An Interpretation of Rodin’s Adam

ALICIA FAXON
Assistant Professor of Art History, Simmons College

Rodin’s Adam, of which the Metropolitan Museum owns the first cast (Figure 1),1 was given several titles from the time it was first exhibited in plaster in the Salon of 1881: La Création de l’homme (The Creation of Man), Le Premier Homme (The First Man), and finally Adam. According to a letter that Rodin wrote to the Ministry of Fine Arts on October 20, 1881,2 he planned to have over life-size sculptures of Adam and Eve on either side of the Gates of Hell (commissioned in 1880 by the under secretary of Fine Arts, Edmund Turquet, for the Musée des Arts Décoratifs), and early sketches of the project show figures of Adam and Eve flanking the Gates. Although Rodin created Adam from life, using a model identified by Judith Cladel as a fairground athlete or strong man named Cailloux,3 he found precedents for the pose in the work of an earlier master.

In 1875, when Florence celebrated the four-hundredth anniversary of Michelangelo’s birth, Rodin went to Italy for two months with the intention of penetrating the secret of Michelangelo’s creative genius, its sources of energy and movement. As he said to the American Truman Bartlett in 1889, “In looking at the Medici tomb I was more profoundly impressed than with anything I have ever seen . . . I like his works because they are living and I could find in them what I wanted.”4 He sketched figures from the Medici tomb,5 Moses,6 and a figure in the pose of Apollo.7 In Rome he visited the Sistine Chapel and saw the ceiling frescoes and the Last Judgment. In Florence he could also have seen Michelangelo’s David, St. Matthew, and Bearded Slave, and he told Judith Cladel of his impression of the Pietà in the cathedral: “A Florence, pendant la messe, j’ai admiré la Descente de Croix de Michel-Ange, par-dessus la foule en prière.”8 Writing to Bourdelle in 1906, Rodin described Michelangelo’s role in freeing him from the conventions of academic sculpture: “Ma libération de l’académisme a été par Michel-Ange qui m’ayant appris (par observation) des règles diamétralement opposées à ce que l’on m’avait appris (école d’Ingres), m’a libéré. . . . C’est celui qui m’a tendu sa main puissante.”9

When Rodin returned to Paris in 1875 he worked on a figure of Adam, which he destroyed before making the final plaster in 1880. Between his first attempt and its realization he toured the cathedrals of France in 1877 and admired their Gothic sculptural programs. At the same time he became interested in literary as well as artistic sources. He owned a well-worn copy of Rivalo’s translation of Dante’s Divine Comedy, which he read frequently.10 In 1878 he began reading Baudelaire, especially Les Fleurs du mal, which he illustrated for Gallimard in 1888.11 However, the main source for the Adam planned in conjunction with the Gates of Hell was undoubtedly Michelangelo.

6. Ibid., p. 46.
7. Ibid., p. 48.
It is interesting that one of the early titles given Adam by other sculptors was L'Esclave (The Slave), suggesting both Michelangelo's Rebellious Slave in the Louvre, in which the placement of the right foot on a raised support and the twisting stance of the torso resemble the pose of Adam, and the Bearded Slave in Florence, in which the angle of the head and the left arm held away from the body are very similar to those of Adam. However, it was recognized that the Creation of Man as a title referred to Michelangelo's fresco on the Sistine Ceiling in which God gives life to the recumbent figure of Adam (Figure 2). More specifically, it was said that the right arm and hand of Rodin's Adam imitated the gesture of Michelangelo's Adam receiving the spark of life. It has recently been suggested by Leo Steinberg that the left arm of Adam

14. Judith Cladel, Rodin: The Man and His Art, trans. S. K. Star (New York, 1917) p. 98. (For the original French publication see note 8 above.)
is derived from that of the dead Christ in Michelangelo's Florentine Pietà (Figure 3), which, as we have seen, Rodin told Cladel that he had admired.

If the hands of Rodin's Adam are analyzed, it appears that the right is closer in form to the creating hand of God in the Sistine fresco; although the last three fingers are curled toward the palm in Rodin's Adam, the thumb and index finger are in a similar position. It is the left hand of Rodin's Adam that resembles that of Michelangelo's Adam in its limpness and in the placement of the fingers. It has been observed that Michelangelo's figures of Adam and God represent twin forms, one active, the other passive, and both these principles are incorporated by Rodin in his Adam. The idea of the first man as both creature and creator is a corollary of this juxtaposition, and one to which Rodin as a sculptor would have been sensitive. As Albert Elsen has pointed out, Rodin at this stage of his career was especially interested in the use of gesture by Michelangelo and other sculptors to convey meaning. This is exemplified not only in Rodin's appropriation of Michelangelo's hand of God and hand of Adam but also, even more significantly, in his borrowing from the Christ of the Florentine Pietà.

The interpretation of Christ as the second or last Adam is traditional in Christian theology. Thus Paul to the Corinthians, writing of the resurrection of the body:

So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit. Howbeit that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual. The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second man is the Lord from heaven. (1 Cor. 15:42-47)

References to 1 Corinthians 15 are found in the nineteenth-century French missal in the Mass for the Dead and to Christ's saving man from Adam's sin in the Holy Saturday service or Easter Vigil. The Mass for the Dead was particularly significant in Rodin's life as his beloved sister Maria, who was preparing to become a nun, died in the fall of 1862, and in his grief Rodin joined the order of the Pères du Très-Saint Sacrement on Christmas Day, 1862, as Brother Augustine. This order, founded by Pierre-Julien Eymard (1811–68), was particularly devoted to the liturgy and would certainly have familiarized Rodin with liturgical references to the relation of Adam and Christ. Later in his life, according to Rodin's secretary Anthony Ludovici, the Bible was one of Rodin's favorite livres de chevet, "and he delighted in expounding his own subtle interpretations to many of its passages." If Rodin's Adam is seen to embody both the first Adam and the last Adam, that is, Christ, his gestures suggest not only the creation and fall of man but also his redemption through Christ's sacrifice of death on the cross.

The association of Adam with Christ is also consistent with Rodin's acknowledged source for the Gates of Hell, Dante's Divine Comedy. Although most critics identify the source specifically as the Inferno, Leonce Bénédicte, the first director of the Musée Rodin, commented on Rodin's use of the Purgatorio and Paradiso as well. Consistently throughout the Divine Comedy, when Adam is referred to, he is linked with Christ. In the Inferno, canto 4, lines 52–69, Virgil reveals to Dante that Adam is no longer in Hell because he was freed from Limbo by Christ as Savior. In the Purgatorio, canto 32, lines 37–75, a comparison is made between the first Adam and Christ as the second Adam in a complicated analogy between the Tree of Knowledge and the Cross of Christ. Finally, in the Paradiso, canto 7, lines 25–148, Adam appears to Dante and explains how he fell from grace and how Christ redeemed him and all humans from damnation by his sacrifice. The identification of Christ and Adam is made even closer in canto 13 of the Paradiso, lines 37–45, comparing Adam's breast and Christ's:

Into that breast, thou thinkest, whence was ta'en
The rib from which the cheek was fashioned fair
Whose palate brought about the whole world's bane,
And into that which felt the thrusting spear,
And so for past and future paid the fine
Which on those scales outweighs all sin soe'er
Such light as may in human nature shine
Was all infused by Him that did create
Both one and other with His power divine.²⁶

Modern interpretations of Adam have tended to
stress grief-stricken guilt and unalterable alienation
from God. If, however, the gestures of Adam embody
both the creation of man and his ultimate redemption
and resurrection through Christ, this transforms
the meaning of the figure and also, by extension,
suggests a dimension of hope to the Gates of Hell.

Is it likely that Rodin would have consciously used
these references in his work? Although Rodin never
illustrated an idea as such, he did employ literary and
artistic prototypes to convey meaning, as in the fig-
ures of Ugoìno and His Children and Paolo and Fran-
cesca from Dante. Speaking of religious symbolism in
his art, Rodin said in an interview in July 1906: “I
have always combined religious art with art; for when
religion is lost, art is also lost.”²⁷ In his conversations
with Rodin, originally published in 1911, Paul Gsell
asked if the public (or the critics) did not read mean-
ing into sculptures that the artist had not intended.
Rodin agreed that some interpretations might well be
too ingenious. “But,” he said, “you may rest assured
that the masters are always conscious of what they
do. . . . If the sceptics of whom you speak only knew
what energy it takes for the artist to translate, even
feebly, what he thinks and feels with the greatest
strength, they would not doubt that all that appears
shining forth from a picture or sculpture was in-
tended.”²⁸

Dorothy L. Sayers and Barbara Reynolds (Harmondsworth, 1962)
p. 170.
²⁸. Paul Gsell, Rodin on Art, trans. Mrs. Romilly Fedden (New
York, 1971) p. 170. (Original English publication: Auguste Ro-
din, Art [London, 1912]; original French publication [Paris,
1911].)