

German culture has a history of lifting creative friendships into an ideal. The Classicist and Romantic periods come to mind as high points, featuring as they did a whole parade of vaunted relationships: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Moses Mendelssohn, Johann Wolfgang Goethe and Friedrich Schiller, Henriette Herz and Wilhelm von Humboldt, and many more. But the modernist moment, too, saw a programmatic elevation of friendship, this time in the spirit of setting oneself apart from the ethos of bourgeois individualism and conventional family values. The circle of friends around Franz Kafka and Max Brod in Prague, the coffee-house groupings in Vienna, ties formed in artists' colonies and youth movements, Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin in Berlin: these connections and dynamics are staple topics when talking of German modernist culture.

Certainly friendship and the rejection of conventional family life have loomed large in accounts of Rainer Maria Rilke's work. Scholars have devoted much attention to Rilke's long connection to the psychoanalyst Lou-Andreas Salomé. Eric Torgersen's excellent study *Dear Friend* (1998), named after the title of a poem by Rilke, assessed the importance of Rilke's friendship with the painter Paula Modersohn-Becker, whom he met in the artists' colony of Worpsurede. And now there is *You Must Change Your Life*, Rachel Corbett's perceptive evocation of Rilke's relationship with the sculptor Auguste Rodin, the subject of one of Rilke's first books.

Rilke went to Paris in 1902 to write about Rodin for a new series of monographs about artists. He was happy to have received the assignment, not least because he needed the money. With a baby at home, Rilke was also restless. But above all, he hoped that spending time with Rodin, whom he venerated, would help him find his way to a mature style. Fragile, uncertain of his poetic path, given to procrastination, and inclined to abstractions, the twenty-six-year old Rilke seemed Rodin's opposite. At sixty-one, Rodin was still robust, and one of the most famous artists in the world. He had a clear sense of what he wanted to do in his work, and he pursued his vision with great single-mindedness and energy. His person, like his sculpture, had an intense physicality. "If Rodin was a mountain, Rilke was the mist encircling it", reads a particularly lovely line in Corbett's book.

Rilke's fulsome essay on Rodin may not rank among his best writings, but in Paris Rilke got what he came for. In his gruff way, Rodin took a liking to the poet and gave him advice about when to work (always) and how to see (into the heart of things – what Rilke called "inseeing" or *einsehen*). Rilke wasn't shy about acknowledging his debts to Rodin, and Corbett reaches a bit when she presents Rodin as a hidden voice speaking through the missives to Franz Xaver Kappus that became *Letters to a Young Poet*, which Rilke began writing in 1902. Rilke actually underlines Rodin's importance in the *Letters*, more than once. Much fresher is Corbett's bringing into play, in thinking about Rilke's appreciation for Rodin and his techniques, of the new notion of empathy, or *Einfühlung*, which Rilke may have been exposed to some years earlier. Coined by Robert Vischer in 1873, and made more popular by Theodor Lipps in

Mist and mountain

Friendships in German culture

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Rachel Corbett

YOU MUST CHANGE YOUR LIFE

The story of Rainer Maria Rilke and Auguste Rodin

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Elizabeth Goodstein

GEORG SIMMEL AND THE
DISCIPLINARY IMAGINARY

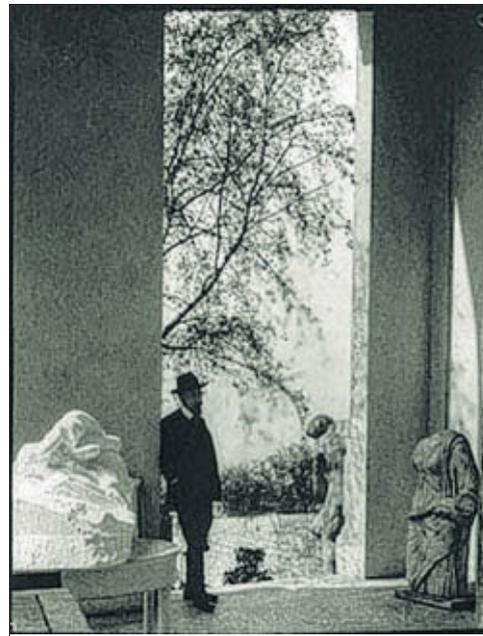
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the 1890s, empathy was used to describe the process whereby viewers are moved to invest a work of art with feeling. Empathy thus carried novel implications for the question of how it is that an artwork achieves its force, a question that was much on Rilke's mind when he went to Paris to write about and learn under Rodin.

But the force of *You Must Change Your Life* is less a function of its (very brief) theoretical musings than of its granular reimagining. Corbett seems not to have German; she has, however, clearly made a careful study of the materials available in translation, and she evokes the interaction between Rodin's and Rilke's circumstances and mental states in vivid detail. Here is a representative moment, which comes from Corbett's account of Rilke beginning to compose his Rodin book: "He stared out the window at the brick wall on the other side. He paced and procrastinated. Unaccustomed to shutting his windows, he suffered the fatty stench of *pommes frites* wafting in and commingling with iodine vapors from the hospital".

It should also be said that Corbett is a fine reader of Rilke's poetry. For example, she astutely links the haunting line about beauty from the *Duino Elegies* – "for beauty is nothing / but the beginning of terror which we can still barely endure" – with a view about the ephemerality of natural beauty that Rilke is supposed to have communicated to Freud. The result of her efforts is a beautiful exercise in compact, interwoven double biography.

There is an ample record of the ups and downs of Rilke's friendship with Rodin, including its low point. This occurred in 1906, when Rodin, a notoriously difficult boss, dismissed Rilke, who seldom held a regular job, as his secretary. Where the figures involved in a friendship have said little about it or have downplayed its importance, scholars and critics have been, unsurprisingly, stingier with their attention, even if what is at stake is understanding a truly consequential episode in the circulation of ideas. A striking example of such neglect is the case of Rilke and the philosopher Georg Simmel, two of the great observers of modern life. Both represented their times as entailing complicated, disorienting push-pulls of liberation and new constraint and the intensifica-



Rilke at Rodin's studio, Meudon, France

tion and deadening of sensory experience. Both were deeply concerned with expressing what these processes meant for how we relate to objects, words and each other. And both wrote in searching and innovative ways that resonated with readers, though Rilke's writings have stood up somewhat better to the test of time.

In 1924, a Germanist named Hermann Pongs asked Rilke to comment on what he owed to Simmel. It would be kind to call Rilke's reply evasive. He had in fact been a student of Simmel's in Berlin. He had also produced a small but ardent record of his enthusiasm for Simmel's work. Yet Rilke claimed that he had known the late philosopher only "socially", having been introduced to him in 1899 by Andreas Salomé, a friend they had in common.

To be sure, scholars haven't taken Rilke's pronouncement at face value. An artist tampering with the facts of his life isn't, after all, unusual. A prominent critic has observed that Rilke seems to have lived out the diagnosis of the modern condition Simmel set forth in his essay "The Adventurer", according to which art and love affairs are all that can give time the fullness it had for a more religious age. Although mostly in passing, Rilke's biographers have drawn attention to letters – Rilke's own as well as third-party accounts – suggesting that Simmel and Rilke had a real affinity for each other, even if they were never close friends. More specifically, scholars have noted that Rilke sat in Simmel's classes in 1899 and *again* in 1905, and that in an unusual step, one betraying a high level of trust and comfort, Rilke asked Simmel about the possibility of one-on-one study sessions. This despite the fact that Simmel was nothing if not busy, lecturing for his supper as a non-regular member at the University of Berlin while publishing at a feverish pace. One commentator has even speculated that Rilke had in mind to make Simmel Rodin's successor as his mentor.

Another has argued that Simmel's influ-

ence and, in particular, his theorizing about urban modernity is all over Rilke's reckoning with modern Paris, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. For with its seemingly random recounting of events and its atmosphere of sensory assault, the novel, the only one Rilke wrote, appears to dramatize lines from the seminal essay that Simmel published while Rilke was living in Paris for the first time, "The Metropolis and Modern Life" (1903). There Simmel speaks of "the rapid telescoping of changing images" and "the unexpectedness of violent stimuli" as characterizing the experience of places like Paris and Berlin at the turn of the century. If Rodin taught Rilke how to work, perhaps Simmel taught him how to think.

Anyone interested in understanding the character – and especially the fate – of Simmel's thought would do well to consult Elizabeth Goodstein's *Georg Simmel and the Disciplinary Imaginary*. Born in 1858, Simmel had become a major figure in and beyond the world of German letters by the time he died sixty years later. In his masterpiece, *The Philosophy of Money* (1903), the focus is on the levelling effects of the money economy. An effect as well as a driver of modern society, the money economy, Simmel claims, compels the reduction of value to exchange value, devaluing whatever resists the departicularizing logic of abstract exchange. Money comes to govern the relationship between the world of values and the world of real things, and thus "money is", in Simmel's phrase, "the spider that weaves the social web".

Such images had a significant impact on some of the most important social theorists of the age, especially Max Weber. Yet Simmel's path through the academy was a rocky one. His first attempt at obtaining a regular appointment ended in failure. Moreover, he did not have a tenured position until the University of Strasbourg offered him one in 1914, a good job but certainly not what he had been hoping for.

Goodstein doesn't discount the role of anti-Semitism in Simmel's institutional difficulties. She cites him speculating that a government minister passed him over for a job in Heidelberg, even though the faculty there supported him, because his was thought to be a "hypercritical" intellect rather than a creative one, something that was often said to belittle German-Jewish authors. But it is Simmel's style of philosophizing that Goodstein sees as the more significant cause. For her, Simmel was a "modernist philosopher" and not, say, a philosophical sociologist or a theorizer of modern experience. His very combination of strengths made for a liminality that, in turn, has hindered a fuller reception. Neither a polemic outsider like Nietzsche, nor a radical innovator whose eye was nevertheless recognizably trained on big philosophical questions, Simmel, according to Goodstein, produced works that "do not, as has so often been asserted, simply affirm or uncritically register modern experience, with all its fragmentation and contradictoriness, but embody a mode of reflection deliberately shaped by the striving to make the modern world intelligible in its own terms". Simmel's affinity for "particularity", Goodstein argues, is, partly, at least, what has led to people to see him as a highbrow *bricoleur* and not a philosopher of the most serious kind.