

War on the Demolishers!

Victor Hugo

Introduction and translation by Danny Smith

Source: Oeuvres complètes de Victor Hugo: Littérature et philosophie mêlées, 315–42. Paris: J. Hetzel and A. Quantin, 1882.

Introduction

In 1825 the young novelist Victor Hugo published a pamphlet titled “A Note on the Destruction of Monuments in France.” Eight years later he returned to the topic in an extended essay titled “War on the Demolishers!,” originally published in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. The two essays were anthologized together under the single title “War on the Demolishers!” in Hugo’s *Littérature et philosophie mêlées* in 1834. The essays, which appear here for the first time in English, represent an impassioned, acerbic, and wry call to arms in support of the monuments of an era that many of Hugo’s contemporaries dismissed as the “dark ages.”

Hugo was hardly the first to call attention to the wanton destruction of archeological monuments in France. In 1791, under pressure from learned societies and antiquarians, the National Constituent Assembly appointed the archeologist Alexandre Lenoir as the founding director of the Musée des Monuments Français, which opened its doors four years later. In 1794, Lenoir’s fellow revolutionary Henri Grégoire, the bishop of Blois, read a series of scathing reports before the National Convention, protesting the violent iconoclasm of many revolutionaries and defining the wanton destruction of religious heritage as *vandalisme*, a term he coined to compare the Frenchmen destroying French monuments with the Germanic tribe that had sacked Rome.¹ Lenoir, Grégoire, and others argued frequently and passionately that the revolution could effectively overthrow the *ancien régime* without needing to entirely obliterate the monuments that the *ancien régime* had left behind. When revolutionaries did smash the idols of the first estate—most famously in 1793, when the church of Notre-Dame de Paris was rededicated to the “Cult of Reason” and plundered by a mob—Lenoir and others secreted away broken sculptures and artifacts for preservation in the museum.

But in the years of revolution and the Napoleonic conquest that followed, Lenoir’s Musée and other projects devoted to the preservation of French *patrimoine* became inextricably linked to the French imperial project. French museums, including the newly opened Musée du Louvre, were filled with the spoils of war. In 1797, in an ironic echo of Grégoire’s term *vandalisme*, Napoleon filled the Musée des Monuments Français with works that he seized from Rome during his campaigns on the Italian peninsula. While medieval artifacts and treasures were preserved, many of the structures of the Middle Ages that dotted the French countryside were left to languish.

Although the defeat of Napoleon and the Bourbon Restoration ended much of the iconoclastic zeal of the French Revolution, it also muted many of the voices who had called for preservation. In 1816 Lenoir's Musée was forced to return the art Napoleon had seized across Europe, and the program of centralization overseen by the newly reestablished Bourbon kings left the fate of many rural monuments, stripped of their artifacts, in the hands of government functionaries. In 1820 Isidore Justin Taylor and Charles Nodier began a series of illustrated travelogues, the *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l'ancienne France*.² Although the series included a survey of churches and medieval buildings across France, the project was not purely one of archeological preservation. Instead, Nodier and Taylor depicted abandoned churches, ruined abbeys, former manor houses, and the like as the romantic and poetic ruins of a distant past.

It was in this context in 1825 that Hugo published "A Note on the Destruction of Monuments in France," a pamphlet criticizing the state of monuments across France and calling for a single law to be established to guarantee their preservation. Hugo explicitly singled out monuments overlooked by Nodier and Taylor's survey: those that lacked romantic appeal and, in particular, buildings that restorers had set about modernizing. Unlike Nodier and Taylor, Hugo argued that these monuments were not merely vestiges of a distant past but served as the foundation of contemporary French society.

The situation would only deteriorate in the years that followed. In 1830 the July Revolution overthrew the Bourbon regime, a transition that Hugo characterized as taking power "from gentlemen who did not know how to write" and giving it to "to peasants who do not know how to read." The July Revolution, which established Louis-Philippe as the leader of a constitutional monarchy, brought with it a return of the iconoclasm of the Revolution of 1789. Buildings that had merely languished without attention suddenly became the targets of elected officials who again sought to erase the lasting legacies of the *ancien régime*.

Hugo's "War on the Demolishers!," published in 1832 in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, was a kind of resuscitation of Henri Grégoire's reports before the National Convention in 1794. Like Grégoire, Hugo believed that the monuments of the Middle Ages, especially the religious monuments, were not merely the legacy of a feudal system but constituted an indelible part of the contemporary artistic identity of France itself. The year before the essay was published, Hugo had tackled the same subject in his landmark novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*

(frequently translated in English as *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*), in which he famously proposed that the printing press had usurped the position of architecture as the primary means for the dissemination of artistic form. The book, which was immensely popular both in French and in English translation, spurred the preservation not only of Notre-Dame itself but of many medieval monuments across Europe and became a foundational text of the Gothic Revival movement.

—Danny Smith

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Notes

1 Grégoire gave three reports before the National Convention in 1794 on the subject: *Convention nationale. Instruction publique. Rapport sur les destructions opérées par le vandalisme, et sur les moyens de le réprimer, par Grégoire. Séance du 14 Fructidor, l'an second de la République une et indivisible* [August 31, 1794]; *Convention nationale. Instruction publique. Second rapport sur le vandalisme, 3 Brumaire, l'an III* [October 29, 1794]; *Convention nationale. Instruction publique. Troisième rapport sur le vandalisme fait au nom du comité d'instruction publique, par Grégoire* [December 11, 1794]. All are reprinted in H. Grégoire, *Patrimoine et cité*, ed. D. Audrerie (Bordeaux: Éditions Confluences, 1999).

2 Taylor, Nodier, and several illustrators and engravers published twenty-three volumes in the series, each focused on a particular region of France, between 1820 and 1878.

War on the Demolishers!

A Note on the Destruction of Monuments in France

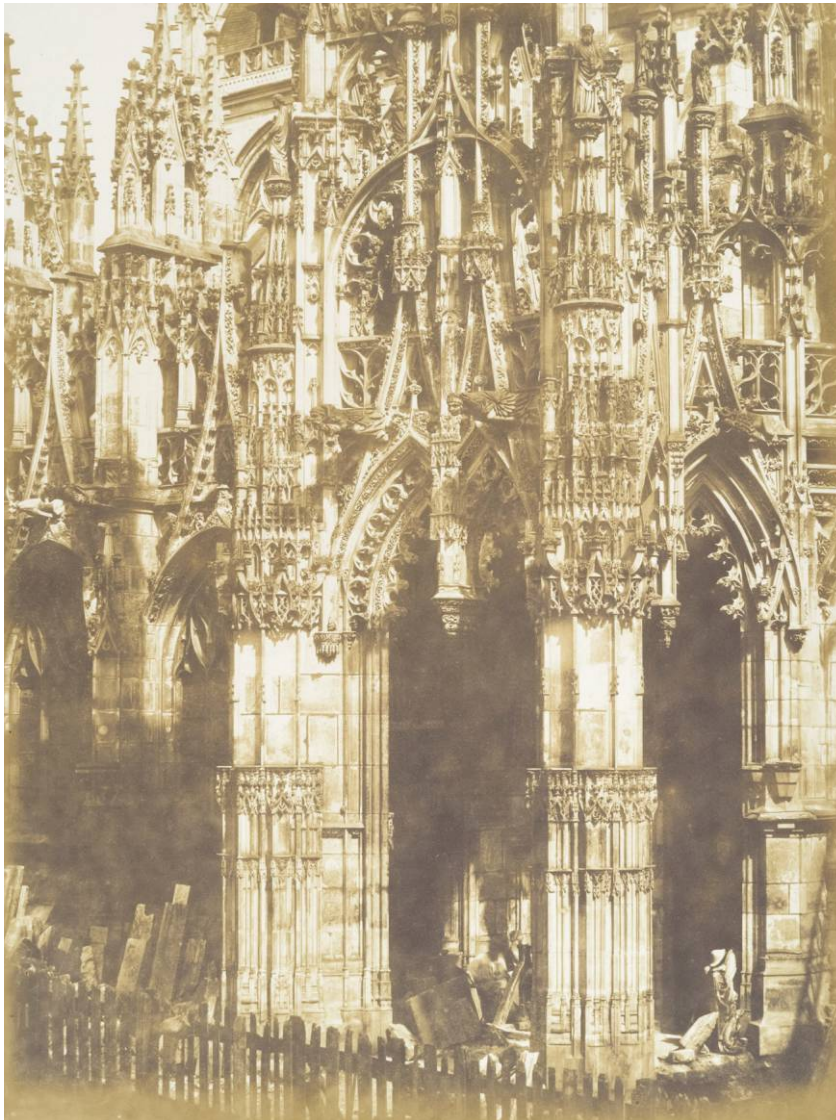
Should things continue along the present course any longer, soon no national monuments will remain in France other than those in *Voyages pittoresque et romantiques*, wherein [Isidore Justin] Taylor's pencil rivals Ch[arles] Nodier's pen in grace, imagination, and poetry. We are well within our rights to speak these names in admiration, for they have occasionally spoken ours in friendship.

The moment has come when it is no longer permissible for anyone to keep silent. A universal cry for help must, at last, arise from the new France for the old. At once all manner of debasement, degradation, and ruin are menacing what little remains to us of those admirable monuments of the Middle Ages, upon which the historic glory of our nation is imprinted and to which are bound both the memory of our kings and the traditions of our people. At the same time that we build, with great haste, I don't know how many mongrel buildings which, with the ridiculous pretense of being Greek or Roman in France, are neither Roman nor Greek, admirable and original edifices fall without our having even deigned to inquire after them—buildings whose only crime is having been French in their origin, in their history, and in their purpose. In Blois the Château des États serves as a garrison, and the beautiful octagonal tower of Catherine de Médicis crumbles, shrouded beneath the beams of a cavalry barracks. In Orléans the last vestige of the walls defended by Joan [of Arc] have just disappeared. In Paris we know what has become of the old towers of Vincennes, whose keep had held such magnificent company. The Abbaye de Sorbonne, so elegant and so ornate, is at this very moment falling beneath the hammer. The beautiful Romanesque church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, from whence Henry IV gazed upon Paris, once had three spires and was the only one of its style to decorate the skyline of the capital. Two of these pinnacles were facing ruin. They needed either to be buttressed or to be cut down, and it was faster to cut them down. Then, in order to connect as much as possible this venerable monument with the horrid portico—in the style of Louis XIII—that conceals the church's entrance, these "restorers" replaced several of the ancient chapels with little confections with Corinthian capitals in the style of Saint-Sulpice and basted the rest in a canary yellow. The gothic cathedral at Autun has suffered the same outrage. When we visited Lyon in August of 1825, two months ago, the beautiful color that the



Edmond Bacot, *Château de Martainville*, 1852–54. Salted paper print from glass negative; 9½ × 12½ in. (24.13 x 31.75 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

centuries had given to that cathedral of the archbishop of the Gauls had disappeared beneath a coat of pinkish paint. Near Lyon, as well, we have demolished the abbey now known as the Château de L'Arbresle. I err—the owner has conserved one of the towers, which he rented to the commune, and it now serves as a prison. Crozet, a small, historic town in the Forez, is falling into ruins, alongside the manor house of the Choiseul-d'Aillecourt family, the seigneurial home where Tourville was born, as well as the monuments that had once decorated Nuremberg. In Nevers, two churches from the eleventh century serve as a stable. There had been a third from the same period, which we did not see, for by the time we made our visit it had been erased from the earth. We could but admire, at the door of a thatched house where they had been cast aside, two Romanesque capitals that attested, in their beauty, to that of the edifice of which they were



Edmond Bacot, *Portail de la Cathédrale de Louviers*, 1852–54. Salted paper print from glass negative; 13 ½ x 10 in. (34.29 x 25.4 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

the only vestiges. The ancient church at Mauriac has been destroyed. At Soissons, the rich convent of Saint Jean and its two spires—so light and bold—have been allowed to crumble. Stone cutters scavenge material from among its magnificent ruins. The charming church of Braisne has faced the same indifference; the dismantled vault permits rain to fall on the ten royal tombs that it should cover.

In La Charité-sur-Loire, near Bourges, there is a Romanesque church which, by the immensity of its interior and the richness of its architecture, rivaled the most celebrated cathedrals of Europe; but it is half ruined. It falls, stone from stone, as unknown as the pagodas of Asia in their deserts of sand, as all the while six stagecoaches pass by there every day. We have visited Chambord, that Alhambra of France. It is already teetering, eroded by the rainwater that has seeped into its stone through roofs stripped of lead. It gives us great pain to declare that if it is not attended to soon, in a few years any kind of support—support that certainly ought to be national, like that which gave Le Primatice's masterpiece to the nation—will be useless, and little will remain of this edifice, once as beautiful as a palace of fairies and as grand as a palace of kings.

We write this in haste, without preparation and having chosen, at random, several of the memories that remained from a quick excursion in a small portion of France. As one considers it, we have scarcely revealed the edges of the wound. We have cited just the facts, and only those facts that we ourselves have verified. What goes on elsewhere?

We have been told that the English have purchased, for three hundred francs, the right to remove all that pleases them from the debris of the admirable Abbaye de Jumièges. Thus, the sacrileges of Lord Elgin are repeated in our own land, and we draw profit from it. The Turks sold nothing but the Greek monuments; we are doing better, we are selling our own. We can confirm, as well, that the beautiful convent of Saint-Wandrille has been demolished, block by block, by I don't know what ignorant and stupid owner who sees nothing in the monument but a quarry of stones. *Proh pudor!* At the moment that we write these lines, in Paris, at a place that calls itself the École des Beaux Arts, are to be found a wooden staircase sculpted by the marvelous artists of the fourteenth century, serving as a masons' scaffold, and admirable woodworks of the Renaissance that had once decorated the Château d'Anet—panels and doors touched by such a tender and delicate chisel, some still painted, gilded, and emblazoned—broken, split up, lifeless in heaps on the ground, in the attics, in the rafters of the antechamber of the office of an individual who has set up there and who calls

himself the architect of the École des Beaux-Arts, and who, every day, passes stupidly beneath them. And we go such distances and pay such sums for the ornaments in our museums!

It is time at last to give a name to this mess, to which we call the attention of the country. Whatever has been impoverished by devastating revolutionaries, by mercantile speculators, and above all, by classical restorers, France remains rich in French monuments. We must stop the hammer that mutilates the face of the country. One law would suffice, were it to be passed. Whatever the rights of ownership, the destruction of a historic and monumental edifice by these ignoble speculators, blind to their duty, must not be permitted. These miserable men, so imbecilic that they do not understand that they are barbarians! There are two things in an edifice: its use and its beauty. Its use belongs to the owner, its beauty to everyone; the owner, therefore, would exceed his right to destroy it.

Active surveillance must be exerted over our monuments. With only modest sacrifices, we would save constructions which, regardless what remains of them, represent enormous resources. The only church in Brou, built toward the end of the fifteenth century, cost 24 million at a time when the day's work of a laborer cost two pennies. Today it would be more than 150 million. But it would take nothing more than three days and three hundred francs to tear it down.

Moreover, we are seized by the laudable regret that much as we would wish to reconstruct these prodigious edifices, we would not be able. We no longer have the genius of those centuries. Industry has replaced art.

We close this note here, as much as it is a subject that demands a whole book. He who writes these lines will return to them often—both when relevant and when not—and, like the old Roman who always said *Hoc censeo, et delendam esse Carthaginam* [this I believe, and that Carthage must be destroyed], the author of this note will constantly repeat, this I believe: that it is not necessary to demolish France.

War on the Demolishers!

It must be said, and said loudly, that this demolition of the old France, which we have decried many times as “restoration,” continues with more tenacity and barbarousness than ever. Since the July Revolution and the advent of democracy, we have become overwhelmed by such ignorance and such brutality. In many places local power, municipal influence, and civic supervision have passed from

gentlemen who did not know how to write to peasants who do not know how to read. We've fallen back a step. As we wait for these brave men to learn to spell, they govern. This administrative nonsense, a normal and natural product of the Marly Machine that one calls "centralization," has always bound us in the chain of mayor and subprefect, subprefect and prefect, prefect and minister. It has only grown.

Our intention here is to consider but one of the innumerable effects that it produces right under the gaze of an entranced country. We do not wish to discuss this administrative nonsense except in the matter of monuments, and even still we will but brush this immense subject, which a series of twenty-five folio volumes would not satisfy.

We posit that at this time, there is not a single town in France nor a single administrative center of an arrondissement nor a single administrative center of a canton, where the destruction of some historical monument is not in consideration, already begun, or fully achieved, either by the action of the central authority or by the action of the local authority under the consent of the central authority or by the action of individuals under the tolerant gaze of the local authority.

We advance this hypothesis with the profound conviction that we do not err, and in doing so we call on the conscience of all those who have made even the smallest of artistic or antiquarian excursions to any part of France. Every day many old memories of France are lost with the stone on which they were written. Every day we destroy some page of the venerable book of tradition. And soon, when the ruin of all these ruins has been achieved, there will remain nothing more for us to do than to cry with that Trojan, though at the least he rescued his gods, *Fuit Illium e ingens Gloria* [Troy is no more, nor her great glory].

And in support of what we have just said, might he who writes these lines be permitted to cite, from a host of documents that he could produce, an extract from a letter sent to him. He did not personally know the signatory, who is, as his letter announces him, a man of taste and of heart, but he is grateful for having been addressed by him. He will never find fault with those who alert him to an injustice or a deleterious absurdity to denounce. He regrets only that his voice does not have more authority and impact. One should read this letter and one should consider, in reading it, that the deed attested therein is not an isolated deed but one of a thousand episodes of the greater general deed—the

continuous and incessant demolition of all of the monuments of old France.

Charleville, February 14, 1832

Dear Sir,

Last September I traveled to Laon (Aisne), the land of my youth. I had been gone for many years and, upon arriving, my first care was to traverse the town. . . . Having arrived at the place du Bourg, as I raised my eyes to the old tower of Louis d'Outremer, what a surprise I had at seeing every part of the thing covered with ladders and crowbars and all the possible instruments of destruction! I swear to you, that sight made me sick. I was seeking to divine the reason for these ladders and these pickaxes when M. Th——, a simple and educated man, full of taste in letters and a great friend to anything touching upon science or the arts, happened to pass. In that instant I announced to him the mournful impression caused to me by the destruction of this old monument. M. Th——, who shared my feeling, told me that, as the sole member of the former municipal council, he had been the only one to fight the deed which we were witnessing and that his efforts had amounted to nothing. Reason, words, all had failed. The new councillors, united in majority against him, had won the day. For having heatedly taken the side of that innocent tower, M. Th—— was himself accused of Carlism. These men had protested that this tower recalled nothing but the memories of feudal times, and that the destruction had been supported by an acclamation. What is more, the town had offered the contractor charged with the execution a sum of more than a thousand francs, and materials in addition. *Voilà* the price of murder, for it is a veritable murder! Mr. Th—— turned my attention to the notice of adjudication, in yellow paper on the neighboring wall. At the top was written in enormous letters: "DESTRUCTION OF THE TOWER KNOWN AS THE TOWER OF LOUIS D'OUTREMER. *The Public is Advised,*" etc.

This tower occupied a space longer than the height of several men. Had extending the neighboring market been the goal that was sought, one could instead have sacrificed a private home—the price for which would not perhaps have surpassed the sum offered to the contractor. They preferred to annihilate the tower.



Edmond Bacot, *Vue de l'Odon*, 1852–54. Salted paper print from glass negative; 13 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 10 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (33.97 × 25.72 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

I am sickened to speak of this shame of the Laonnois; their town possessed a rare monument, a monument of the kings of the *seconde race*. Today not a single such thing still exists. Louis IV's tower was the last. After such an act of vandalism, one was hardly surprised to learn several days later that they had demolished their fine eleventh-century cathedral, to build a grain exchange.¹

Similar stories abound, rich with such deeds.

And at first blush, doesn't he reveal an excellent farce? You can imagine for yourself ten or twelve municipal councillors deliberating the great *destruction of the tower of Louis d'Outremer*. See them all there, doubtless arrayed in a circle and sitting on the table, legs crossed and babouches on their feet in the Turkish fashion. Listen to them. They mean to make a feudal monument disappear in order to enlarge their cabbage patch. Those present, who pool all they know of great oratory after fifteen years of having been made to recite from *Le Constitutionnel* by the schoolmaster of their village. They all contribute. Good reasons rain down. One raises feudalism as their topic and they all take it up. Another raises the tithes paid to lords; another, the unpaid labors performed for the king; another, the serfs who battled the water of the ditches to silence the frogs; a fifth, the right of the first night; a sixth, those infernal priests and those infernal noblemen; another, the horrors of Saint-Barthélemy; another (who is probably a lawyer) the Jesuits—then this, then that, then this and that again, and then all has been said and the tower of Louis d'Outremer is condemned.

You can imagine for yourselves the situation of this poor man, this sole representative of science, of art, of taste, and of history, in the middle of this grotesque Sanhedrin. Can you see the humbled, stifled spirit of this pariah? Can you hear as he risks a few timid words in favor of this venerable monument? And can you see the rage that erupts against him? That poor man there who folds in the face of such invectives. See what, from all sides, is denounced as Carlism, and probably even Carlist apologism. What is there to say in response? It is finished. The deed is done. The demolition of a "monument of the barbaric ages" is resoundingly and enthusiastically approved, and you hear the "hurrah!" of the brave municipal councillors of Laon who have made their assault on the tower of Louis d'Outremer.

Would you believe that Rabelais and Hogarth were anywhere ever able to find more farcical figures, more buffoonish profiles, or more delightful silhouettes to scrawl in charcoal on the walls of a cabaret or in the pages of a *batrachomyomachia*?

Yes, laugh—but as these noble men squeak and croak and deliberate, the old tower, so long unwavering, feels a trembling in its foundation. And all at once, from the windows, from the doors, from the barbicans, from the murder holes, from the dormers, from the gutters, from everywhere, the demolishers emerge like maggots from a corpse. The tower is dripping with masons. These fleas bite it. These vermin devour it. The poor tower starts to fall stone by stone, its sculptures crash onto the pavement, it showers houses in its debris; its flank is torn open, its face is ripped open and the helpless townsman who passes before it without knowing what is being done is astonished to see the tower more covered with ropes, pulleys, and ladders than it ever was when under assault by the English or the Burgundians.

Thus, to tear down this tower of Louis d'Outremer, a near contemporary of the towers of ancient Bibrax, to do what neither battering rams, nor ballistae, nor scorpions, nor catapults, nor axes, nor picks, nor heavy equipment, nor bombardments, nor serpentine cannons, nor *fauconneaux*, nor culverins, nor iron cannonballs from the forges of Creil, nor bombard stones from the quarries of Péronne, nor canons, nor thunder, nor tempest, nor battle, nor the fire of men, nor the fire of the heavens could do, took merely the marvelous progress of the nineteenth century! Simply a goose-feather quill, ambled as if by chance across a sheet of paper by such infinitesimally tiny men. The dangerous quill of a twentieth-order municipal council! Quill that feebly drafts imbecilic fatwas from the couch of a peasant! Quill indistinguishable from that of the Senate of Lilliput! Quill that makes mistakes in French! Quill that does not know how to spell! Quill that, to be certain, traced more X marks than signatures at the bottom of this foolish decree!

And the tower was demolished! And thus it is done! And the town paid for it! Their crown was stolen from them, and they paid the thief!

What name ought we to give to such things?

And we repeat, so that it might be fully considered, that this deed in Laon is not an isolated deed. As we write, there is not a place in France in which something

analogous is not going on. It might be on a greater or lesser scale, to a smaller or larger extent, or to a smaller or larger thing, but it is still, everywhere, vandalism. The list of demolitions is inexhaustible. It has already been begun by us and by writers of greater import than ourselves. It would be easy to expand; it would be impossible to conclude.

You have just seen one exploit of a municipal council. Elsewhere it is a mayor who relocates a menhir to mark the limits of the commons, it is a bishop who scrubs and repaints his cathedral, it is a prefect who pulls down a fourteenth-century abbey to expose the windows in his parlor, it is an artilleryman who razes a convent from 1460 to extend a firing range, it is a functionary who makes the sarcophagus of Theodebert into a pig's trough.

Though we could cite their names, we have pity and withhold them.

Nevertheless, there is one who does not deserve to be spared, a certain curate from Fécamp who demolished the rood screen of his church, giving for a reason that this massive impracticality—chiseled and carved by the miraculous hands of the fifteenth century—deprived his parishioners of the happiness of contemplating him, the curate, in his splendor at the altar. The mason who executed this order from this blessed man made an admirable little house from the debris of the rood screen, which one can see in Fécamp. What a shame! What has become of the time when the priest was the supreme architect? Nowadays it is the mason who instructs the priest!

Was there not also a dragoon or a hussar who would have made the church in Brou, that marvel, into his granary and who brazenly asked the permission of the minister to do so? Were they not in the process of scrubbing the lovely cathedral of Angers from top to bottom when lightning struck the spire—now blackened but still intact—as if the lightning itself had the intelligence to know better and would have sooner destroyed the old steeple than let it be scrubbed by municipal councillors! Was it not a minister under the Restoration who pruned the admirable towers at Vincennes and the handsome ramparts at Toulouse? Did they not have, in Saint-Omer, a prefect who destroyed three-fourths of the ruins of Saint-Bertin under the pretext of giving work to laborers? A mockery! If you are so mediocre an administrator, with brains so sterile that in the presence of roads to edge, canals to dig, streets to macadamize, doors to clean, lands to weed, and schools to build you don't know what to do with your workers, at least do not give them our national edifices as prey to destroy, do not tell them



Edmond Bacot, *Abside de Saint-Pierre, Caen*, 1852–54. Salted paper print from glass negative; 13½ × 10 in. (34.29 × 25.4 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

to make blocks from their stones! Divide these workers instead into two groups, have each dig a great hole and then have each in turn refill their hole using the dirt from the other. And then pay them for the work. There's an idea! I prefer the useless to the destructive.

In Paris, Vandalism flourishes and prospers under our very gaze. Vandalism is an architect. Vandalism settles in and luxuriates. Vandalism is feted, applauded, encouraged, admired, entertained, protected, consulted, subsidized, paid for, naturalized. Vandalism is the public works commissioner for the government account. He has slyly installed himself in the budget and he nibbles quietly at it, like a rat does his cheese. And of course he makes good money. Every day he demolishes something of the little that remains to us of that admirable old Paris. What do I know? Vandalism slathered paint across Notre-Dame, Vandalism altered the towers of the Palais de Justice, Vandalism razed Saint-Magloire, Vandalism destroyed the Jacobin Convent, Vandalism amputated two of the three spires at Saint-Germain-des-Prés. We will perhaps shortly speak of the edifices that he builds. Vandalism has his newspapers, his coteries, his schools, his pulpits, his public, his truths. Vandalism has the bourgeoisie on his side. He is well-fed, well-funded, swollen with pride, almost wise, ever so traditional, a good logician, a strong theoretician, happy, powerful, attendant to his needs, well-spoken, and content with himself. He goes about like Maecenas. He protects young talents. He is a professor. He awards the great prizes of architecture. He sends students to Rome. He wears an embroidered frock, an *épée* at his side, and French *culottes*. He is a member of learned societies. He attends court. He lends an arm to the king and strolls with him through the streets, whispering plans in his ear. You must meet him.

Occasionally, he plays landlord and turns the magnificent tower of Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie into a tower for making lead shot, mercilessly closed to the curious antiquarian; or he makes the nave of Saint-Pierre-aux-Boeufs into a shop selling empty barrels, or the Hôtel de Ville in Sens into a carriage house, or the Maison de la Couronne d'Or into a cloth factory, or the Chapelle de Cluny into a printer's. Occasionally he plays decorator, and he demolishes Saint-Landry to construct in place of this simple and beautiful church a large and ugly and unsatisfactory house. Sometimes he plays clerk, and he clutters Sainte-Chapelle with bureaucracy, that church that will be the most admirable jewel in Paris once he has destroyed Notre-Dame. Occasionally he plays speculator, and into the dishonored nave of Saint-Benoît he violently packs a theater—and what a theater! Disgrace! The historic, solemn, holy cloister of the Benedictines



Louis Marie Jean Baptiste Athalin, "Porte de l'abbatiale de St. Martin d'Auchi à Aumale," in *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l'ancienne France: Normandie*, 1822. Lithograph; sheet: 13 × 9½ in. (33.02 x 24.13 cm); image: 9¾ × 7¾ in. (24.77 x 18.73 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Charles Soulier, *La Tour St. Jacques la boucherie à Paris*, ca. 1867. Albumen silver print from glass negative; 16 x 12 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (40.64 x 30.80 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

metamorphosed into I don't know what wretched literary setting.

Under the Restoration, we can all agree, he took it at his leisure and frolicked about in an equally charming manner. Everyone recalls how Vandalism, who then, too, was architect to the king, handled the cathedral in Reims. An honorable man, a man of science and of talent, M. Vitet, has already reported the event. This cathedral is, as we know, loaded from top to bottom with excellent sculptures that overflow its bounds on all sides. At the time of the coronation of Charles X, Vandalism, who is a good courtesan, feared that a stone might break off by chance from any of the overhanging sculptures and would come improbably to fall on the king at the moment when his majesty passed. And so, in three months of great pitiless blows of the mallet he cut back the ancient church! The author of this text has, in his own home, a beautiful head of Christ, part of the curious debris of this execution.

Since July, Vandalism has done yet something else that can serve as complement to this: the destruction of the Jardin des Tuileries. One day we will speak again, at greater length, of this barbaric upheaval. We cite it here but to recall. Who has not shrugged their shoulders in passing before these two plots stolen from the public promenade? We snatched the Jardin des Tuileries from the king, and here are the two morsels that he keeps. All the harmony of a calm and royal masterpiece is disrupted, the symmetry of the flowerbeds is uprooted, the moat cuts up the terrace; it doesn't matter, he has his two little gardens. What would one say of a theater producer who trims a couplet or two from the chorus of *Athalie*? Surely the Tuileries was Le Nôtre's *Athalie*.

It is said that Vandalism has already condemned our aged and irreparable church of Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois. Vandalism has his plans for it. He wants to make, all across Paris, a great, great, great, road. A road the length of a league! What magnificent devastations will line its path! It will pass over Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, perhaps it will also pass over the remarkable tower of Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie. But what matter! A road the length of a league! Don't you understand how beautiful this will be? A straight line drawn from the Louvre to the Barrière du Trône. From one end of the road, from the Barrière, one will gaze upon the façade of the Louvre. It is true that the sole merit of Perrault's colonnade—if merit is there to be found—is in its proportions and that this merit will disappear when viewed from such distance. But what can be done? One will have a road as long as a league! From the other end, from the *Louvre*,

one will see the *Barrière du Trône*: those two proverbial columns that you know well, as slender, skinny, and ridiculous as Potier's legs. O marvelous perspective!

We hope that this burlesque project will not be accomplished. If an attempt were made to realize it, we hope that there would be a riot of artists. We will do our best to push for it.

The devastators have never been lacking for justifications. Under the Restoration, Catholic edifices of the Middle Ages were spoiled, mutilated, disfigured, profaned more sanctimoniously than anything in the world. The congregation developed the same excrescence on their churches as they had on their religion. The *sacré-coeur* of this excrescence is made of marble, bronze, whitewash, and gilded wood. It appeared most often in churches in the form of a little painted chapel, gilded, mysterious, elegiac, filled with puffed-up angels, coquettish, galling, plump, and awash in false daylight, like the one at Saint-Sulpice. There is nary a cathedral, nary a parish in France from which a chapel of this type has not grown, either inside the church or beside the church. These chapels have become a veritable sickness for churches. It is Saint-Acheul's wart.

Since the July Revolution, such profanations have continued yet more gruesomely and fatally and in other guises. A pretext of piety has been succeeded by national, liberal, patriotic, philosophical, and Voltairean pretexts. One no longer restores, one no longer even spoils, one no longer even makes ugly: one simply tears down. And one has good reason for this. A church is fanaticism; a dungeon is feudalism. One denounces a monument, one massacres a pile of stones, one Septemberizes the ruins. Our poor churches can now but attempt to save themselves by taking up absurd disguises. Not a single Notre-Dame in France, no matter how colossal, how venerable, how magnificent, how impartial, how historical, how magisterial, does not today have a little *tricouleur* flag dangling from her ear. Often one can save an admirable church by writing above its entrance: "Town Hall." Nothing is less popular among us than these edifices made by the people and for the people. They are wanted for all the crimes of times past to which they were witness. We wish to erase it all fully from our history. We devastate, we pulverize, we destroy, we demolish in the national spirit. In the interest of being good Frenchmen, we have become excellent *Welches*.

One meets, in great numbers, certain of the repugnant men who served banal roles in the magnificent pathos of July, and who applaud demolishers for other reasons: pedantic and pretentious reasons, the reasons of economists and bankers.

“What end do these monuments serve?” they say, “All they do is cost us the price of maintenance.” Tear them down and sell the material. There is always money to be made that way. Even in purely economic terms such reasoning is bad. We have already fully established that these monuments are themselves capital. Many among them—that are well known to rich foreigners—bring in far more money to France than they cost. To destroy them would be to deprive the country of a source of revenue.

But we leave aside this arid point of view and consider greater truths. When, in a civilized society, would one dare to question art on the grounds of its utility? Shame on you if you do not know what purpose art serves! There is nothing left to be said to you. Go! Demolish! Utilize! Turn Notre-Dame into rubble. Make a pretty penny out of the Colonne Vendôme.

There are others who do accept and who do value art, but to listen to them the monuments of the Middle Ages are in poor taste, barbaric works, architectural monstrosities that cannot be done away with quickly and thoroughly enough. Neither, to them, is there anything more to be said in response. They are finished with it. They have turned over their fields, the world has gone on without them; they have written off the work of another time, they are not of a generation that can see the light. For we must repeat, so that noble ears might grow accustomed to hearing it said and repeated, that at the same time as a glorious political revolution is achieved in society, a glorious intellectual revolution is accomplished in art. It is now twenty-five years since Charles Nodier and Mme de Staël declared it in France, and if we might be permitted to add our obscure name after these famous ones, we would add that it is now fourteen years that we have been fighting for it as well. Now the revolution is over. The ridiculous duel between the classical and the Romantic has sorted itself out, all the world is at last of one mind. There is no longer a question. Everything that is in the future is for the future. There are hardly any longer, in the back-rooms of colleges, in dim academies, those good old children playing in their corners with the *Poetics* and the canons of another age, whether poets or architects—those who play around with the three unities, or those who toy with the five orders. The latter waste plaster emulating Vignola, the former waste verse emulating Boileau.

It is a respectable thing, and we shall speak no more of it.

Now, during this complete rebirth of art and of criticism, the case of

architecture from the Middle Ages—which was pleaded seriously for the first time three centuries ago—has triumphed alongside the triumph of other good causes; it has triumphed for the same reasons as science, triumphed for the same reasons as history, triumphed for the same reasons as art, it has triumphed by intellect, by imagination, and by heart. We needn't return therefore to what is judged to be good and what is judged to be bad, but instead say forcefully to the government, to the communes, and to individuals that they are responsible for all the national monuments that fate has left in their hands. We must account for the past in the future. *Posterī, posterī, vestra res agitur* [descendants, descendants, this thing is kept for you].

As for the edifices that we build in place of those that we destroy—we will not accept the change, we do not want it. They are wretched. The author of these lines maintains all that he has said elsewhere of the “modern monuments” of Paris. He has nothing kinder to say of those monuments today under construction. Of what import to us are the three or four little classicizing churches that you piteously build hither and yon. Rather crumble your ruin of the Quai d'Orsay with its heavy arches and its awful engaged columns! Crumble your Palais Bourbon and its Chamber of Deputies, who didn't demand better! Isn't it an insult, in a place called the École des Beaux-Arts, that this hybrid and fastidious construction—for which the drawings languished for so long in that dirty attic—impudently displays its nudity and ugliness in the face of the admirable façade of the Chateau de Gaillon? Have we fallen to such a miserable point that we practically admire the barbarities of Paris? Is there nothing in the world more hunched and scrawny than your compensatory monument (Ah yes! What are you compensating for?) on rue de Richelieu? There is truly not a single beautiful thing on your Bourse—that second attempt at La Madeleine—with its heavy tympanum that destroys its paltry colonnade. Oh! Who will save me from colonnades!

I beg you, do better by our millions.

And surely do not use them to polish the *Louvre*. You would wish to accomplish closing what you call the “parallelogram” of the Louvre. But we warn you that your parallelogram is actually a trapezoid, and it's simply too much money for a trapezoid. At any rate, the Louvre—beyond the fact that it is from the Renaissance—the Louvre, you see, is not beautiful. It is not necessary to admire and to maintain, as though it were by divine wish, all the monuments of the seventeenth century, even as much as they are an improvement on those of the eighteenth and far beyond those of the nineteenth. Whatever their good airs, whatever their

grand impressions, the monuments of Louis XIV are like his children: many among them are bastards.

The Louvre—whose windows cut into its architrave—the Louvre is one of those.

If it is true, as we believe, that architecture is alone among the arts to have no future, use your millions to conserve, to underwrite, to sustain the national and historical monuments that belong to the state and to buy more of those that remain in private hands. The cost will be modest. You'll have them at a good price. Some ignorant landowner will sell the Parthenon for the price of its stones.

Repair these beautiful and solemn edifices. Repair them with care, with intellect, with sobriety. You have around you men of science and men of taste who might enlighten you in this task. Above all, let the architect-restorer be sparing in his own imagination; let him carefully study the character of each edifice, according to each century and each locale. Let him understand both the general qualities and the specific qualities of every monument whose care is placed in his hands, and let him know how to adroitly meld his own genius to the genius of the ancient architect.

You have jurisdiction over those that are public; defend them from being demolished.

As for those that are privately held, as for the owners would persist in demolishing, who have the law at their defense, their property should be appraised, purchased, and administered by the state. If one might permit us to transcribe here what we have said on this subject in 1825:

We must stop the hammer that mutilates the face of the country. One law would suffice, were it to be passed. Whatever the rights of ownership, the destruction of a historic and monumental edifice by these ignoble speculators, blind to their duty, must not be permitted. These miserable men, so imbecilic that they do not understand that they are barbarians! There are two things in an edifice: its use and its beauty. Its use belongs to the owner, its beauty to everyone; the owner, therefore, would exceed his right to destroy it.

This is a question of public interest, indeed one of national interest. Each day, when the public interest raises its voice, the law silences the squeals of private

interest. Private property has always been, and can be again, modified for the sake of the common good. Your field might be expropriated to build a square, your house expropriated to build a hospice. One could expropriate your monument.

If a law should be necessary—we repeat—let them make one. But here we hear the objections raised from all sides: Do the chambers have the time? A law for so small a thing.

For so small a thing.

How! We have forty-four thousand laws that we know not what do to with, forty-four thousand laws of which there are, at most, ten of any quality. Every year, when the chambers of the Assembly are in heat, they lay about a hundred laws, and from incubation at most two or three are born viable. They make laws about everything, for everything, against everything, concerning everything. To transport boxes of such and such a minister from one side of the rue de Grenelle to the other, they make a law. And one law for monuments, one law for art, one law for the national identity of France, one law for the memories, one law for the cathedrals, one law for the greatest products of human intelligence, one law for the collective work of our fathers, one law for the history, one law for the irreplaceable things that we destroy, one law for a nation to keep what is most sacred for the future, one law for the past. For this one good, just, excellent, holy, useful, necessary, indispensable, urgent law there is no time and it will not be done.

Ridiculous! Ridiculous! Ridiculous!

¹ We do not publish the name of the signatory of this letter, not having been formally authorized to do so, but we keep it in reserve for our guarantee. We believed it necessary to omit the passages that were nothing but kindly expressions of sympathy for ourselves personally from our correspondent.