

AUTHOR'S NOTE

AUGUSTE RODIN AND THE NOMENCLATURE OF HIS WORKS

A STUDY IN SPITE

WHEN illegitimate criticism is met with a smart swing on the point of the jaw, and has subsided into an unpleasant and unpitiful heap; when its high-well-born brother has shaken hands—without many years of friendly sparring—with the new pugilist, all his family are very disappointed, for Society takes no notice of them in its (to them unseemly) adulation of the rising star. Their unfraternal feeling may even lead them to employ a sandbagger and a dark night to rid them of this dreamer Joseph.

In the case of the success, in the heavy weights, of the Meudon Chicken (M. Rodin will forgive us for the lengths to which we carry our analogy), envy has given up hope even of sandbags, and is now engaged in the ridiculous task of attempting to disconcert the eye of the Fancy Boy by flipping paper pellets at him across the arena. They do not reach him, it is true; but as I, who happen to be sitting in a back row, admiring the clean, scientific sequences of rib-punchers, claret-tappers, &c., &c., recently received one of these missiles in the eye, my attention was called to the disturber. I will now do my part as a law-abiding citizen and take my boot to the offender, as a warning to him and all of his kidney. I shall not mention his name; that he would enjoy; that is perhaps what he hoped. I will

merely state that he is one of those unwashed and oleaginous individuals who are a kind of Mérodack-Jauneau without the Mérodack, *i.e.*, without the gleam of intention in their work which to the lay mind redeems even the most grotesque imbecility of technique, and the most fatuous ignorance of all subjects connected or unconnected with art. By philosophy he understands "Science and Health": by poetry Lake Harris or Eric Mackay; he expects a painting to tell a pretty story or to upset a metaphysical position. His conversation is like that of Planchette; or if William Horton were vocal—But Heaven forbid!

What he said, though parrot-talk, caught up in some fifth-rate sculptor's studio, no doubt, had so much truth in it, carefully concealed by the lying misinterpretation he had put on it, that, as I said, the pellet hit me. This was what it came to. Rodin's works, it is said, *mean* nothing. He makes a study; people see it in his studio; A. goes up and says to the Master; "Ah, how beautiful," &c., *ad nauseam*—"I suppose it is 'Earth and the Spring.'" B. follows, and suggests "Hercules and Cacus"; C. thinks "The Birth of a Flower"; D. calls it "Despair"; E. varies it with "Moses breaking the Tables of the Law"; F. Cocks his eye warily, and asks if it is not meant for "Mary Magdalene"; G. votes for "The Beetle-Crusher and his Muse," and so on, day after day, till Z. comes round and recognises it for Balzac. Rodin shakes him warmly by both hands; Balzac it is for all time—and one ceases to wonder that it was rejected!

Now, of course, this paper pellet is in any case very wide of its mark. Rodin can easily sculp himself a tabernacle and go in with Whistler—and even drag in Velasquez; but here am I illustrating, however feebly, the Works, in Poetry; and poetry cannot, unfortunately, ever be pure technique. I have long wished to write "A Sonnet in W. and P."

(with Whip as the keynote) ; a triolet in U. and K.; an ode in S. Sh. Sw. Sp. and Str.—and so on; but people would merely say “Nonsense Verses” (so they do now, some of them!). So that my work is liable to the most vital misinterpretation. My best friend tells the utterly false, utterly funny story about me that I wrote one sonnet for “L’Ange déchu” and another for “Icare.”

The real heart of the attack is, of course, against Rodin’s intention, and it is my object to show what rubbish it is, even granting the literary basis of criticism to be valid. I am given to understand that something of the sort described above does sometimes take place in the naming of a statue (of the allegorical description especially). But that is a question of felicity, of epigram ; never of subject.

In “La Main de Dieu,” for example, the meaning is obvious, and not to be wrested or distorted. What does it matter if we call it as at present, or

- (a) The Hand of Creation,
- (b) The First Lovers,
- (c) The Security of Love,
- (d) The invisible Guard

—anything in reason? These are only ways of looking at one idea, and as you are theologian, poet, lover or mystic, so you will choose. And it is the Master’s merit, not his fault, if his conception is so broad-based as to admit of different interpretations. The phenomenon is possible because Rodin is the master and not the slave of his colossal technique. The naming of a masterpiece is perhaps harder work than the producing it, and Rodin begin a sculptor and not an illicit epigram distiller, is perfectly justified in picking up what he can from the witty and gifted people who throng his studio as much as he will let them.

Let there be an end, then, not to the sordid and snarling jealousy which greatness must inevitably excite, not to the simian tooth-grindings which

must always accompany the entrance of a man into the jungle, but to this peculiarly senseless and sidelong attack. One accepts the lion as a worthy antagonist; one can enjoy playing with a fine dog; one can sympathise with sincere and honourable labour, though it be in vain; one ignores laughingly the attack of tiny and infuriated puppies; but there are insects so loathsome, so incredibly disgusting, worms whose sight is such an abomination, whose stink is so crapulous and purulent, that, ignoring their malignity, but simply aware of their detestable presence, the heel is ground down on one generous impulse, and the slimy thing is no more. Decomposition, already far advanced, may be trusted speedily to resolve the remains into the ultimate dust of things, mere matter for some new and hopefuller avatar.

Such a worm are you, M. D—— who once, as above described, voided your noxious nastiness in my presence, trusting to conciliate me by the intended compliment that my poems on Rodin were from myself and not from him, and that any other statues would have done as well.

I am as little susceptible to flattery as I am to the venomous dicta of spite and envy, and I resent that when I see it employed as the medium for this. Without your compliment, M. D——, I might have left you to crawl on, lord of your own muck-heap; with it, I take this opportunity of stamping on you.

NOTE.—I had intended to include reproductions of photographs of those few statues which I have written upon; but I prefer to pay my readers the compliment of supposing that they possess the originals in either bronze or marble.