

ATTEMPTING THE IMPOSSIBLE: ROMAIN ROLLAND'S PACIFISM
AND CRISIS IN HIS PERSONAL DIARY
AND THE NOVEL *CLERAMBAULT*

Marilène Haroux

"I attempted the impossible," writes Romain Rolland¹ (1866-1944) in July 1915 in a letter that he would later copy into his diary² during World War I. In the spring and summer of 1915, the French novelist, dramatist, essayist, art historian, and leader of pacifism showed clear signs of fatigue and discouragement. Rolland's work, either forgotten or ignored for too long in France, is finally in the midst of a rediscovery.³ It is a body of work that is both rich and complex.⁴ There remains a great deal of textual analysis and commentary to be done on his work, especially in regard to putting in perspective the relationship between his fictional and biographical writings, as well as his essays and articles. Rolland's idea of "attempting the impossible"—as he formulates it in his fictional and nonfictional texts from this period—leads to critical questions about his belief and his work. It is also necessary to analyze his distinction between the possible and the impossible. In the twenty-first century, it is crucial to rethink Rolland's great contribution to peace and justice, and researchers need to acknowledge the powerful influence he had on his contemporaries. With special attention to the year 1915, I will focus primarily on the diary he kept during the war, the articles he published during that year, and the novel *Clerambault*. Interestingly, though Rolland would write in an article dated April 1915, "who of us would have the heart to write a play or a novel whilst his country is in danger and his brothers dying?"⁵ he nevertheless began work on a new novel, *Clerambault*, whose subtitle reads: *The Story of an Independent Spirit during the War*.⁶ As he would later explain in a striking letter, the crisis of morale he sustained during the summer of 1915 effectively led him to retire temporarily from public life, and that was when he returned to art.