

Victor Hugo
War On The Demolishers!
(1825, 1832)

Translated by Lyn Thompson-Lemaire

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1825

If things keep going at this pace, soon the only national monument left in France will be *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques*, in which Taylor's pencil and Ch. Nodier's pen rival each other in grace, imagination, and poetry. Nodier's name we may well pronounce here with admiration, although he has at times pronounced ours in friendship.

The time has come when no one must be allowed to remain silent. A universal cry must finally go up to call the new France to the aid of the old. All manner of profanation, degradation and ruin are all at once threatening what little remains of these admirable monuments of the Middle Ages that bear the imprint of past national glory, to which both the memory of kings and the tradition of the people are attached. While who knows what bastard edifices are being constructed at great cost (buildings that, with the ridiculous pretention of being Greek or Roman in France, are neither Roman nor Greek), other admirable and original structures are falling without anyone caring to be informed, whereas their only crime is that of being French by origin, by history, and by purpose. In Blois, the *château des états* is serving as a barracks, and Catherine de Medici's beautiful octagonal tower is crumbling, buried under the rafters of a cavalry's quarter. In Orléans, the last vestige of the walls that Joan defended has just disappeared. In Paris, we know what they've done to the old towers of Vincennes, which made such magnificent company for its dungeon. The Sorbonne Abbey, so elegant and so ornate, is at this moment falling under the hammer. The beautiful Roman church of Saint-Germain-des-Près, from which Henri IV had looked out over Paris, used to have three spires, the only ones of their kind to grace the silhouette of the capital. Ruin threatened two of these needles. They needed to be buttressed or destroyed; it was deemed quicker to destroy them. Then, in order to connect, as much as possible, this venerable monument to the awful Louis XIII-style portico that masks its gate, the *restorers* put in place of several of the old chapels little candy stores topped with Corinthian capitals, in the fashion of Saint-Sulpice; and the rest was whitewashed in a nice canary yellow. The gothic cathedral of Autun has been subjected to the same outrage. [...]

It has been said that for *three hundred francs* the English had purchased the right to remove anything they pleased from the debris of the admirable Jumièges Abbey. As such, Lord Elgin's profanations are happening here again, and we make a profit. The Turks sold only Greek monuments; we do even better, we sell our own. [...]

Proh pudor! as we are writing these lines, in Paris, at the very place called the *École des beaux-arts*, a wooden stair, sculpted by the marvelous artists of the 14th century, is being used as a masons' ladder; admirable Renaissance woodwork -- some still painted, gilded and emblazoned -- woodwork, doors touched by the same tender and delicate chisel that worked on the Château d'Anet, are gathered there, broken, dislocated, half-dead in a pile on the ground, in attics, under the eaves, even in the antechamber of the office of an individual who has set up shop there, and whose title is *architect of the École des beaux-arts*, and who treads ignorantly over them every day. And then we're going to search far and wide and pay quite a lot for objects to adorn our museums!

It is time to put an end to this mess, to which we call the country's attention. Though impoverished by revolutionary ravagers, by mercantile speculators, and above all by classical restorers, France is still rich in French monuments. The hammer that is mutilating the face of the country must be stopped. One law would suffice; let us pass it. Whatever the property rights may be, we must not allow the destruction of a historical and monumental edifice by these ignoble speculators whose honor has been blinded by self-interest; miserable men, and so idiotic they don't even understand that they are barbarians! A building has two things: its use and its beauty. Its use belongs to its owner, its beauty to everyone; to destroy it is to overstep one's rights.

Active surveillance must be placed on our monuments. With a few meager sacrifices, we would save structures that, all the rest aside, represent enormous capital. The church of Brou alone, built towards the end of the fifteenth century, cost twenty-four million, at a time when a worker was paid two sous. Today that would be over one hundred and fifty million. It takes only three days and three hundred francs to bring it down.

And then, a laudable regret would take over: we would want to reconstruct these prodigious edifices, but we will not be able to. We no longer possess the genius of centuries past. Industry has replaced art.

Let us finish this note here; there again is a subject that would require a book. He who writes these lines will come back to it often, relevant or not; and, like that old Roman who used to say: *Hoc censeo, et delendam esse Carthaginem*, the author of this note will never stop repeating: "This is what I think, and France should not be demolished."

1832

[...]In Paris, vandalism flourishes and prospers before our eyes. Vandalism is an architect. Vandalism squares itself off and spreads itself out. Vandalism is celebrated, applauded, encouraged, admired, caressed, protected, consulted, subsidized, defrayed, naturalized. Vandalism undertakes work for the government. It has underhandedly inserted itself into the budget, and quietly eats away at it, like a rat at its cheese. And it certainly earns its money well. Every day it demolishes something of what little remains of this admirable old Paris. What do I know? Vandalism has whitewashed Notre Dame, vandalism has repaired the towers of the Palais-de-Justice, vandalism has flattened Saint-Magloire, vandalism has destroyed the Jacobin cloisters, vandalism has amputated two of the three spires of Saint-Germain-des-Près. Maybe in a few moments we will talk about the structures it has built. Vandalism has its newspapers, its cliques its schools, its chairs, its public, its reasons. Vandalism has the bourgeoisie on its side. It is well nourished,

well funded, bloated with pride, well learned, very classical, a good logician, a strong theoretician, joyous, powerful, affable when necessary, a good speaker, and happy with itself. It distances itself from the patrons of the Arts. It protects young talents. It is a teacher. It gives out great architectural prizes. It sends students to Rome. It is an elected official and refuses to allow Ingrès to paint the frescos of the chamber, so as to auction them off to who knows who. It wears an embroidered coat, a sword at its side, and French trousers. It is a member of the Institute. It visits the court. It gives its arm to the King, and strolls with him in the streets, whispering its plans in his ear. You must have run into it.

Sometimes it turns itself into an owner, and transform the magnificent tower of Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie into a factory for hunting rifle bullets, mercilessly closed off to the snooping antique dealer; and it turns the nave of Saint-Pierre-aux-Bœufs into an empty cask store, l'Hôtel de Sens into a stable for roll-on roll-off ships, the Maison de la Couronne into a cloth factory, the Cluny Chapel into a printing press. Sometimes it becomes a building painter and demolishes Saint-Landry in order to build in place of this simple and beautiful church a big, ugly, unrentable house. Sometimes it becomes a law clerk, and drowns Sainte-Chapelle in paperwork, this church that will be Paris's most admirable ornament, when it will have destroyed Notre-Dame. Sometimes it becomes a speculator, and in the dishonored nave of Saint-Benoît, violently crams a theatre, and what a theatre! A disgrace! The sacred, learned, and solemn cloister of the Benedictines, transformed into some kind of bad literary scene!

Under the Restoration, it made itself at home and frolicked about in a rather amiable manner, we will admit. Everyone remembers how vandalism, the king's architect at the time, treated the cathedral of Reims. A man of honor, science, and talent, M. Vitet, has already pointed this out. [...]

Monuments are no longer restored, no longer spoiled, no longer defaced -- they are torn down. And for good reasons. A church is fanaticism; a dungeon is feudalism. A monument is denounced, a pile of stones is massacred, ruins are butchered.¹ Our poor churches are barely able to save themselves by donning the uniform of the Republic. Not one Notre-Dame in France -- as colossal, as venerable, as magnificent, as impartial, as historic, as calm and as majestic as it may be -- doesn't fly a little tri-colored flag on its ear. Sometimes an admirable church is saved by writing on it: City Hall. There is nothing less popular among us than these sublime edifices made by the people and for the people. We hold against them all the crimes throughout the past to which they have been witness. We would prefer to erase our entire history. We devastate, pulverize, destroy, demolish out of national spirit. By being good Frenchmen, we have become excellent Welshmen. [...]

We owe the future an explanation of the past. *Posteris, posteris, vestra res agitur.* [...]

We make laws about everything, for everything, against everything, regarding everything. In order to transport one minister's boxes from one side of the rue de Grenelle to the other, we make a law. And a law for monuments, a law for art, a law for

¹Hugo used the verb "septembriser," which entered the French language after September 1792, when revolutionaries massacred innocent prisoners in their prison cells at knife point. Hugo is thus also drawing a continuity between the vandalism of the revolution and that of Louis Philippe I's liberal constitutional monarchy (aka July Monarchy).

France's nationality, a law for memories, a law for cathedrals, a law for the greatest products of human intelligence, a law for the collective oeuvre of our fathers, a law for history, a law for the irreparable that is being destroyed, a law for that which a nation holds most sacred besides the future, a law for the past -- this good, excellent, holy, useful, necessary, indispensable, urgent law, we don't have time for it, we won't make it!

Laughable! Laughable! Laughable!