RODIN Rediscovered

ALBERT E. ELSEN
editor

with contributions by

ALBERT ALHADEFF
RUTH BUTLER
JEAN CHATELAIN
ALBERT E. ELSEN
SIDNEY GEIST
ROSAYLN FRANKEL JAMISON

CLAUDIE JUDRIN
MONIQUE LAURENT
JOANNE CULLER PARADISE
ANNE PINGEOT
DANIEL ROSENFELD
KIRK VARNEDEOE

National Gallery of Art, Washington • New York Graphic Society, Boston
Rodin's tragic vision of modern life expressed in *The Gates of Hell* began as the interpretation of a medieval literary epic (fig. 3.1). For the year that followed his commission by the French government in July 1880 for a sculptural portal to go to a new Museum of Decorative Arts, it was Rodin's idea that the *Gates* were to be about Dante's *Inferno*. We can still see this source in several sculptures and areas of the doors: *Paolo and Francesca* and *Ugolino and His Sons* in the lower left door panel (fig. 3.2); *The Three Shades* atop the portal; perhaps *The Thinker* as Dante (fig. 3.3); and less obvious motifs such as figures grappling with a serpent in the upper left door panel and those emerging from or falling into caves and sinking into soft substances (fig. 3.4). Some of the portal's topography evokes the infernal landscape of Dante.

In 1881, Rodin unsuccessfully proposed to the government that he flank the doors with life-size, free-standing statues of Adam and Eve. Even in the preliminary drawings of 1880, themes from the *Inferno* were to have joined with humanity's parents, thereby stressing the legacy of original sin. Other Biblical allusions were added at unknown dates, including plummeting and battered angels and the severed head of John the Baptist, high in the upper external right side of the gateway (fig. 3.5). Pagan mythology and Christian allegory were fused to the old epic. A centaur, for example, in the left relief pilaster dates from before 1884 (fig. 3.2), and a siren in the base below that pilaster was done before 1889. In 1899, Rodin placed the broken-winged figure of *Fortune* above the tomb at the lower left, and the two tombs in turn replaced reliefs in which at least one centaur was present. "The Dance of Death," enacted in the tympanum behind *The Thinker* (fig. 3.3) and realized by 1884, may have introduced another aspect of medieval Christian thought, unless it was a free interpretation of Dante's damned souls coming before Minos for assignment to the circles of Hell. When Rodin exhibited figures isolated from the portal, beginning in 1883, they were often baptized with such ancient references and mythological titles as *Fallen Caryatid, Danae, Andromeda, Psyche and Amor*, and *Fauness*. In the first years of work Rodin had begun to create a personal religion and mythology based on his awareness and understanding of the Christian and non-Christian past. Such an unorthodox admixture may have been possible because, in the words of his academically trained colleague Jules Dalou, "Rodin had the luck not to have been at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts!"

Although Rodin's preliminary drawings for the portal in 1880 had stressed a series of panels containing episodes from Dante, when he actually began serious work in clay he found this traditional narrative format inhibiting. He told the American sculptor Truman Bartlett before 1889, "There is no intention of classification or method of subject, no scheme of illustration." The turning point in what the *Gates* are about and Rodin's decision not to illustrate but improvise came by the artist's own reckoning when he moved away from his drawings inspired by Dante and confronted life. He told a writer, "I lived a whole year with Dante, drawing the eight circles of his Hell. At the end of the year, I saw that while my drawings rendered my vision of Dante, they were not close enough to reality. And I began all over again, after nature, working with my models. I abandoned my drawings from Dante." It was almost at the project's beginning, when Rodin studied men and women, posed and unposed, that an awareness of his time and the relevance of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*Flowers of Evil*) worked their way into *The Gates of Hell*. Though probably not the literal inspiration for what Rodin did, Baudelaire's pessimistic view of the trials of the modern spirit was its poetic articulation and confirmation. The *Gates* were seen by Rodin's contemporaries as being both timeless and about modern life. In 1889 Gustave Geffroy observed their "changeless humanity." Felicien Champsaur wrote about Rodin's reading Baudelaire in the studio where the *Gates* were taking form, and James Huneker later wrote, "This
top left: 3.2 Detail of *The Gates of Hell* showing part of the right and all of the left door panels, and most of the left exterior bas-relief. Musée Rodin, Paris.

WP right: 3.3 Detail showing the upper section of *The Gates of Hell*, the tympanum area, with *The Thinker*. Musée Rodin, Paris.

bottom left: 3.4 Detail of *The Gates of Hell* showing the lower half of the right door panel. Musée Rodin, Paris.

bottom right: 3.5 The upper right external portion of *The Gates of Hell*. Musée Rodin, Paris.
Gate is a frieze of Paris as deeply significant of modern inspiration and sorrow as the Parthenon frieze is the symbol of the great clean beauty of Hellas. 6

The "reality" of which Rodin spoke to Bartlett meant attaining formal as well as thematic credibility. After Adam and Eve and The Thinker, his figures have no conscious paraphrase of previous postures in art. Like many of the routinized movements or "habitudes" of Degas's sculpture, those Rodin modeled from life, which are usually more psychologically and emotionally motivated, derive from their time and place. Rodin's genius was in finding and shaping "new truths" about the body from his Parisian subjects that were both of his era and eternal. It was when Rodin was working in clay from nature and carving stone that he came to understand what he had read in great writers such as Dante and Baudelaire.

Rodin's sensibility was of his time and not outside of it. The Gates of Hell are unthinkable in thirteenth-century Amiens, fifteenth-century Florence, seventeenth-century Rome, or twentieth-century New York. He did not see himself apart from society or as its prophet. Although he had chosen a popular literary theme acceptable to his commissioner and well known to the public, at least by the end of the first year's work Rodin felt sufficiently confident in his own vision and skill that he could later say to Bartlett, "It has been from the beginning and will be to the end, simply and solely a matter of personal pleasure." Rodin was essentially a reactive artist who allowed himself to be acted upon by experience. The Gates had "no intended moral purpose" but are Rodin's compassionate commentary on the moral cost to society of the decline of orthodox religion and the addiction to materialistic values. The crucial connection he discovered between subjects from the past and present was suffering: the eternal and internal punishment inflicted by unsatisfied passions. By adding the tombs in 1899, Rodin more explicitly related his conception of life to life after death. The horror was that it would be no different: past, present, and future are a continuum, without hope of spiritual peace. The portal's fractured families, disillusioned lovers, solitary men and women groping and turning inward are of any period and every place. Rodin affirms that the past lives in us. The Gates are about Rodin's bridging his consciousness of the then and now. He was a modern rather than contemporary artist because he did not moralize or take sides in topical issues but preferred to strive in The Gates of Hell for an image of society as a whole.

Even more than Rodin's self-portrait in relief on the inside base of the right pilaster (fig. 3.6), The Thinker reflects the artist's position in society. The artist-poet has replaced Christ in the seat of judgment, but he has the power neither to condemn nor to save souls from their personal hells. The tense solitary stillness of The Thinker dramatizes the effort of concentrated thought required to comprehend human tragedy and create a poetic art that expresses it truthfully. Commitment to this impossible task, like the passionate strivings of those around him, is the artist's private inferno. Above The Thinker and those around and below, Rodin placed a thorn vine, a crown of thorns for the artist and suffering humanity. 9

The Gates move us today not primarily because they are a poignant late nineteenth-century commentary on humanity's spiritual dilemma, but because of their artistic power. As Rodin personalized his project he became less self-conscious about its having a literary base and conveying a message. His artistic instincts took command, and The Gates of Hell became above all a work of art in which Rodin sought unprecedented formal unities between sculpture and architecture.
How the Gates Came About

In the great drawing collection of the Musee Rodin are three previously unpublished sketches for the overall design of The Gates of Hell which must date from 1880 (figs. 3.7, 3.8, 3.9). These drawings confirm the obvious, that when he accepted such an ambitious project for which he had no previous experience, Rodin counted on Ghiberti’s Gates of Paradise as a Renaissance prototype. That Rodin always conceived of a large figure or figures surmounting the portal connects his work with Gothic tympana and Italian sources. In the early sixteenth century, Ghiberti’s first baptistery doors had placed above them Jacopo Rustici’s composition of John the Baptist Preaching to a Levite and Pharisee. The juxtaposition of these three large freestanding figures above the much smaller ones in relief must have impressed Rodin when he saw them in 1875, for by at least 1884 The Three Shades had been substituted figuratively for Rustici’s trio and were in place atop the Gates.

Two of the three drawings (figs. 3.8, 3.9) show Rodin’s cryptic but graceful notations for the life-size involuted figures of Adam and Eve that were to flank the doorway. (I read them as Adam to our left and Eve to our right.) If the government had agreed to their casting, the outsize scale of The Three Shades and The Thinker, in relation to other figures within the doors, would not be as prominent as it is today. While we do not know exactly when before 1884 Rodin decided to place the Shades atop the portal, a fourth, previously published drawing (fig. 3.10) suggests that in 1880 the idea of at least one large, if not life-size, figure in that position had occurred to him. The Shades may have come into being after the 1881 rejection by the government of the proposal for the flanking life-size statues, as they are close variants of Adam.
Of lesser importance to Rodin in the first three drawings is the exact number of panels for the door, and the artist may never have actually decided how many and which episodes to interpret. The drawings show the same indecision as to shape: either single panels or a triptych. In two drawings the panels are wider than they are tall. In the third they are more vertical, suggesting that they might have contained only one figure or couple each, like the last modeled architectural sketch in which the lower portions of the left and right door panels are occupied exclusively by Paolo and Francesca and Ugolino respectively. Overall, these sketchbook notations show that Rodin was not concerned with particulars, but with the general conception, the biggest elements of architecture and sculpture, and their relationship to one another.

While there are later and more developed architectural sketches, we have not as yet found working drawings (if indeed they existed) from the time in late 1880 or early 1881 when Rodin had the first actual wooden frame of the doors constructed. We now have a good idea of what that original frame looked like and can understand why drawings, at least detailed drawings, may not have been required. This information comes from old photographs taken in Rodin’s government-owned studio at the Depot des Marbres in late 1880 or in 1881, when Rodin was actually modeling The Thinker and his Ugolino group in clay (figs. 3.11, 3.12). For the camera he posed these sculptures in front of what looks like a wall of horizontal pine planks and vertical joists; in fact, this is the first wooden armature of The Gates of Hell. Although we cannot see all of this framework, what is visible indicates that it was of simple design which could have been rigged by Rodin and his assistants or a professional carpenter. Within a plain rectangular frame, the two doors had recessed undivided areas above their bases and terminated at the top in a lintel. The cruciform design of the portal came with the vertical divider between the two door panels, which continued up through the
lintel area (fig. 3.12). The back wall of the lintel, or tympanum area, curved upward and came forward to meet the top cornice. The two sides of the doorway were simple vertical planks about one foot wide. The door panels seem to have been recessed only about six inches, much less than the thickness of the Ugolino group posed in front of them. The vertical center board in the tympanum left no room for The Thinker in that location.

Old photographs show this clay sculpture raised for viewing from below on a scaffolding in front of the wooden frame, but not situated at its center. We know that in the early months of work on the Gates, Rodin toyed with the idea of putting The Thinker in front of the doors at ground level and so noted on a recently discovered old photograph of a plaster Seated Ugolino, the formal ancestor of The Thinker. From photographs it is hard to judge the size of the wooden framework. In 1881 Rodin indicated to the government that the portal would be "at least 4m50 by 3m50 in size."

While Rodin's lowliest gargon d'atelier in 1880-1881 would have known, today we are still searching for information on just how, for example, the physical background of the Gates was modeled. We know the figures were generally modeled separately from the doors, but not how they were mounted on them. The figures in the side reliefs were often the exception, probably modeled as reliefs on a horizontal surface before being vertically installed. Another old photograph, this one taken of Eternal Spring while in clay, shows in the background what is unquestionably the lower section of the portal (fig. 3.13). What we can see suggests that clay may have simply been applied directly to the rough wooden planking, after which it could have been removed and replaced by plaster casts. (On this point Truman Bartlett's 1887 notes for his Rodin articles, now located in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, contain the unpublished sentence, "The whole thing was first modelled in clay and cast, in pieces, in plaster.") The portal's base shown in this photograph, while possessing more profiling and relief than what we see today (fig. 3.14), does have a section, just below the middle, that comes close. Rodin could have built up the molding of the base simply by the addition of planking. It is also possible that the first wooden framework for the door of 1880-1881 might have been used only for Rodin to work out his ideas on the architecture, in Bartlett's words as the "large first sketch," and to test the scale of his figures, and that he had to build or rebuild a larger and deeper one when he began the montage of the sculptures on the portal. When he had developed his ideas for the tympanum, which we know from its surviving plaster model was made apart from the door,
Rodin would have been required to rebuild the entire upper section of the original doorway frame.

Between late 1880 and 1884, Rodin must have completed much of what we see today in *The Gates of Hell*. By June of 1884, he had progressed to the point where he could ask the founder Eugene Gonon, who had made some casts for him in 1883, to estimate the cost of reproducing the portal in bronze by the lost wax method. On 15 June, Gonon replied that he had approximated the weight of the door to be "four thousand kilos" (roughly half of what the bronze Gates weigh today) and that the cost for the work would be 40,000 francs. In the event that the state furnished the metal, estimated at 8,000 francs, the cost would be reduced to 32,000 francs for the "good execution" by Gonon. In 1885 the Bingen Foundry gave an estimate of 35,000 francs for casting, a figure that the government accepted and set aside in Rodin's account, indicating that this foundry was to do the work. From the estimated weight and Rodin's earlier approximate measurements, it would seem that by 1884 the Gates were about two-thirds their present height if not overall size. (As we know them today, the Gates measure 7.5 x 3.96 meters.) Presumably the founders' estimates were made from a substantially mounted portal. Although the Shades are unmentioned, Octave Mirbeau confirms this in the first detailed description of the portal published in *La France*, 18 February 1885. (The Shades were mentioned in 1886 by Felicien Champsaur.) It seems the size of Rodin's portal was never determined by the architect in charge of the new Museum of Decorative Arts, which in fact was never built as planned on the site of what is today the Gare d'Orsay. In 1885, Octave Mirbeau wrote, "It is not known whether the Gates would be set inside or outside the new Museum." Rodin may have believed in 1884 that he was so close to completing the commission that he could compete for a major new assignment in good conscience. In October, he was successful in obtaining the commission for a monument to the Burghers of Calais (which to all intents and purposes he would complete by 1889). As a possible sign of his confidence, on 23 July 1884, Rodin entered into a contract with an architect named Nanier for a sum of 2,400 francs to work on the architecture of the doorway. The Musee Rodin files do not show Nanier's receipts for all of this amount, but in a letter of 24 February 1885, the architect complains that as of 31 December 1884, he had received only 1,000 francs out of a total of 1,424 francs incurred in expenses. Thereafter, receipts show that Nanier received only a few hundred more francs. We do not know what this architect was to receive as an hourly wage, but Rodin's most skilled assistants were getting about one franc an hour at the time. Even at four times that sum, Nanier would have put in a considerable number of hours on the architectural details. The interesting unanswered question is just how much of the architectural design we see today was devised by Nanier in consultation with Rodin and how much by the sculptor himself. Further evidence suggests that the
Tracings after marginal drawings on a bill to Rodin from Guichard for carpentry work done in connection with The Gates of Hell, 1884.

- "2 moulures au sapin 0.12 sur 0.13 à l'outil détache, de 1.00"
- "Cadres en sapin 0.65 x 0.12 à l'outil détache"
- "Cadres volants en sapin 00.41 sur 0.15, à l'outil détache"
- "2 moulures en sapin 0.12 sur 0.13 à l'outil détache, de 1.00"
- "Moulures en sapin 00.6 sur 0.15 à l'outil détache"
- "Chapiteaux ou moulures sapin o 13 x o 14 à l'outil détache"
- "2 moulures au sapin 0.12 sur 0.13 à l'outil détache, de 1.00"
- "Chapiteaux ou moulures sapin o 13 x o 14 à l'outil détache"
- "Moulures en sapin 00.6 sur 0.15, à l'outil détache"
- "Chapiteaux ou moulures sapin o 13 x o 14 à l'outil détache"
- "Moulures en sapin 00.6 sur o 15, à l'outil détache"
- "Chapiteaux ou moulures sapin o 13 x 0 14 a l'outil détache"

From his letter to Rodin cited above, there is a hint not only that Rodin was slow in paying the full account, but that he may not have been pleased with the architect's interpretation of his intentions. In addition, the sketched capitals and moldings do not accord with those in the Gates as we see them today. It is likely that Rodin found Nanier's designs too intricate or colorful. The external framing of the central panels and that of the flanking pilasters now looks as if it was made of simple flat wooden planks set at varying depths to each other. Similarly, much of the horizontal molding at the bottom of the central panels is achieved by a stepped arrangement of flat boards. The profiles of the cornices and bases below the side pilasters do not coincide with those in Guichard's invoice, and the former are much simpler in overall design (fig. 3.14). In the final portal the most intricate moldings are those which frame the upper sides of the tympanum but which are cut off and merge into winged figures and those at the very bottom which would have been their termination (figs. 3.5, 3.16). Old photographs indicate that these deep flanking moldings did exist at one time and ran continuously from tympanum to base."

The meager historical evidence recommends an evolution from the elaborate to the simple. For all of Rodin's study of older architecture and drawings of moldings, much of the final portal's frame consists of flat planes and relatively simple cornices and capitals. This simplification may have resulted from Rodin's intense and prolonged reflection on modifying the interaction of
sculpture and architecture. Rodin may also have wanted fewer references to period styles in order to achieve a greater effect of timelessness. As we now see the portal, and as it was in 1900, the only areas in which there is architectural inconsistency are the side moldings of the tympanum, their truncated equivalents below at the base, and the stepped pilasters on the external sides of the doorway. Rodin's only specific comments on the Gates that refer to its architectural deficiencies were written on a photograph taken in 1900 of the disassembled plaster portal at the Paris Exposition: "Moins grosses de dimensions. Les moulures plus incolores, plus fines" (Less bulky dimensions, less colorful and more fine moldings) (fig. 3.17). Rodin may have regretted the three stage pilaster added to the right side, because it made the whole too broad.

To the extent that the French government's payments to Rodin for the expense of making the plaster model of the Gates tell us when, and how long and extensively he worked on it, it seems that the period of greatest activity before 1899 was from the summer of 1880 to the winter of 1888. The list of payments is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14 October 1880</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 January 1883</td>
<td>3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 November 1883</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 August 1884</td>
<td>2,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 January 1885</td>
<td>2,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 July 1885</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 October 1886</td>
<td>3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 March 1888</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>25,700</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Rodin was never again personally to request funds from the government's account of 30,000 francs that had been set up for him, and it was not until July 1917 that the curator of his museum, Leonce Benedite, asked for the remainder of the allocation. Unexplained is why in 1900 Rodin did not ask for the 4,300 francs due him. By that time he had spent far more than 30,000 francs in working on the portal. Finally, it is probable that Rodin did little or no work on the project between 1888 and June 1899.

We have always known that Rodin prepared the entire plaster form of The Gates of Hell for its public premiere at the end of May 1900. There is in the Musee Rodin archives a large chart, done in pen and ink and titled "Porte de l'Enfer-Moulage-13 Juin 1899 a 1" Juin 1900," that was undoubtedly prepared by one of Rodin's secretaries. In addition to carrying the portal's title as we know it today, this document records the names of twenty assistants, along with the exact amount each earned in two-week periods. Eugene Guiochet, Jr., did the most work, a truly astonishing amount, and he must have been Rodin's most trusted assistant in making plaster molds from clay models. Four other Guiochet brothers--Gaston, Dieudonne, Auguste, and Ernest--also did work in varying amounts. Even assuming that Eugene Guiochet obtained one and one-half times or even twice the one-franc-an-hour customary wage, there were long periods when the column under his name showed bi-monthly earnings of over 275 francs; and from March 1899 until the end of May, he was billing Rodin for well over 300 francs each period. In one two-week stretch, 29 April-12 May, as the deadline for the show approached, Guiochet earned 410 francs. Ten-hour work days and six-day work weeks were the norm. Guiochet must have worked around the clock seven days a week. The labor cost of preparing the plasters of The Gates of Hell for the 1900 exhibition came to 32,438.85 francs. This expense, awesome for the time, was borne by the artist out of pocket. In addition he absorbed the even
greater costs of building his own pavilion, for example, albeit with the aid of private loans.

The obvious and important question is, on just what areas of the portal was all that work done? Rodin had repeatedly affirmed to the government and visitors, from 1884 on, that the project was near completion. We lack a photograph, not only of the fully assembled Gates before June 1899, but also of its frame alone without the sculptures in high relief, such as we have for June 1900 (fig. 3.17). What information we have from before 1899 comes from photographs of individual figures and couples, and drawings and lithographs made from photographs of parts of the door. There are two verbal descriptions which give us a rough sense of the former arrangement of the two door panels. We know that the architecture and much, if not all, of the sculpture were joined by 1885 when Octave Mirbeau wrote,

Each of the double doors is divided into two panels, separated by a group that seems to form a knocker. Ugolino and his sons on the right, Paolo and Francesca da Rimini on the left.... Above these groups Rodin has composed bas-reliefs from which figures and scenes detach themselves in varying degrees of relief. This gives his work extraordinary perspective. Each of the double doors is crowned with tragic masks, heads of furies, and the terrible or gracious allegories of sinful passions.

Below each group, there are still more reliefs. Centaurs gallop along a river of mud, carrying off women who struggle. . . . Other centaurs fire arrows upon the unfortunate who try to escape; women and prostitutes who collapse as they are carried away can be seen falling head-first into the flaming mire."

Almost a year later, and as if he had read Mirbeau's article, Felicien Champsaur wrote,

Each of the doors is divided into two panels separated by a group: Ugolino on one side, Francesca da Rimini on the other. . . . Then, above them, countless furies, tragic masks, terrible and delightful allegories; and below; in a bas-relief, centaurs carrying off naked women who struggle or faint on their backs. . . . Other centaurs fire arrows upon the unfortunate who try to escape; women and prostitutes who collapse as they are carried away can be seen falling head-first into the flaming mire."

Either in 1887 or in 1899. Rodin seems to have moved the Ugolino group from the right to the left door panel and introduced in their place what we see today (fig. 3.2). The two reliefs having symbolic grieving heads in their midst and flanked by rampant centaurs were removed and replaced by not only the tombs, but also the low reliefs of mothers and children that frame them. Directly above the tombs Rodin added the fallen figure of Fortune at the left and the couple known as Avarice and Lust at the right. What Mirbeau and Champsaur describe as "tragic masks" above the two groups from Dante may have been transferred to the tympanum's cornice, directly above the head of The Thinker (fig. 3-3).

In an old photograph in the Musee Rodin archives and the lithograph made from it that Bartlett reproduced in 1889, that cornice is shown devoid of sculptural decoration. (Otherwise, with a few exceptions, the central section of the tympanum and the cornice with its decoration above it and The Three Shades are as we see them today.) It is possible that Rodin entirely redid the upper portions of the two central door panels. Bartlett wrote that the size of the portal when he saw it was eighteen by twelve feet, two feet less than their present height, minus The Three Shades. His unpublished notes say that the Gates were in a "barnlike studio," thirty feet square and "high in proportion" and that they "reached nearly to the ceiling." It seems likely that Bartlett may have been underestimating the portal's height by a few feet and that it had reached the size we see today. It is also possible that in reworking the door panels, Rodin modified the architectural framing. Although made before 1889, two other possible additions may have been the reliefs of the Siren and Rodin's self-portrait on the inside panels of the bases below the side pilasters. That these additions—the tombs, the reliefs of mothers and children, the Siren, and the sculptor's own portrait—were made by and not after 1900, is confirmed by photographs taken in 1899–1900 of parts of the Gates and the full frame without high relief figures of 1900 (fig. 3.17)."

If indeed Rodin did not make a new cast of the entire portal (which seems likely), part of the expense incurred by Rodin's assistants in April and May of 1900 could have resulted from cleaning, if not polishing, the plasters and the construction of bases and scaffolding. The wooden platform on which the portal stood and the wooden armature behind it were built in that period at a cost of 161.20 francs. Unfortunately, the exact date of the Gates' delivery to the pavilion does not show in Autin's accounts. Judith Cladel wrote in 1914:

The day of the opening arrived before the master had been able to have placed on the fronton [the tympanum] and on the panels of his monument the hundreds of great and small figures destined for their ornamentation.

Rodin had been tremendously busy for weeks before June
first, having more than 150 sculptures and a large number of drawings moved and installed, and he seems to have misjudged the amount of work that had to be done.

The arrival of the Gates at the pavilion, presumably just before the public opening, may have meant that Rodin did not have the time for his assistants to build a scaffolding and remount the sculptures in the portal. To have done this after the opening (considering how much he had at stake) would have been disturbing to visitors and might have offered ammunition to his critics. Rodin had many other major works in the exhibition, including his plaster Monument to Balzac, which he was anxious for the public to see under the best conditions. Then there is another explanation, compatible with the foregoing. Judith Cladel later wrote that when the show opened, "The artist felt worn out from overwork." As for The Gates of Hell, Cladel was of the opinion that it was not reassembled because "he had seen it too much during the twenty years in which it had been before his eyes. He was tired of it, weary of it." It is also likely that Rodin, the perfectionist, was extremely sensitive to critical comments about the denuded portal and was further disinclined to have Guiochet and the others reassemble it." At the exhibition's end, he knew the Gates would have to be moved again, hence dismounted, either to go back to the studio or to Bingen for casting. 'I

Are the Gates Complete?

The big question that still confronts us is whether Rodin regarded the plaster model of The Gates of Hell in 1899 as complete or incomplete. Would he have spent so much of his own money and effort to show his work of twenty years to the government and public without its being ready for casting? The Gates were surely viewed by officials. It was certainly known to the sculptor in 1899 that the Museum of Decorative Arts was housed in the Marsan Pavilion of the Louvre. Rodin did, in fact, meet with one of its architects, Georges Berger, who seems to have been connected with the projected museum from 1880. On 10 January 1901, Rodin told a reporter for the L'Echo de Paris, named Le Nain, "A few months ago, M. Georges Berger asked me to go to the Pavilion de Marsan in order to study the place that would be suitable for my door. But I believe that the official architects show little enthusiasm for the project. And when the officials don't want it, there is nothing to do. It is a 'camorra,' (a cabal of Neopolitan malefactors) like that which killed Carpeaux."

Rodin thus did not put Berger off by pleading that his work was unfinished, but Berger may have been put off by, among other things, the Gates' twenty-three foot height, which would have caused severe problems architecturally were it to have been integrated into the museum's exterior. Whether or not Rodin assembled the plaster in his pavilion did not really influence Berger's rejection. From Rodin's written note on the photograph of the portal, it would seem that he wanted modifications, but this was a reaction typical of the artist to his own work seen in photographs. He often drew possible changes on the prints themselves, but as often as not no alterations were made to the work itself. Rodin would even occasionally sell an expensive marble sculpture with some of his graphite editing marks still on it, to the annoyance of at least one client. All this is by way of saying that if casting of the Gates had been called for, Rodin would probably have complied, with or without modifications.

The posthumous bronze casts of The Gates of Hell were made from molds taken off a new fully assembled plaster of the portal that stood in the Musee Rodin chapel at least from late 1917 (fig. 3.18). (The plaster model
shown in 1900 remains at Meudon.) This second, full plaster model was not personally assembled or directed by Rodin before his death in November 1917; it was done under the direction of the museum’s ambitious first director, Leonce Benedite (fig. 3.19). 33 This reassembly was begun in the spring of 1917, and in July, Benedite wrote to the government asking for the remaining 4,300 francs in Rodin’s account, adding that all of the parts of the portal had been found and assembled. The money was to cover the cost of the montage. We know that from some time in 1916 until his death, Rodin was physically incapable of doing even the smallest amount of work with his hands, due probably to a stroke. Although he had the legal power to do it on his own, Benedite presumably had Rodin’s permission to effect the montage so that the Gates in plaster could be featured in the new Paris Rodin Museum at the Hotel Biron. On the basis of what we have learned these past few years, it is my judgment that Rodin did not make a single change or modification in The Gates of Hell after May 1900. What we now see are the Gates as they looked when Rodin had them prepared for his great exhibition. 34

This still does not answer the question of whether or not Rodin believed that he had done all he could on the portal and considered the work complete, if not finished by conventional standards. That he did not reassemble them in 1900 or when they were moved again in 1901 argues that he still had reservations about either the architecture, the sculpture, or both. A project as unprecedented, of such magnitude, undertaken over a twenty-year period by an artist for whom the idea of “finish” was anathema and who always saw other ways of extending his art, could never have been realized to Rodin’s permanent and total satisfaction. ("And were the
cathedrals finished?" lie would say.) In my judgment Rodin was ninety-nine percent satisfied with what lie had done, and his dissatisfaction focused on the problems of modifying the architectural frame and its coordination with the sculpture. After 1900, lie usually spoke in the past tense about what he had done in the Gates, such as showing all that could be gotten from movement in sculpture.

Even though Rodin's project was not accepted for the Marsan Pavilion, the government still owned it and made one more recorded inspection of the portal at Meudon in 1904 in order to find out when it might be ready for casting. The National Archives dossier on Rodin contains reference to a brief report by a Mr. Morand, a member of the Commission des Travaux d'Art. As there was no indication in the dossier or the report of where the bronze door was to go, it is reasonable to believe the government had no plans for it. Morand was sent on a routine inspection tour of all government sponsored projects, not just Rodin's, as part of the government's demand for an accounting of funds being held for various artists. On 9 February 1904, Morand reported that the work at Meudon was "advanced," but that its author had "manifested the intention of making diverse modifications" and lie did not foresee its completion "before three or four years." In August of 1885, the government had set aside 35,000 francs for the portal's casting, but in 1904 it was decided that this sum could no longer be withheld from other projects. The Ministry of Public Instruction and Arts therefore annulled the 1885 award, while in principle maintaining the commission and Rodin's obligation to supervise the eventual casting. Another award for casting costs would be considered in future. It was this financial annulment that delayed the casting of The Gates of Hell in bronze after Rodin's death until Jules Mastbaum commissioned casts first for his new Rodin Museum in Philadelphia and then for the Paris Musee Rodin. There was never any question of Rodin's repaying the government, acquiring all rights to the plaster model, and then casting it for himself.

Rodin had an idea of carving and casting the Gates. Henri Frantz wrote in 1898. "The artist's dream is to have the jambs carried out in marble and the two doors in bronze." In the Musee Rodin archives is a sketch on thin paper, as well as a cost estimate. The frame, tympanum, and Three Shades were to have been carved in marble at an estimated cost of 96,000 francs. The door panels were to have been bronze. There is no date on the rough sketch, which is really a tracing of a photograph made of the reassembled portal in the chapel of the Musee Rodin around the end of 1917 or early 1918. This argues that Benedite made the request and possibly the sketch, probably after Rodin's death.

The Form of the Gates

What contributes to the conviction that to all intents and purposes The Gates of Hell were complete by May of 1900 is another remark Rodin made to Le Nain in the interview of 10 January 1901:

As for me, I am indifferent to whether the door is here or there. I have wanted to give a new interpretation to bas-reliefs, a work where the decorations are a part of the ensemble and give, by the play of light, a variable diversity to the sculptural motifs. I hope to have succeeded in this. And that alone interests me. The administration that commissioned and paid for the door will take it to Meudon, . . . and will place it where it desires.

Le Nain concluded, "And the master smiled again with a great deal of serenity."

By "decorations," Rodin meant the architectural frame, particularly its moldings, capitals, and bases, if not also the background for the sculpture. Their function was not only to serve as a stable container or foil for sculptural movement but also to help vary the light and shadow cast on the sculptures as the sun moved. When we understand this purpose, we can comprehend why, for example, the vertical moldings which frame the two central panels are of varying depths and are not continuous but cut back at certain points. If Rodin had kept these moldings consistently as deep as they are at their base, too much shadow would have obscured the central panels, accentuating the "holes" for which Bourdelle criticized the work. The moldings were treated somewhat like Rodin's partial figures: they were hybrid montages, edited or simply removed when they did not provide Rodin with the total effect he desired. The simultaneity of different styles for the moldings is comparable to the simultaneity of disparate modes in his figural sculptures, discussed in my essay "When the Sculptures Were White." Rodin loved to compare architectural moldings from past styles to the profiles of the human body, and he conceived of architecture in a sculptural as well as human sense. Close study of the two capitals atop the flanking pilaster reliefs shows that in the one on the right Rodin changed part of the neck of the capital, filling in what was curved in its counterpart to the left (fig. 3.16). He kept the unforeseen and accidental in his architecture, such as the downward sag of the top of the portal caused by the weight of The Three Shades, just as he did in his sculpture.

Rodin's objective for his reliefs and their relation to the decorative frame was one he had shared with Truman Bartlett in the late eighties: "My sole idea is simply one
of color and effect." This goal constitutes a daring modern vision of decorative unity—a subordination of detail and consistency in the part to the requirements of the overall aesthetic effect. Rare was the visitor to the studio who commented on the Gates and was not bewildered or overwhelmed by their complexity—the number and beauty of the disassembled components which inhibited seeing the work as an aesthetic totality. Such were the habits by which viewers "read" art that most sought stories and links to Dante or their own society rather than attempting an analysis of the overall design. Rodin's refusal to reassemble his portal after June first, 1900, may have resulted from the view that as it was, the work had a greater breadth and unity of form.

Rodin's goal may have been inspired by his study of late Gothic cathedrals and Renaissance sculpture, but as we see in the final arrangement, he had no specific precedent for the decorative unity he sought. Once he determined in 1880 to break with a traditional episodic treatment of the doors, Rodin committed himself to a heroic improvisation on an epic scale. It was to be a composition in which the architecture was neither expressively passive nor totally separate from the sculpture. As in baroque compositions, figures spill over the frames, cling to or push off from them. As in medieval art, architectural framing might terminate in human forms or the wings of an angel. As in early medieval manuscripts and Romanesque sculpture, a framing feature might be cut away to accommodate a foot or hand, as at the bottom of the bas-relief of the right pilaster.

Although not derived from impressionism, Rodin's mode of overall composition recalls certain late impressionist compositions, notably Pissarro's urban pictures of the nineties seen from above, in which unity is the result of overall spotting and averaging of densities of lights and darks, projections, and recessions. Those large uninhabited planes in the central door panels, for example, are crucial to contrasts between dense and open and allow the composition to breathe rather than strangulate from congestion. It is far easier for us today, after our experience with abstraction, to read the great portal as a total arrangement.

What provides interest in the composition are the changes in scale, ranging from the largest figures, the Shades and The Thinker, down to forms only a few inches in height. These changes give vigor and surprise, variety and interest, to complement ingenious and inspired coherence. Rodin's myopia has often been cited as a cause of his failure to complete large compositions successfully. (It is forgotten that he wore glasses.) Myopia, however, would have better allowed him to study the overall balance and the effects of light and shadow on the whole portal, as it would have screened out many details. For the same reason, he welcomed fading light in the studio to study the big planes and their relationships in his figural sculptures.

As much as his interpretation of his themes of anguish, despair, and striving, the unity of The Gates of Hell is personal to this artist and an achievement never adequately credited. He has been categorized since his own lifetime as the master of the fragment and not the whole. The composition of The Gates of Hell is one of his greatest audacities. The fabric of the unity is deceptive and seemingly casual, yet in reality calculated and complex: there is the conjoining axis, at once rectangular and cruciform, made by the overall architectural frame and The Thinker atop the juncture of the doors and the lintel, which is played against the figures, randomly dispersed. Elsewhere twenty years ago I argued that just the overall figural arrangement was like the counterpoise of the Shades atop the portal (fig. 3.1). To complete the figural analogies, the portal's design has a spine running vertically through the center of the doors, The Thinker, and the central Shade. The figures were not arranged from a single viewpoint, but rather a roving perspective, as if one were free to view the work from a number of vantage points, including above the ground. Similarly, the physical background of the reliefs was made pliable to Rodin's thought and each motif attached to it. This ground could be hard or soft, rocklike or vaporous, topographical or abstract (fig. 3.4). Rodin dared to create a world free from traditional laws of joining and viewing. There was no preexisting space except in the stagelike tympanum. Rodin's figures, their relationships, and the distances between them establish these functional spaces. Thematic and formally, the Gates have an atomized character in large part, but in terms of form this profusion of particles is also read against the stable, continuous framing of the moldings. All are in a delicate balance that creates the impression of thematic disarray but disciplined artistic order. When Rodin spoke of driving his art further, included was the challenge to find an artistic harmony appropriate to the qualities of his thematic chaos. In the late eighties, the sculptor Truman Bartlett studied the Gates and wrote that "the character of the design, in comparison with that of Ghiberti . . . is more original and varied." Bartlett and a few others saw the portal in terms of its extraordinary sculptural "color"—the effect which resulted from overall light and shade. Recent critics and commentators have been blind or indifferent to these aspects which together compose the work.
The Gates rank as one of the greatest imaginative works of art in history. Rodin insisted that he could not make drawing or sculpture unless he had something to copy. What he told Bartlett, however, about how he formed The Gates of Hell shows an awareness of his greatest gift: "I followed my imagination, my own sense of arrangement, movement and composition."

NOTES


5. This statement was given to the writer Serge Basset, "La Porte de l’Enfer," Le Matin, 19 March 1900.


7. For a recent discussion of the difference between Degas and Rodin, see Kirk Varnedoe, "The Ideology of Time: Degas and Photography," Art in America (Summer 1980). Varnedoe contrasts Degas’s paintings—not the sculpture—with Rodin’s Sculpture. I believe it is more difficult to make the case for the Degas sculpures as all representing "instances of behavior that locate the figure in society," and it may be an oversimplification to say that "Rodin seeks to show gestures that lift the figure out of time into universal psycho-emotional states." As discussed in my essay on Rodin’s work in plasters, it can be countered that Rodin’s art was capable of both the temporal and the timeless.


9. The identification of this motif as a thorn vine was first made by John Tancock.

10. It was suggested by Jacques de Caso in his article, "Rodin at The Gates of Hell," Burlington Magazine, 106 (February 1964), that Henri de Triqueti’s earlier nineteenth-century tom high doors for
the Church of La Madeleine in Paris, which show the Tell Commandments, was a possible influence on Rodin's early thinking about his own portal. While this is possible, their austere neoclassic framing and sculptural style and shallow space was never to Rodin's taste. None of Rodin's contemporaries who had access to both portals, nor indeed the artist himself, even mentions Triqueti's work. Varndoe has found a far more likely source that Rodin might have seen in Paris, Charles Percier's door which held eight bronze reliefs by A. Riccio and which was in the Louvre. "Early Drawings by Auguste Rodin," Burlington Magazine (April 1974): 197-202.

11. On his 1875 trip to Italy, Rodin undoubtedly saw Jacopo della Quercia's relief sculptures flanking the main doors to San Petronio. Above the doors are the free-standing and larger figures of the Virgin enthroned between saints. As Rodin contemplated placing Eve atop his portal, he may also have had the Bolognese example in mind.

12. A few years ago the Musee Rodin administration installed the statues of Adam and Eve on the portal's flanks. Because of the installation of the doorway on a stepped podium, the flanking statues cannot be placed sufficiently close to them, in my view, but overall one can gain a sense of what Rodin had in mind by this installation.

13. In the vast archives of the Musee Rodin, there may yet turn up a carpenter's account for this project.

14. These invaluable old photographs, taken in Rodin's lifetime and under his supervision, are in the archives of the Musee Rodin in Paris. I have published a large number of them in my In Rodin's Studio: A Photographic Record of Sculpture in the Making (Oxford: Phaidon Press in association with the Musee Rodin, 1980).

15. See author's In Rodin's Studio, 158-159 and fig. 7.

16. See author's Rodin's Gates of Hell, 67. Documents and correspondence pertaining to this commission can be found in the Rodin file at the National Archives in Paris.

17. Musee Rodin archives, dossier on Eugene Gonon.


19. Judith Cladel wrote concerning the proposed museum, "The new edifice will allow a monumental portal having a highly decorative effect." Rodin, Sa Vie Glorieuse, Sa Vie Inconnue, Edition Definitive (Paris: Grasset, 1936), 137. We cannot be sure that Cladel actually knew that the Gates were to be the entrance to the museum or whether she just surmised it. Mirbeau was writing only five years after the commission in his article "Auguste Rodin," La France, 18 February 1885. Mirbeau's article and many others have been translated and anthologized in Ruth Butler's excellent Rodin in Perspective (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 45-46.

20. One such photograph is reproduced in my In Rodin's Studio, fig. 95. In his 1885 article Mirbeau describes what are presumably the main vertical moldings: "It is framed by two exquisite moldings whose style belongs to the vague and captivating period that is no longer Gothic but not yet Renaissance...."

21. On 18 May 1917, Benedite wrote: "In 1880 M. Rodin was commissioned by the Fine Arts Administration to produce the model of The Gates of Hell, inspired by Dante's Divine Comedy, originally intended for the Museum of Decorative Arts, The fee to be paid for this model was 30,000 francs and M. Rodin received 25,700 francs of this total. This work, while in a sense it could be said to have already been delivered to the State, in the studios of the Depot des Marbres, had remained unfinished, and M. Rodin had not put in a claim for the balance of the sum contracted for. Today . . . I have the honor of informing you that I have had the various parts that compose The Gates of Hell assembled in their entirety, in a completed form, in the choir of the chapel of the Hotel Biron, and I therefore respectfully request, in the name of M. Rodin, tile settlement of this balance, amounting to the sum of 4,300 francs." The letter is in the National Archives, and its translation is given in Robert Descharnens and Jean-Francois Chabrun, Auguste Rodin (London: Macmillan, 1967), 96. As his government-owned studio was rent-free, these payments would have covered models' fees; those of his assistants, carpenters, at least one architect; materials; tools; and other equipment. For the Gates Rodin never received any money for himself, which explains why, as late as 1882, he was working at an hourly wage for the Manufacture de Sevres doing decorative art. Rodin had to rely upon the sale of his sculpture to private parties in order to support himself, his family, and the costs of several other studios he maintained from at least the mid-1880s. No sculptor could get rich as the direct result of government commissions or purchases, but the rationale was that the resulting prestige would bring clients to the artist who would want other casts or carvings of work purchased by the State. Rodin did, in fact, exhibit, cast, and sell figures from the Gates, starting in at least 1883.

22. The names that I have been able to decipher, in addition to those of the Guiochet family, are: Arrighi, Vimmera, Husson, Edmond, Raphael, Bandettini, Fromont, Andre Demont, Maguery, Tosi, J. Joseph, Pierre Detruy, Frederic Paillet, Bongini. In the extensive dossier of Rodin's enlarger, Henri LebossC, there are frequent references over many years to having Guiochet make plasters of the clay enlargements or reductions, and presumably this was Eugene.

23. The plaster mold makers should not have been paid as much as Rodin's skilled professional sculptor assistants who actually did modeling for him, so that the figure cited for Guiochet's hourly wage is probably a little high.

24. Butler, Rodin in Perspective, 47.


26. The indecision about the date of changing the position of Ugolino and his sons results from a contradiction between Bartlett's published articles on Rodin and his unpublished notes in the Library of Congress. In one of his articles published in 1889, Bartlett wrote, "The Ugolino group is the chief point of interest of the right-hand part of the door, and is placed on a line with the eye of the observer." (Bartlett in Elsen, Auguste Rodin: Readings, 74.) However, in his notes Bartlett wrote, "The lower part of the large panel on the left has for its chief part the terrible group of Ugolino and his sons. Immediately below are two figures, male and female lying horizontally. To the left of Ugolino are a crowd of figures falling, in every conceivable shape." Despite this contradiction, the reader is encouraged to read Bartlett's published account of the doors as it is the most extensive eyewitness description of the portal while it was being made. An extensive commentary on Bartlett's printed text and his notes will be presented in the forthcoming revision of my book, Rodin's Gates of Hell.

27. These "tragic masks" may have been depicted in a caricature of Rodin carrying The Gates of Hell, done in 1884 by Ch. Paillet. See de Caso and Sanders, Rodin's Sculpture, 126.

28. In a paper given at the 1979 International Congress on Art History, at Bologna, J.A. Schmoll argued that the portal was completed at the end of Rodin's life, based on the previously cited request of Benedite and the view that the tombs and relief of Rodin's self-portrait were not added until long after 1900. (His paper will be published in the future as part of the proceedings of the International Congress.) Unfortunately, Schmoll did not have access to the materials on which this essay is based, nor had he seen the photographs in my...
I "l'Enfer, in the studio of the rue de l'Universite, all the article states, "During Rodin's last days, M. Benedite gathered authorization for or supervising the assembly of the portal. In fact, In the article Benedite makes no mention of Rodin having given the be installed. They will set up a plaster cast of the Porte de chapel of the Hotel Biron where a selection of the master's works will rest to arrange the Musee Rodin. They have begun by restoring the biographer, Judith Cladel. In an article that appeared reporting, according to Rodin's more reliable long-time friend and first director of the Musee Rodin was not a paragon of truthful (Paris: Librairie Francaise, d'Erudition Frangaises Dante: Melanges de Critique et even more doubtful, as Rodin was very much restricted to Meudon direction," but from what we know of Rodin's health, this is extremely doubtful. If the montage was done at the Depot des Marbres, it is even more doubtful, as Rodin was very much restricted to Meudon the last year of his life. Benedite, Dante: Melanges de Critique et d'Estimation Francaises (Paris: Librairie Francaise, 1921), 32. The first director of the Musee Rodin was not a paragon of truthful reporting, according to Rodin's more reliable long-time friend and biographer, Judith Cladel. In an article that appeared 16 December 1917, in Le Courrier de la Presse, one month after Rodin died, we read: "M. Benedite and Mademoiselle Judith Cladel work without rest to arrange the Musee Rodin. They have begun by restoring the chapel of the Hotel Biron where a selection of the master's works will be installed. They will set up a plaster cast of the Porte de l'Enfer." In the article Benedite makes no mention of Rodin having given the authorization for or supervising the assembly of the portal. In fact, the article states, "During Rodin's last days, M. Benedite gathered in the studio of the rue de l'Universite, all the moreancs of the Porte de l'Enfer, and he was greatly surprised to notice that the monument was complete. It was not lacking one piece. It was a question of joining together and superposing the parts of the portal in order to see it set up in its radiant ensemble." Surely, if Rodin had initiated the final assembly, his first director would have so indicated to the world in 1917 rather than in 1921. Benedite took a large number of initiatives without Rodin's knowledge and consent, and, ethics aside, he seems to have had the legal authority to do so. Disturbing evidence of Benedite's meddling with Rodin's arrangement of The Gates of Hell is given by Judith Cladel when writing with bitterness during the years 1933-1936 about the last weeks of Rodin's life and the insensitive removal of the artist's sculpture from Meudon to Paris: "Some of Rodin's scandalized assistants who cast his plasters made it known to me that charged with the reassembly of The Gates of Hell they received orders to place certain figures in a different arrangement than that which the artist wanted, because 'that would be better,' or because the figure of a woman representing a spring (une source) must not have the head below.' The sense of the cube (la raison cubique) is the mistress of things and not appearances,' Rodin used to say. But does a shockingly brusque functionary have the time to meditate on such an axiom?" (Rodin, Sa Vie Glorieuse et Inconnue, 397.) Cladel's clear accusation is that Rodin no longer had any say in what happened to his portal and that Benedite was taking uncalled for and insensitive liberties with its reconstruction. "La raison cubique" refers to Rodin's view that one should imagine a well-made sculpture as existing within a cube. 34. This is why it would not have been difficult for Benedite to have Rodin's assistants reassemble the project. As further evidence, consider Rodin's statement made in 1917 to Gustave Coquiot: "Will I finish the Gates some day? It is improbable! Nevertheless, I would need only a few months, perhaps two or three at most to finish it. You know that all the casts are ready, labeled for the day when I am asked for the final conclusion. But will this day ever come? The government would have to pay me more money. . . . Bail! I have dispersed a little everywhere the details of my Gates; it is perhaps well so! Consider, to finish the Gates, it would have to be cast in bronze and about a hundred thousand francs would be necessary. Do you think the government would grant this to me?" Coquiot, Rodin a l'Hotel de Biron, 103, quoted and translated in de Caso and Sanders, Rodin's Sculpture, 128. With regard to their dispersal, Rodin may have been referring to parts of the Gates being at the government studio, and others at Meudon. 35. Judith Cladel incorrectly reported that in 1904 Rodin returned the money received from the government, thereby making it his property, but then he willed it to the State before his death. Cladel, Rodin, Sa Vie, 141. Schmoll correctly pointed to this error in his Bologna paper. 36. Henri Frantz, "The Great New Doorway by Rodin," Magazine of Art (September 1898). 37. See the chapter "Methods and Style," in my Rodin's Gates of Hell, especially 83-84.