before the break between the two men.

The line "and still I have you in my power" probably reflects Rilke's need to control this powerful and, at least in fantasy, destructive and dangerous master, which may have been part of his motivation for enduring the heavy burden of the tasks he was given to do at the time and for focusing upon the sculptor's neediness and age both then and in the fall of 1908. The story of David and Saul, as it is interpreted here, works very well as a medium in which the poet could explore these feelings obliquely, perhaps unconsciously. In reading the poem we should remember that David was appointed by God to take Saul's place, and that the king was doomed, having betrayed his God, having allowed himself to be corrupted. In so many ways the poem suggests Rilke's sense of the relationship between himself and the sculptor. Saul is remembering his pleasure with the help of David's playing. He conceals himself in darkness. David has him in his power.

"Abisag" (Abishag) precedes "David Sings before Saul" in the *New Poems*. When the two poems are read together with the poet's and the sculptor's lives in mind, the former seems to express obliquely a fantasy of Rodin. "Abishag" is based upon the story in the First Book of Kings in which a young girl is found for the old king, to sleep with him and warm him. But, as the poem emphasizes, the withering man ("den Welkenden") remains cold and impotent when the girl lies on him (WDB, 1:242-44).

The first part of "David Sings before Saul" is unusual in Rilke's work, which rarely has to do with explicitly sexual competitiveness between a paternal old man and a filial younger one. Here the conflict is rendered with delicacy, subtlety, and originality, and with ambivalence—the young man's desire to bring back by means of his playing those "dark

moans of pleasure," as well as his delight in the realization that the girls the king once knew are the women now tempting him, while the old king has only his memories.

The second part of the poem, after affirming the king's power to "overwhelm and overshadow" the young harper with "loud life" (surely here we can see Rodin and Rilke's reaction to him), reasserts the young man's sexual power as if the older one doubts it: "take a look at this boyish hand:/ do you think, King, that it still can't/ span the octaves of a body?"²

As the harpist foresees the "days . . . coming" about which he knows very little, the poet senses the approach of his own new life, in which he will be able to express the new depth which he feels in himself.

But what is the feeling behind the appeal to the king to come down from his throne and shatter the harp which he has been exhausting? This exhortation calls to mind Rilke's fatiguing use of his own gifts as a writer in the service of Rodin and his role as a friend and companion, daily keeping the old man happy, giving him emotional support, a task which was wearing on the poet, as he felt the need to be alone to do his own work. During this period (September 1905 to May 1906) much of his imaginative energy went into the master's correspondence and into his supportive role.

It is a strange request, asking the king to come down off his throne and to shatter the harp. It reminds one that Rilke himself seems to have provoked the rather brutal, if temporary, sundering of the relationship by the sculptor in May 1906. Perhaps, the violence and destructiveness which the voice in the poem is appealing for reflect the poet's need to project onto Rodin the violence which he felt and his own desire to destroy the relationship. He displaces these impulses into the drama which he has taken from the Bible and projects them onto the figure in the poem who represents Rodin, defending himself from guilt. In the biblical story David was not guilty of injuring Saul, of dethroning or killing him.

The relationship between the two men and Rilke's feelings about the sculptor had gone through a complex transformation, which probably remained largely unconscious during the winter of 1905-6, and the result was not an opaque dream, but a marvelously lucid poem, in which a number of feelings were given indirect and subtle, but also primitive and powerful, expression through image and metaphor.

One can go on playing with "David Sings before Saul." Perhaps, an analyst, reading the poem, focusing on the young singer's appeal to the old King to destroy his harp, might say that there is an unconscious desire in the oedipal son to have the threatened father castrate him, so that he may not be guilty of supplanting the older man with women. But the poem as a whole is weighted against any such desire. Clearly, the playing of the harp represents the devotion of the young man's imaginative energy and all his gifts to the happiness of his old master, whose demands and needs have exhausted and withered his singing and playing. It needs to be replaced by another instrument, which, in part 2 of the poem, is the woman's body, whose octaves the young man's hands can span.

Did Rilke's feelings about his father's age, illness, and approaching death also help to mold this poem? I have argued that they probably influenced his response to the sculptor, the second father, whose power, sexual possession of many women, aging, and arousing of intense ambivalence in Rilke are reflected in the poem. The ambivalence, whose complexity shaped "David Sings before Saul," was part of a wide range of feelings originating in the relationship of father and son during the oedipal stage. Aside from this matter, one cannot help wondering if the father's aging, illness, and approaching death helped to release and strengthen the kinds of self-confidence represented in David and yet, at the same time, provided motivating energy for the harpist's sense at the end of the poem that he needs the old king and that, if only they could cling together, they might achieve the radiance, glory, and permanence of a star circling the heavens.