

Camille Claudel was a sculptress. She was also a sister of Paul Claudel and for ten years the companion and artist-partner of August Rodin. She died seventy years ago. The last thirty years of her life Camille Claudel spent in a mental asylum.

The last photo ever taken of Camille provided an impulse that directly influenced the final shape of the performance. It features Camille together with a friend who visited her in the hospital. I imagined that the visits, which didn't occur very often during her 30 years in the asylum, may have evoked in her a cascade of memories. The memories whose shapes I sensed and clothed in my own sensitivity.



Photo by William Elborn, archive

Camille's friend was Jessie Lipscomb, who since the very early days of Camille's stay in Paris was her work companion. A British woman, who after her first successes in her own country, came to the capital city of France to continue studying sculpture. She soon became a confidant of Camille, and so it went on almost until the end of her life. In the photo from the 1929, taken by William Elborn – Jessie's husband – we see two women, advanced in years, sitting on one of the porches of the Montdevergues hospital in Montfavet near Avignon. In the summer of 2014 together with Ewa Pasikowska I visited this place. Today it is a modern medical centre surrounded by a forest full of incredibly loud cicadas, the sound of which could still, once more, drive a person mad. The old buildings, where Camille had spent around 30 years of her life, have been preserved. Ironically, Camille is probably the best known patient of this place, although we know how strongly she wanted to avoid this infamy: 'I have not done, all I've done, just to end my life as number one of some hospital; I deserve something else...'

Camille died in the hospital, aged 79, as a serene old lady, remembered warmly by the medical staff. What an amazing internal process she must have gone through during those 30 years. How was it that throughout her life she was a rebel, sometimes quite ill-mannered, uncompromisingly breaking the French female stereotype at the turn of the 19th/20th Century? In France, it wasn't until the middle of the 20th century that a woman stopped being 'perpetually adolescent'. This meant she could not decide her own fate, often also the fate of her children (mothers became equal to fathers in the matter of parental authority only in 1970). Prior to this change, women were evenly handed from the guardianship of their parents to that of their husbands or brothers. After the death of their mother, Paul Claudel used this legal status to keep Camille in Montdevergues, even though after only a few years in the hospital, the doctors had appealed to Claudel's family in order that she might live in the family home.

The decision of placing a member of the family or a friend in the hospital for mentally ill shouldn't be easy, but when I think about Paul's little castle [...] I am more and more convinced, almost to the point of certainty, that his crucial decisions were fundamentally ideological. Paul, who converted quite late, had the zeal of a neophyte. A year after putting his sister in the asylum he published a text about his vision

of staging the *Annunciation*. Bruno Dumont, in his film *Camille Claudel, 1915* from 2013, interprets Paul's decision to lock up Camille as being motivated by a wish to punish his sister for her abortion, which he suspected she underwent while in relationship with August Rodin.

At the certain point in her life Camille Claudel went through a deep nervous breakdown that led to depression and obsession. Certainly now it would be much easier to help her in a more humanitarian way, but over 100 years ago in France (and obviously not only there), there was only one idea of how to deal with the situation. If it was not uncommon to lock up a woman in a lunatic asylum because of irregular menstruation or ebullient erotic fantasies (La Sain Maison de Correction), what other reaction could one expect to Camille – weird, sticky from dirt, hiding within her four walls? But before she got to that point, she lived through her golden years, most of which she spent in a stormy relationship with August Rodin, which changed her life for good. They created a perfect creative tandem. She was his muse, his assistant, but also during all that time she was an independent sculptress with her own artistic path. August was also a father to the child she lost. This moment in her biography marks the beginning of her end, a merciless downfall that leads Camille into the abyss.

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