In the future and beginning today, 12 October 1886, I will have no student other than Mlle Camille Claudel, and she alone will I protect with all the means I have at my disposition and with the help of my friends, who will also be her friends, especially my influential friends.

I will no longer accept other students, so that there will be no chance of rival talents being created, although I do not suppose that one will often meet an artist so naturally endowed.

At exhibitions I shall do everything possible for placement and journals. Under no pretext will I go to the home of Madame . . . , to whom I shall no longer teach sculpture. After the exhibition in the month of May, we will leave for Italy and we will stay there for 6 months, living communally in an indissoluble liaison, after which Mademoiselle Camille will be my wife. I will be very happy to offer a figurine in marble to Mademoiselle Camille if she would like to accept it in 4 or 5 months.

From now until the month of May I will have no other woman, and if I do, all the conditions are dissolved.

If my commission for Chile works out, we will go there instead of to Italy. I will take none of my feminine models whom I have known.

I will order a photograph from Carjat of Mademoiselle Claudel in the clothes she wore to the Academy [when she was] dressed for town, and perhaps one in an evening dress.

Mademoiselle Camille will stay in Paris until May. Mademoiselle Camille commits herself to receive me in her atelier 4 times a month until the month of May.33

To this crude draft, Rodin affixed his signature. The terms of the agreement are so strange, in a sense so childish, that the reader is left speechless. One person has suggested that it might be a joke within a lovers' quarrel, but neither of the participants in this liaison ever revealed any levity about their mutual predicament. At least one fact is clarified by the document: there is no doubt the love affair was a consummated union. What are we to make of Camille's voice as reflected here? Was she so jealous and possessive that she would stake her claim in the middle of Rodin's most creative years? Or was Rodin's obsessive love, whipped to a peak of desire by her unobtainability in the summer of 1886, driving him to project onto her memories of his other stern taskmistress, Maria, the most unobtainable woman of all?

With the Salon of 1884, Rodin achieved status among contemporary sculptors. But he still lacked the one thing that guaranteed a permanent place in the annals of nineteenth-century sculpture: success in a competition for a public monument. The Third Republic commissioned six times as many monuments as any previous regime.1 It was a burgeoning field of creative expression, as a growing number of citizens came to believe that the liberal, secular climate of the French Revolution had finally taken root and that honor should be bestowed upon men and women, both humble and high-born.

It was not for lack of trying that Rodin had not executed such a commission. He had failed with his submission for the Byron monument in London in 1877, again in the 1879 competition for La Défense, and again in the competition to create the monument to the mathematician and military strategist of the Revolution, Lazare Carnot, in 1881. It was the same story with the monument to Diderot for the boulevard Saint-Germain and the monument to General Margueritte of Sedan fame, both of which he considered desirable projects.

In Rodin's mind, these failures were a continuation of his painful experience in being turned down by the École des Beaux-Arts and the Salons. Once again he stood alone on the edge of the golden circle, looking in, but not being permitted to enter. In October 1884 a small opening appeared. A painter from the northern coastal city of Calais, Alphonse Isaac, a student of Rodin's friend Jean-Paul Laurens, mentioned that his hometown was planning to erect a monument to the most illustrious citizen of its medieval past, Eustache de Saint-Pierre. Laurens had brandished Rodin's name in glowing terms.

Calais had long wished to celebrate the hero of the Hundred Years' War who had given himself up as hostage to King Edward III of England in 1347. Eustache's bravery during the English siege inspired others to surrender, thus saving the citizens of Calais from starvation. Eustache was to Calais what Jeanne d'Arc was to Orléans. In 1845 the city had approached David d'Angers about a monument, but financial and political considerations got in the way, and the project had died with Louis-Napoléon's coup d'État in 1851. Now, Mayor Omer Dewavrin had raised the question again, this time in connection with a plan to join Calais to a large industrial suburb, Saint-Pierre. In the
The process of reshaping the distinguished old city, the medieval walls would have to come down, and Dewavrin proposed to erect a memorial on the site. In the fall of 1884 he addressed the Conseil Municipal: "Today, at the moment when the last vestiges of the ramparts of our city are about to disappear and when our city will cease to be itself, we think that it is the duty of all of us who will be the last representatives of an independent Calais to perpetuate one of the most beautiful memories in our history with a monument."

Normally, such a project would have been handled by a competition, but that would have been costly and time-consuming. Instead, the officials of Calais inquired about likely candidates to execute the monument. On October 17, P. A. Isaac wrote Dewavrin: "Monsieur Jean-Paul Laurens and many other competent people have been unanimous in giving opinions about the choice of a sculptor... We should speak to a man whose previous performance guarantees that we shall receive a real work of art. Monsieur A. Rodin, whose name you no doubt know, is the one whose powerful talent would be the most appropriate to treat this subject. This is my unbiased opinion: I give it on purely artistic grounds and advise putting his name before all others."

Since Isaac's family had helped to put Dewavrin in office, he was easily able to get the mayor's attention. Before the month was out, Dewavrin had visited Rodin's atelier in Paris. For the first time in Rodin's life an elected official was in his own studio, talking about a monument that someone wanted—not somewhere, sometime, but right now.

About a week later, Rodin wrote to Dewavrin: "Since I had the honor of your visit, I have been busy on the monument. I've had the good fortune to come up with an idea that I really like. The execution would be original; I've not seen anything like it." Rodin said he wished to create a composition that was completely integrated with the subject. "It would be so much better than what one finds in all the other cities, which is always the same monument, give or take a few details. I'm going to make a clay sketch and have it photographed."

Rodin had shown himself willing to do any kind of monument people might pay him to do: the eighteenth-century figures of d'Alembert and Diderot, Lazare Carnot of the Great Revolution, a contemporary figure in Marguerite, or an allegory depicting the defense of Paris. Now he rushed headlong into a medieval project. As Dante had been his guide while he worked on the doors for the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, now he took his cue from the fourteenth-century chronicler Jean Froissart and his account of the siege of Calais. The town was at King Edward's mercy. His vassals urged moderation, and in the end he agreed to take just six citizens. He ordered them to come out of the city "with their heads and their feet bare, halters round their necks and the keys of the town and castle in their hands. With these six I shall do as I please, and the rest I will spare." An emissary brought the message to Calais. There was weeping, then silence, until finally the richest man in town, Eustache de Saint-Pierre, stepped forward: "I will strip to my shirt... and deliver myself into the hands of the king of England." One by one, five others followed.

This is the story that Rodin wanted to tell in bronze. He formulated his idea almost immediately. Nothing like the monument he was planning existed in France, or for that matter anywhere else. Traditionally, monuments were based on a single or a dominant figure, and sculptors revealed ideas through their handling of movement and gesture, physiognomy and clothing. Rodin's monument would have six figures of equal importance, and their vitality would lie not only in their physiognomies and gestures, but in their relationships to one another—a problem similar to the one Rodin faced in the portal.

On November 20 Rodin sent Dewavrin a plaster sketch composed of six loosely clad figures, each just over a foot tall: moving, bending, turning, and bound to one another
by a rope encircling their necks. Standing on a rectangular pedestal upon which Rodin had drawn a triumphal arch design, the figures gesticulated in every direction. The mayor acknowledged the sketch on November 23: "You have rendered the idea in the most thrilling and heroic fashion. . . . Everyone who has seen the group is gripped by it." The Conseil Municipal was ready to open a subscription; Rodin must come to Calais to examine sites. By return post, Rodin reassured the mayor that he would not charge too high a fee, because "one does not often get such a beautiful opportunity to execute a work that inspires not only patriotism but sacrifice." On November 25, Rodin wrote that the monument would cost 34,000 francs, including 15,000 francs for the founder and 4,000 for the stone base. His own fee of 15,000 francs was perhaps based on the amount Barrias had been awarded for La Défense. But that had been a two-figure group, whereas for Calais Rodin had proposed six over-life-size figures. By contrast, Dalou had charged 250,000 francs for the Monument to the Republic, while the recently announced winner of the competition for a monument to Gambetta was to receive 350,000 francs. Rodin's modest bid was sure to lose him money, but money was rarely an issue in his mind. What he wanted was the commission, and he wanted it badly.5

A month went by with no word from Calais. Rodin knew that other artists had submitted maquettes. Nervous, he asked his friend Cazin, a native of Pas-de-Calais, to assess the situation. Cazin journeyed to Calais with Legros, who had come from London. Asking to see the "Burghers of Calais" projects, they showed their appreciation for each maquette "as seemed appropriate." Then they outlined the merits of Rodin's sketch to an attentive audience of officials, comparing it particularly to projects based only on a single figure of Eustache de Saint-Pierre. Cazin wrote to Rodin that he had emphasized "how much better your work has glorified the entire population. In conclusion, we did everything we could and in no way did it appear that our visit had been inspired by you."

Rodin was touched that an artist of Cazin's greatness would give so freely of his time. Perhaps the visit of Cazin and Legros did help; in any event, the commission promptly fell into place. On January 23 the Conseil Municipal voted: there were thirteen votes for Rodin's project and two against, with two abstentions. The report read: "He has presented us with such a seductive project that it has unified our endorsement; his is a new idea, one that has not been and could not be exploited by others. . . . His idea is a good answer to the spirit of defaming reputations which recently has seen the light of day in certain circles among those who do not believe in civic virtue and heroic actions like those of Eustache de Saint-Pierre."6

Only at this point did the officials begin to negotiate with Rodin in earnest. He wanted the commission so much that he ended up making promises he could not keep—most specifically, the promise to deliver in a year. Dewavrin came to Paris in February to review the schedule at the foundry. For the time being, it was to be his last official action with regard to the monument; a few weeks later he was defeated in his bid to become mayor of the new city of Calais/Saint-Pierre, though he continued to serve on the Conseil Municipal. Rodin, beset by insecurity and stress, fell sick. Nevertheless, he started the second maquette in May 1885. Working with models, he created nude figures and then draped them. Once the individuality of each figure was established, he sought to project the spirit of "patriotism and sacrifice" that he believed critical to the success of the monument. It would be a matter of interaction, burger with burgher, the whole group with the viewer. This last step was his ultimate challenge.

On July 14 Rodin—who frequently wrote letters on holidays, when the studio was quiet—inaugurated Dewavrin that the maquette was ready. It consisted of six figures slightly over two feet tall. Rodin cautioned Dewavrin that many details were not yet finished and that the drapery would be redone in the final work. In the maquette, he had focused on body types and gesture, rendering them in a way that he believed was unique. Rodin went to Calais to uncrate the figures himself. He remained for several days as the guest of Dewavrin and his wife, Léontine. A friendship began to grow. Rodin's meeting with this couple, people his own age who not only respected his work but were genuinely fond of him, was a great bonus of the commission.

At last Rodin felt grasped by the opportunity to execute a large, important commission for which he had no real competitors and in which he had been allowed the freedom to do what he wanted. The fee, though not sumptuous, was more money than he had previously earned, and everyone seemed enthusiastic about his original conception of the monument. Nothing had gone wrong—nothing, that is, until the Calais Patriote appeared on the morning of August 2.

The model of the planned monument to Eustache de Saint-Pierre has just arrived in Calais. We have been fortunate to be able to study the sculpture and will let our readers know how it impresses us. . . . Eustache de Saint-Pierre is seen in the foreground, standing with head down, the upper part of his body bent slightly forward, his arms hanging in front of his legs, the palm of a hand turned toward the knees. His appearance is heartbreaking; . . . His pain is such that his arms literally sag. . . . another one of the six burghers is pulling out his hair and seems to abandon himself to fits of anger that are untamable. . . . We want to say, "If your sadness is so great . . . why didn't you stay at home?" . . . The feelings emanating from the work, in general, are those of sorrow, despair, and endless depression.7

The article went on to say that Rodin's group did not represent the historical event as viewed by the citizens of Calais. First of all, he had chosen the wrong moment in the siege. Rather than depicting the burgheurs in bondage, Rodin should have focused on their decision to sacrifice themselves, for that was when they were most "beautiful, noble, great, and . . . also were dressed as bourgeois." The article addressed formal issues, too, especially the fact that Rodin had made all the figures the same height: "Instead of assuming the pyramid shape generally used for this type of monument, the group forms a cube, the effect of which is most graceless." The article was signed "A Passerby," but it closely reflected the thinking of the conservative members of the
Consell Municipal. They made their objections known to Rodin a few weeks after the article appeared. The councilors were distressed that the gestures and facial expressions made the burglers’ suffering painfully real. They wanted to see their ancestors walking toward death, “not as criminals...but as martyrs.” Further, they objected to the “silhouette” of the monument, which was so lacking in elegance. They found no other option but to “insist” that Rodin change his work.  

For Rodin, the controversy must have been disturbingly reminiscent of the day eight years earlier when a critic had suggested that he had cast his Age of Bronze from life. But in 1885 Rodin was a stronger man, and he was better able to handle the situation. He immediately sent Dewavrin a point-by-point rebuttal of the councilors’ criticism. He emphasized that they had misinterpreted the figure of Eustache. Far from humbling himself before the king of England, the burgler was “leaving the city to descend toward the camp. It is this that gives the group the feeling of march, of movement.” As for the assertion that the composition should form a pyramid rather than a cube, Rodin objected that his work was being “castrated.” His critics were regurgitating the laws set down by the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, and Rodin declared that he was “directly opposed to this principle, which has dominated since the beginning of the century.”  

Rodin’s next letter was to Le Patriote; it was a masterpiece of public relations. He began with a general explanation of a sculpture’s evolution from maquette to finished work. He then moved to a subject on which he was certain they would agree: “I find the title of your paper Le Patriote so beautiful, and you must agree with me in thinking that Buddhist art must be treated in the national taste, that of the sublime Gothic epoch...which places us so far above anything that can be seen in Italy...But that renaissance...has nothing to compare with the loveliness (and that is the word) of the Gallic soul of our Gothic epoch...It is for this reason, sir, that I have chosen to express my sculpture in the language of Froissart’s time, if you prefer. It is for this reason that I reject the pyramid, which belongs to conventional art and locks everything in place. Also, curved lines are dull.” Rodin ended his letter to the editor with one of the most eloquent statements he ever uttered in defense of his own vision: “One can make beautiful things differently than I have done, but you must allow me to work with my own mind and my own heart, otherwise you take away my energy, my teeth, and my nails, and I become a workman. In short, I am a sculptor who, like you, asks only to make a masterpiece, if that be possible, and for whom the question of art takes precedence over all others.”  

Rodin felt confident enough about his group to turn his back on the criticism and return to work. He wrote Dewavrin: “In Paris, in spite of the struggle I carry on against the antiquated mode of sculpture at the Ecole, in my door I am free.” He intended to claim the same freedom in his monument for Calais.  

Rodin needed a new studio to accommodate the monument. By the fall, all the work on The Burglers of Calais was being done in a studio at 117 boulevard de Vaugirard. The following spring Edmond de Goncourt visited Rodin there and described it as “filled with lifelike humanity,” in contrast to the atelier at the Dépôt des Marbres, which was the “domicile of a poetic humanity.” With more space at his disposal, Rodin was ready to turn to the figures as monumental forms. He worked on the bodies, the hands, and the heads separately. It was in the nude torsos with attached arms that he addressed the problem of movement. Heads were a special concern. He wrote Dewavrin: “I intend to study some expressive portrait heads in the countryside for the companions of Eustache de Saint-Pierre.” Rodin’s belief in the existence of regional types and his firm commitment to naturalism made him look for models from Calais. He considered Cazin ideal for the figure of Eustache de Saint-Pierre, and his friend greeted the idea with enthusiasm: “I’m ready to pose...I’ll be there, rope around my neck and barefoot. This excellent man who is in some way an ancestor of mine on my mother’s side would surely approve of your choice, for I am in profound admiration of his grand action.” (May 29, 1885).

Another Calaisian friend of Rodin’s was of the same mind: Coquelin cadet, celebrated actor of the Comédie Française, wanted to know if Rodin might like him “to pose as a man of the people...I was born in Boulogne, thus I am a real native of Pas-de-Calais and would be an absolute natural. Besides, it would give me so much pleasure to serve as model for the great sculptor Rodin.” Coquelin cadet modeled for the figure we call Pierre de Wissant.
Rodin had promised the monument for 1886. At the beginning of the year he reported that he had almost finished three figures and was well along with the others. He assured Dewavrin that he now worked on nothing but the Calais project and that he did so with great enthusiasm and passion. However, he needed more money—say, two thousand francs (Jan. 11, 1886). He was probably anxious because he had not heard from Dewavrin since October; usually they exchanged several letters a month. Finally, Léontine Dewavrin wrote that the banks of Calais were failing, including that of Maurice Sagot, treasurer of the monument committee, who had deposited the money for the commission in his own bank. Rodin wrote immediately to commiserate with Sagot and Dewavrin. As for himself, he said: "Don't worry, I can wait." By February, bankruptcies were mounting. Even so, the Maison Sagot had been able to declare a first dividend of 7 percent. Mme Dewavrin hastened to send Rodin a check for seven hundred francs and promised send another as soon as she could.

By 1886 Calais was feeling the impact of the "Great Depression," the economic upheaval viewed by historians as among "the most serious depressions that has ever marked the history of an industrialized nation." The Union Générale had crashed in Paris in 1882 and the banks of Calais were collapsing as the coal and textile industries fell apart. Rodin did not fully understand the seriousness of the crisis. Though he needed money, it apparently did not occur to him to cash the check until May. The truth of the matter was that, although Rodin had assured Dewavrin he was devoting all his time to The Burghers of Calais, he was actually busy on so many fronts that he could not keep them straight. In addition to the doors, he was either working on or trying to secure commissions for six other monuments in 1886. The nearest to his heart was a monument to his friend Jules Bastien-Lepage, who had died of cancer at age thirty-six in 1884. The plan was to erect the monument in Damvillers in Lorraine, the painter's birthplace. Rodin attended the first meeting of the organizational committee in 1885,
and soon thereafter the commission became his. In the summer of 1886, Jules' younger brother, Emile, assuming that Rodin was busy on the monument, suggested that he go to Damvillers to look at the site and talk to the workers there.

Another possibility came through a certain G. Saunois de Chevert, who was considering asking Rodin to create a monument to his forebear, Gen. François de Chevert, killed at the Battle of Hastenbeck (1757) during the Seven Years’ War. Rodin put two well-placed friends, Roger Marx and Antonin Proust, on the case, hoping that their intervention would bring him the commission. In a similar fashion, Rodin persuaded Turquet, once again undersecretary of state for fine arts, to approach the Chilean government on his behalf for two commissions that he knew about through the Chilean ambassador to France, Carlos Morla Vicuña. The Chileans were planning to erect a monument to the uncle of Vicuña’s wife, General Lynch, and another to the statesman-writer Benjamin Vicuña-Mackenna. Rodin did maquettes for both; the sketch for the General Lynch monument was his first and only equestrian figure. Neither saw the light of day.

Another project on Rodin’s mind was the competition being organized by the city of Nancy to honor the seventeenth-century landscape painter Claude Lorrain. Roger Marx, critic, collector, and arts administrator, had moved to Paris from Nancy in 1882 and formed a committee to work in tandem with one in Nancy. He and Rodin soon became friends, so we must assume that Rodin was kept informed of the fund being collected for the monument. In 1885 Rodin contributed a work to a benefit lottery, and by the following year an invitational competition was being planned. In June 1886 Léon Mougnot, the head of the Nancy committee, visited Rodin’s atelier in Paris. Rodin won the award in 1889.

Rodin was also putting time and effort into planning a monument to Victor Hugo. Presumably it was to be placed in the Panthéon, for the third time in less than a hundred years was secularized in order to receive Hugo’s body. We know nothing of this project, but Rodin’s early biographers give 1886 as the year in which he began work on it. A journalist noted Rodin’s absence from the Salon that year, explaining that he was “preparing a project for the tomb of the poet who sleeps in the Panthéon.”

Of the many things that kept Rodin from finishing his monument for Calais, none was more debilitating than his failure to work out a satisfactory relationship with Camille Claudel. Whatever Rodin had hoped to achieve with the strange contract of October 1886, it had failed. By 1887 the lovers were estranged again. Jessie Lipscomb, now living in England, returned to Paris in March 1887 to see Rodin, but he refused to receive her. Perplexed and annoyed, she wrote: “I tell you frankly that we have come from England just to get your advice and you promised to give it to us. We do not intend to stay with Mlle Claudel, if that is what bothers you. The problems you are having with her have nothing to do with us.”

The year 1887 was one of acute suffering for Rodin. With certain people he spoke openly about his pain, but never of its causes. To his new friend Robert Louis Stevenson he wrote: “What bad years I have just gone through, and ironically it was during this time of despair that my reputation grew in Paris.” With other friends, such as Edmond Bazire, he kept silent. After seeing Rodin’s 1887 show at the Georges Petit gallery, Bazire wrote: “Do you know how much pain you are causing me? I’ve been waiting for an eternity and I never see you. What are you doing? I almost had tears in my eyes as I looked at your three barghers, your faun, your Francesa, and your bust of a woman. I thought: he doesn’t love me anymore!” Rodin wrote to Léontine Dewavrin, now a confidante, about the success of the exhibition, but said it meant little to him: “I’m too nervous. I’m interested in absolutely nothing; even the countryside—so adorable in springtime—leaves me cold. I’d like to get rid of my brain and just vegetate” (May 1887).

No one kept in closer touch with Rodin than Octave Mirbeau, the brilliant and combative writer whom he had met in 1885 and who became one of his most resolute supporters. In 1887 Mirbeau took his bride, the beautiful former actress Alice Regnault, to Kerisper on the coast of Brittany. They insisted that Rodin be their first guest in a lovely house overlooking the river: “You will see, this country will enchant you” (June 1887). Rodin responded negatively, but Mirbeau would not be put off: “What, you are still sad? You complain that you cannot do what you want to do, you, the great creator! What an injustice toward yourself. You have the greatest artistic mind of our times. What else do you want?” (July 1887)

Finally, Rodin gave in. In August he took the train to Brittany, where he stayed with the Mirbeaus for slightly less than a month—the longest vacation he had taken in his life. Rodin was almost as fond of Regnault, now becoming a painter, as his husband. The Mirbeaus found many diversions for their guest, such as a visit to Mont Saint-Michel. Mirbeau was fascinated to see Rodin at ease, far from the city, the worries, and the work. He wrote to a friend:

Do you know what an admirable little guy that Rodin is? If he doesn’t say a word in Paris, believe me, he sees everything. Very few things escape him. He is able to form judgments about things and people that are astonishing. To begin with, he knows everything. Could you imagine that he knows philosophy as well as Renan, anatomy as well as Claude Bernard, history as well as Michelet, and chemistry and physics and geology, and astronomy, of course? More than that, he is a great poet. In the intimacy of a field, he is free of his usual shyness and lets loose with all that.

You ask yourself, is this Rodin speaking? That’s right, it’s Rodin. I have passed such sweet hours with him, really delicious. He has even begun my portrait in charcoal. It’s a real Rembrandt.

Mirbeau, whose enquiring taste brought him to defend Monet, Cézanne, Pissarro, Van Gogh, and Gauguin, put Rodin high up on a pinnacle by himself. He never withdrew his love for the man and his worship of the artist, even though he saw the world in very different terms than Rodin did. He once told Edmond de Goncourt that Rodin was
capable of anything, even "of a crime, if it was for a woman," and that he regarded Rodin as "the beast of a satyr that you see in his erotic groups." 20

The August visit with the Mirebeau restored Rodin's spirits. He was able to resume work once he returned to Paris, and for the moment the letters of complaint ceased. He wrote Gustave Geffroy, his other loyal and talented critic, to apologize for neglecting their friendship and to tell him how much he loved him. He mentioned that he had been to see Georges Hecq, still secretary at fine arts, and that there was "hope." The hope Rodin entertained was for the Légion d'Honneur: he was profoundly conscious of never having received this recognition. It was part of the quasimilitaristic system of "decoration" originated by Napoléon, which throughout the nineteenth century had given artists an entrée into bourgeois society. Refusing the honor could be an equally powerful statement; not accepting the ribbon of the Légion d'Honneur was a standard means for artists to declare their opposition to society, the government, or the École. Daumier turned it down because he wanted no award from Louis-Napoléon's empire. Courbet feared it would inhibit his freedom. Degas refused the ribbon, and when his friend de Nittis accepted it in 1878, he chided him as too bourgeois. He felt the same about Monet, who was anxious to be decorated and only got the ribbon through the intervention of Autunini Proust during his short term as minister of art in 1881. Renoir was so worried about what Monet would think when he accepted his belated decoration in 1900 that he wrote to Monet: "I have let them give me a decoration. . . . Whether or not I have done something stupid, your friendship still means a lot to me." 21

Unfortunately, Rodin went after the honor just as the traffic in Légion d'Honneur awards became a matter of public knowledge. The scandal of people buying the ribbon reached the upper levels of government and was one of the reasons Maurice Rouvier's administration toppled in November 1887. So when Rodin got official word in December, he had mixed emotions. He told Bartlett, who was with him on the day the notice came, that "it's too late as an expression of appreciation. It simply informs the public that another artist has been noticed by the authorities, just as it knows that many others, without the least talent for art . . . have also been noticed." 22 Nevertheless, Rodin accepted. Dozens of friends wrote to tell him how happy they were that a grave injustice had finally been repaired. Baudelaire became "chevalier" at the same time, and friends gave them a joint banquet at the Lion d'Or on January 24, 1888. Geffroy could not come. "All that is very official, very Parisian, chic, and superficial," he wrote. "When I get back I'll invite just you, my dear sculptor, to a banquet in a wine merchant's place." 23

Mirebeau, who adamantly opposed decorations, was not happy. A few days before the banquet he published "Le Chemin de la croix," an article about the "cross" of the Légion d'Honneur. In it he lamented an artist whom he loved and who had recently been decorated. "Imagine," he wrote, "one day you meet a woman equal to the vision of poets. You look at her and your heart anticipates, your imagination exalts . . . your dreams are illuminated by this sweet angel. . . . Then the next day you see her again in a slum, drunk, her hair a mess, sitting on some lout's knee." This is how Mirebeau felt when his friend accepted the Légion d'Honneur. Then he named the friend: "Look, we have this magnificent artist: Auguste Rodin. . . . What does his genius have in common with the cross of the Légion d'Honneur?" Mirebeau thought it would have been more appropriate to have given this "honor" to some "sweet mediocrity" (Le Figaro, Jan. 16, 1888). Lest his criticism damage their friendship, Mirebeau wrote immediately to assure Rodin that the "cross" had changed nothing: "Today as yesterday you are the greatest artist, the best of men."

As 1887 drew to a close, Rodin put into writing a resolve that he must have been formulating throughout the fall. Having heard nothing concrete from Calais, he informed Leontine Dewavrin that he was going back to work on his door; when it was finished, he wrote, "I shall return to the burghers." His letter sparked an instant reaction from Omer Dewavrin, who spent much of 1888 trying to get Rodin back on the job. Calais intended to celebrate 1889, the centennial of the Revolution, by inaugurating their new port and unveiling The Burghers of Calais. Subtly and persistently, Dewavrin managed to suggest that it was Rodin's fault the monument was not finished. Yet it is also clear that Calais did not have the funds necessary to cast the work. In temporarily withdrawing from the project, Rodin wrote diplomatically to Dewavrin that great works take much time and reflection, and that he considered it important for every part of the monument to be the work of his own hand. He thought it better not to hurry.

Rodin presented the completed plaster of The Burghers of Calais to the world at Georges Petit's gallery on June 21, 1889, as part of a two-man show with Monet. The Burghers, in which Rodin declared his freedom as an artist while making a bold nationalist statement, was the ideal work for him to offer at the time of the centennial. In a sense, the misfortunes of Calais served Rodin, for the city's inability to pay for the casting in 1886 and 1887 allowed him to complete the work at a bit more remove from the watchful eyes of the committee. He interpreted the subject and worked with the composition exactly as he wished, without having to make the compromises the committee might have demanded.

The commission for The Burghers of Calais gave Rodin the opportunity to reach deep into his past, to his boyhood love of Hugo's Notre-Dame de Paris and his passion for the French cathedrals. The year before Rodin began the Burghers, Hugo had published his "Vision de Dante," in which he presented a personal view of the medieval period and described how he identified with Dante. 24 Many people saw this collection of poems, in which Hugo conversed directly with God, as hopelessly out of date. Rodin, however, was equally eager to declare a personal vision of French history, of patriotism and sacrifice. He also wanted to explore his understanding of narrative. It is telling that in a letter to Robert Louis Stevenson, he referred to the Burghers as "my novel." After the plaster was exhibited, people frequently spoke of Rodin as "that Gothic." One critic wrote: "His real artistic family is in the Musées du Toscadero [the Museum of Compar-
tive Sculpture, a museum of plaster casts of masterpieces of French architectural sculpture, opened in 1882), and we must jump back in a single bound, over several ages of our sculpture, to connect the sculptor of *The Burghers of Calais* to his true ancestors.25 To modern eyes, a group of figures so dependent on naturalism and on subtle psychological characterization might suggest Donatello rather than the carvers of Chartres and Amiens. But Rodin’s contemporaries, thrown off balance by his break with academic practices, strained to find a terminology to express the changes they saw. Rodin himself was not at all displeased to be identified with the sculptors of the cathedrals he loved so much.

*The Burghers of Calais* stood out as a uniquely fulfilling project for Rodin. To work on a public monument with great freedom, to bring it to completion in a relatively short space of time, to have it installed where he had envisioned it (although the unveiling did not take place until 1895), and to have a fair number of people understand it in the way he had intended—these were not everyday occurrences in Rodin’s long career.