A Note on the Destruction of Monuments in France

Should things continue along the present course any longer, there will soon remain no national monuments in France besides those in *Voyages pittoresque et romantiques,* wherin Taylor's pencil rivals Ch. Nodier's pen with grace, imagination and poetry – we are well within our rights to speak the latter's name in admiration, for he has occasionally spoken ours in goodwill.[1]

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 *ancienne*. At once all manner of profanity, 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. Although we are frantically building I don't know how many mongrel buildings that with the ridiculous pretense of being Greek or Roman in France are neither Roman nor Greek, meanwhile admirable and original edifices fall without anyone so much as deigning to enquire about it, buildings whose only crime is having been French in their origin, in their history, and in their purpose. In Blois, the *Chateau des Etats* serves as a garrison, and the beautiful octagonal tower of Catherine de Medici crumbles shrouded beneath the trusses of a cavalry barracks. In Orleans, 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 towers and was the only one of its style to decorate the skyline of the capital. Two of these spires 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 as best as possible to connect this venerable monument with the horrid porch – 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 taste 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 centuries had given to the cathedral of the archbishop of the Gauls had disappeared beneath a coat of reddish tempera. As well, near Lyon we have the abbey now known as the *chateau* of L'Arbresle demolished. I err, the owner has conserved one of the towers, which he rented to the *commune* and it 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[2] family, the seigneurial home where Tourville[3] was born as well as the monuments that had once decorated Nuremberg. In Nevers, two churches from the eleventh century serve as stables. 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 wiped from the earth. We could but admire, at the door of a thatched

[1] The title was a 24-volume compendium of lithographic prints and accompanying texts illustrating elements of French patrimony published by Baron Isidore Taylor, Charles Nodier, and Alphonse de Cailleux. Drawings were supplied by Taylor and others and texts were writted by Nodier and de Cailleux. Volumes focused on individual regions of France. The first was published in 1820, the final in 1878. Trans.

[2] A cadet branch of the aristocratic Choiseul family in Champagne. Trans.

[3] Anne Hilarion de Constantin, Compte de Tourville, was an admiral under Louis XIV and was named Marshall of France in 1683. Trans.

house to which they had been cast, two Romanesque capitals that attested in their beauty to that of the edifice of which they were the only vestiges. The ancient church at Mauriac has been destroyed. At Soissons, rich convent of Saint Jean and its two spires – so light and bold – has been allowed to crumble. Stone cutters scavenge material from among its magnificent ruins. The charming church of Braisne has faced the same indifference, where 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 in ruin. It falls, stone from stone, as unknown as the pagodas of Asia in their deserts of sand. All the while six stagecoaches pass by every day. We have visited Chambord, that Alhambra of France. It is already teetering, eroded by the rain-water that has seeped into its stone since the roof was 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 had certainly ought to be national, like that support that gave Le Primatrice's masterpiece[4] 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 not but revealed the edges of the wound. We have cited but 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 abbey of 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 so beautiful convent of Saint-Wandrille has been sliced, room by room, by I don't know what ignorant and stupid owner, who sees nothing in the monument but a quarry of stones. *Proh pudor!*[5] At the moment that we write these lines, in Paris, at a place that calls itself the *Ecole des Beaux Arts* there are to be found: a wooden staircase, sculpted by the marvelous artists of the fourteenth century, serving as a masons' scaffold, 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 *Ecole 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. Miserable men, and such

[4] The palace at Fontainebleau. Trans.
[5] A sarcastic exclamation of astonishment. Trans.

imbeciles 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 belongs to everyone; the owner, therefore, would exceed his rights to destroy it.

An 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 towards the end of the fifteenth century, cost twenty-four million at a time when the day's work of a laborer cost two pennies. Today it would be more than a hundred and fifty 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*[6], the author of this note will constantly repeat: I believe this, that it is not necessary to demolish France.

- 1825

[6] Cato is said to have closed his every argument in the Senate with this phrase, meaning: I believe this, and that Carthage must be destroyed. Trans.

War on the Demolishers!

It must be said, and said loudly, 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 with both a certain ignorance and a certain 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 is a normal and natural product of this *machine de Marly*[7] that one calls 'centralization,' such administrative nonsense, as it has in the past, is always passed to the mayor from the under-prefect, the under-prefect from the prefect, the prefect from the minister. Only now it is on a far greater scale.

Our intention here is to consider but one of the innumerable effects that it produces under the gaze of an astonished country. We do not wish to discuss this administrative nonsense except in the matter of monuments, and, still, we will only brush this immense subject, which even a series of twenty-five volumes of folios will not satisfy.[8]

We hypothesize, 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 being considered, already begun, or fully achieved; either by the action of 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 eyes and with the tolerance of the local authority.

We advance this hypothesis with the profound conviction not to err, and we call upon the knowledge 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 of these ruins will have been achieved, there will remain nothing more for us to do to 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 has just been said, he who writes these lines might be permitted to cite, from a host of documents that he could produce, the extract from a letter sent to him. He did not personally know the signatory, who is, as his letter announces, 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 might read this letter and one might 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 successive and incessant demolition of all of the monuments of old France.

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[7] A complex, seventeenth-century hydraulic system for pumping water from the Seine to fill the fountains of the Palace of Versailles, the phrase became a shorthand for complicated and inefficient projects administered from on high. Trans.

[8] Hugo refers here to the then ongoing *Voyages pittoresque et romantiques* series, illustrating the monuments of France in what was originally slated to be twenty-five volumes.

Charleville, 14 February 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 of the possible instruments of destruction! I will swear to you, that sight made me sick. I was struggling to guess 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 remaining member of a former municipal council, he had been the only one to fight the deed to which we were in that moment witnesses and that his efforts had amounted to nothing. Reason, words, all had failed. The new councilors, 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.[9] 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 vote. What is more, the town had offered a sum of more than a thousand francs and materials in addition to the contractor charged with the execution. *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, written enormous letters: DESTRUCTION OF THE TOWER KNOWN AS TOWER OF LOUIS D'OUTREMER. *The Public is Advised,* etc.

This tower occupies a space of longer than the height of several men.[10] To extend the market that neighbored it, should that have that been the purpose 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. I am sickened to speak of this shame of the *Laonnois*, their town possessed a rare monument, a monument of the kings of *la seconde race*.[11] Today not a single such thing still exists. Louis IV's tower was the last. After such an act of vandalism, one will hardly be surprised to one day learn, that they had demolished their fine eleventh century cathedral, to build a grain exchange." [*]

Similar stories abound that are rich with such deeds.

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[9] The term refers to literally to supporters of the claim of Carlos V of Bourbon to the Spanish throne but colloquially referred to royalist opponents of the constitutional monarchy established following the July Revolution. Trans.

[10] Hugo's correspondent gives the metric as "*quelques toises*," a toise being a now-defunct metric of roughly six feet, based on the height of a grown man. Trans.

[11] Kings of the later Carolingian Dynasty of the eighth-tenth centuries. Trans.

[*] 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 extract the passages that were not but kindly expressions of sympathy for ourselves personally from our correspondent.

And, at first blush, doesn't he reveal an excellent farce? You can imagine for yourself ten or twelve municipal counselors deliberating the great *destruction of the tower of Louis d'Outremer*? See them all there, doubtless arraigned 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 school masters 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 *corvée*,[12] another: the serfs who battled the water of the ditches to silence the frogs, a fifth: the right *cuissage*,[13] 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 under such abuse. See what, from all sides, is denounced as royalism, and probably even royalist apologia.[14] What is there to say in response? It's done. 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 counselors of Laon who have made their assault on the tower of Louis d'Outremer.

Would you believe that Rabalias and Hogarth were ever able to anywhere 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?[15]

Yes, laugh – but as these noble men squeak and croak and deliberate, the old tower, so long unwavering, feels a trembling in its foundations. 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 workmen. 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 townsperson who passes before it without knowing what they are doing to it 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.

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[12] Unpaid labors performed in service to the kings. Trans.

[13] The right of a king or lord to have sexual relations with the women subject to him, sometimes known as *jus primae noctis* [the right of the first night] in reference to the idea that the King or Lord would have the right to a bride on her wedding night before her husband. Trans.

[14] Hugo's actual construction is "*carlist*, et probablement *carlisse."* A pun on the notion not only supporting the royalty but of smoothing over (*lisser*) their misdeeds. Trans.

[15] The batrachomyomachia, literally a war "between frogs and mice" is the title of a Homeric parody of the Illiad, but the term refers generally a publication about any sort of petty squabble. Trans.

Thus, to tear down this tower of Louis d'Outremer, a near contemporary of the towers of the ancient Bibrax[16] – to do what neither battering rams, nor ballistae,[17] nor scorpions,[18] nor catapults, nor axes, nor picks, nor heavy equipment, nor bombardments, nor serpentine cannons,[19] nor *fauconneaux*,[20] nor culverins,[21] nor the iron cannonballs from the forges of Creil, nor the 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 much by chance across a sheet of paper by such infinitesimally tiny men. The dangerous quill of a *vingtième ordre*[22] municipal counsel! 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 it so that it might be well considered, this deed in Laon is not an isolated deed. As we write, there is not a place in France in which something analogous does not take place. It might be on a greater or a lesser scale, to a smaller or larger extent, or on a smaller or a 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, it would be impossible to conclude it.

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 the artilleryman who razes a convent from 1460 to extend a firing range, it is the functionary who made the sarcophagus of Theodebert into a pig's trough.

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

Nevertheless, one does not deserve to be spared, this curate from Fécamp who demolished the roodscreen 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

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[16] The Bibrax, or the Remi, were a Gallic tribe who occupied the region at the time of the Roman invasion. Hugo's assertion that the tower is as old as the pre-Roman tribe is a bit of a stretch. Trans.
[17] An ancient siege engine that fired spring-loaded projectiles. Trans.
[18] A kind of small projectile cannon carried by the Roman legions. Trans.
[19] A long-range cannon used during the late middle ages. Trans.
[20] A portable cannon used during the late middle ages. Trans.
[21] A canon similar to a serpentine. Trans.
[22] A reference to the twentieth order of the senate of the first republic of France which supplied rules and formats for debates in municipal matters. Trans.

executed this order from this blessed man made an admirable little house from the debris of the roodscreen that one can see in Fécamp. What a shame! What has become of the time when the priest was the supreme architect? Now-a-days 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 naïvely asked the permission of the minister to do so? Was one 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 lightning itself had the intelligence to know better and would have sooner destroyed the old steeple than let it be scrubbed by municipal counsellors! Was it not a minister of 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-fourth 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 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, the vandalism flourishes and prospers under our very gaze. Vandalism is an architect. Vandalism settles in and luxuriates. Vandalism is fêted, 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 to 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. *Que sais-je?*[23] Vandalism slathered paint across Notre-Dame, vandalism altered the towers of the Palais de Justice, vandalism razed Saint-Magloire, vandalism destroyed the Church of the Jacobins, 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, affable if need be, well-spoken and content with himself. He goes about like Maecenas.[24] He protects young talents. He is a professor. He awards the *grands prix* of architecture. He sends students to Rome. He wears an embroidered frock, an *épée* at his side and French *culottes*. He is from the institutes. 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 he 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-Beoufs into a shop selling empty barrels, or the *Hôtel de Ville* of Sens into a carriage house, or the *Maison de la Couronne d'or* into a cloth factory, or the

[23] A construction that alludes to Michel de Montaigne, literally "what do I know?" but more generally a rhetorical and skeptical question about the limits of human knowledge. Trans.
[24] An aide to the Roman emperor Augustus, Maecenas (Mécène in French) is an archetypal patron or benefactor, a man of arts and letters with royal connections. Trans.

Chapelle de Cluny into a printer's. Occasionally he plays decorator, and he demolishes Saint-Landry to construct in the place of this simple and beautiful church a large and ugly house that does not satisfy him. Sometimes he plays clerk, and he clutters Sainte-Chapelle with bureaucracy, that church that will be the most admirable jewel in Paris once he will have destroyed Notre-Dame. Occasionally he plays speculator, and in the dishonored nave of Saint-Benoît he violently packs a theatre – and what a theatre! Disgrace! The historic, solemn, holy cloister of the Benedictines 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.[25] This cathedral is, as one knows, 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 incongruously 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 again speak, 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?[26] We snatched the *Jardin des Tuileries* from the king and here are the two morsels that he keeps. All of 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 theatre 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 as long as 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 as long as a league! Don't you understand how this will be beautiful? A straight line drawn from the *Louvre* to the *Barrière du Trône*.[27] 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 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

[25] Ludovic Vitet was appointed in 1831 to be first *Inspecteur General des Monuments Historiques*, a state-funded position, to assess the monuments and national patrimony of France. Hugo's reference is to a report Vitet made the same year following a tour of monuments of northern France. Trans.
[26] Following his coronation as King of the French in 1830, Louis-Philippe I carved off two small portions of the then public gardens, separated by a moat and hedgerows, to use as private royal gardens. Trans.
[27] Today known as *Place de la Nation*. Trans.

see the *Barrière du Trône*: those two proverbial columns that you know well, slender, skinny, and ridiculous like Potier's legs.[28] O marvelous perspective!

We hope that this burlesque project will not be accomplished. If one does try to realize it, we would hope that there would be 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, gallant, 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 had not grown, either inside the church or beside the church. These chapels have become a veritable sickness for the churches. It is Saint-Acheul's wart.[29]

Since the July Revolution, such profanations have continued yet more gruesomely and fatally and in other guises. The place of a pretext of piety has been succeeded by national, liberal, patriotic, philosophical, and Voltairean pretexts. One no longer restores, one no longer ruins, one no longer 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[30] the ruins. Our poor churches can now merely 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. We want them for all of the crimes of times past to which they were witness. We would 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*.[31]

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.

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[28] M. Potier was a stock character in French comedies of the period whose skinny legs were the butt of frequent jokes. Trans.

[29] A reference to the Abbey of Saint Acheul near Ameins which was converted into a Jesuit college in the early 19th century. Trans.

[30] A reference to the destructive and violent September Massacres in Paris, September 1792. Trans.

[31] A reference to Voltaire's *Le Discours aux Welches*, a polemical essay published in 1764 in which Voltaire compares the French, whose international power was slipping against the British, to the Welsh – a people seen as barbaric, backwards and a mongrel nation victim to the vicissitudes of greater powers. Trans.

- 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.

Seeking purely economic boon, their justification is misplaced. We have already well established that these monuments are themselves capital. Many among them, that are well known to rich foreigners in France, bring in far more money 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 accept and who 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 names, 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 backrooms 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 architect: 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 of the national monuments that fate has left in their hands. We must account for the past in the future. *Posteri, posteri, vestra res agitur*.[32]

[32] A reference to a plaque said to have decorated the foot of Mount Vesuvius during the 18th and 19th centuries, meaning: posterity, posterity, you are to be concerned with such a thing. Trans.

As for those 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 on the 'modern monuments' of Paris. He has nothing kinder to say on 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 the deputies, who didn't demand better! Isn't it an insult, in a place called the *Ecole 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.[33] 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 of 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 believed, 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 imaginations; 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.

[33] In French the words for a trapezoid and a trapeze are the same and Hugo is playing with the idea that the project would amount to a costly circus. Trans.

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. Miserable men, and such imbeciles 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 belongs to everyone, to you, to me, to us all; the owner, therefore, would exceed his rights 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 of are in heat, they lay about a hundred laws, and, from their incubation there are at most two or three born viable. They make laws about everything, for everything, against everything, concerning everything. To transport boxes from 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 irreparable 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!

- 1832