Note on the Destruction of Monuments in France / I Declare War on the Vandals! (1825)

Notes:

* Originally titled “Note sur la destruction des monuments en France,” this essay came to be called “Guerre aux démolisseurs! (1825)”, the title Hugo gave to his 1832 essay on the same topic.
* Translator’s notes appear in square brackets, and italics in the text are Hugo’s.

If things go on this way much longer, there will soon remain to France no national monument except the *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques*, where the pencil of Taylor and the pen of Charles Nodier are rivals in grace, imagination, and poetry. . . .

The time has come when no one may remain silent. A universal outcry must call, at last, the new France to the rescue of the old. Desecration, degradation, and ruin of every sort are threatening the little that is left to us of these admirable monuments of the Middle Ages, which bear the imprint of the early glory of the nation, and to which are attached both the memory of kings and the traditions of the people. On the one hand, we are building at great expense unclassifiable bastard edifices, which embody the ridiculous claim to be Greek or Roman in France, and which are neither Roman nor Greek. On the other hand, other buildings, admirable and original ones, are falling, without our even bothering to look into the matter. Yet their only transgression is to be French in origin, history, and goals. At Blois, the Hall of the Estates General is in use as a barracks, and the beautiful octagonal tower of Catherine de Medicis is crumbling, buried under the rafters of a cavalry post. At Orleans, the last vestige of the walls defended by Joan of Arc has just vanished. In Paris, we know what has been done with the ancient towers of Vincennes, which kept the Donjon company so magnificently. The abbey of Sorbonne, so elegant and ornate, is falling even now to the wrecker’s ball. The beautiful Romanesque church of Saint-Germain des Prés, from which Henry IV looked out on Paris, had three spires, the only ones of their type ever to embellish the capital’s silhouette. Two of these were about to collapse. They had to be either strengthened or demolished. It was quicker to demolish them. Then, so as to “*link”* more or less this venerable monument to the ill-favored Louis XV portico that masks its entrance, the *restorers* replaced some of the old chapels with little candy-boxes having Corinthian capitals in the vein of Saint-Sulpice, and the rest has been daubed with fine canary yellow. The Gothic cathedral of Autun has suffered the same outrage. When we were through Lyon, in August of 1825, two months ago, they were hiding under a coat of pink distemper the beautiful color that the centuries had given to the cathedral of the Primate of Gaul. We saw as well the demolition, near Lyon, of the famous castle of l’Arbresle. Excuse me: the owner did preserve one of the towers. He is renting it to the local government, which is using it as a prison. A small historic town in the Forez, called Crozet, is falling into ruin, including the manor of the d’Aillecourts, the stately home where Tourville was born, and monuments that might beautify Nuremberg. In Nevers, two churches of the eleventh century are in use as stables. There was once a third such, which we did not see: it had just been razed, down to the ground. All we could do was admire, at the entrance to a hut, where they had been thrown away, two Romanesque capitals whose beauty was a testimony to that of the edifice of which they alone remained. The ancient church of Mauriac has been destroyed. At Soissons, the rich cloister of the church of Saint-Jean was allowed to collapse, along with its two towers, so light and bold. The stonecutter seeks his raw material among these magnificent ruins. The same indifference greets the charming church of Braisne, whose dismantled vault lets the rain fall onto the ten royal tombs inside.

At La-Charité-sur-Loire, near Bourges, there is a Romanesque church which, thanks to the immensity of its surface and the richness of its architecture, would rival the most famous cathedrals of Europe, were it not half ruined. It is falling one stone at a time, as obscure as the pagodas of the Orient in their sandy deserts. [*sic*] Six stagecoaches pass by daily. We visited Chambord, the Alhambra of France. It is shaky even now, weakened by the rains from above, which have seeped through the soft stone of its roofs, robbed of their lead. We state with sorrow that if something is not done promptly, in a few years, any subscription--one surely deserves to be carried out on a national basis--like the one that brought the masterwork of Primatice back to this country will be pointless, and very little indeed will remain of this building, as lovely as a fairy palace and as large as a palace of kings.

We are writing in haste, without preparation, and choosing at random some of our memories of a rapid excursion through a small portion of France. Think of it: we have unwrapped only one margin of the wound. We have listed only facts, facts that we first verified. What is going on elsewhere?

We were told that Englishmen had bought for *three hundred Francs* the right to pack up whatever they liked among the debris of the admirable abbey of Jumièges. And so the desecrations of Lord Elgin are renewed in our land, and we profit from it. The Turks sold only Greek monuments; we are going them one better: we are selling our own. It is said, besides, that the beautiful cloister of Saint-Wandrille is being hawked one piece at a time, by an ignorant and greedy owner who sees a monument as nothing but a stone quarry. For shame! [*In Latin in the text: ‘Proh pudor’*.] As we write these lines, in Paris, at the very place called “l’École des beaux arts,” a wooden staircase, carved by the marvelous artists of the fourteenth century, is in use as a ladder for masons. Admirable joinery from the Renaissance, some still wearing paint, gilded and emblazoned; wooden decor; doors touched by the tender and delicate chisel that shaped the Chateau d’Anet, all may be found there, broken, disjointed, lying heaped upon the ground, in attics, under the rafters, and even in the antechamber of the office of an individual who has settled in there, who claims the title of *architect of the École des beaux-arts,* and who treads upon them, stupidly, every day. And we shall seek in far-off places, and buy at a great price, ornaments for our museums!

Finally, it is time to put an end to this disorder, to which we draw the country’s attention. Though impoverished by Revolutionary destruction, by profit-minded speculators, and above all by classical restorers, France remains rich in French monuments. The hammer that is mutilating the face of the country must be stopped. One law would be sufficient; let it be made. Whatever the rights of the possessor, these base speculators, rendered blind to their honor by their interests, should not be permitted to destroy a historical monument--miserable men, such imbeciles that they don’t even understand that they are barbarians! There are two things in an edifice: use and beauty. Its use belongs to its proprietor, its beauty belongs to everyone. Hence destroying it is not within its owner’s rights.

Active surveillance of our monuments should be practiced. With small sacrifice, we would save buildings that, whatever else, represent enormous amounts of capital. The church of Brou alone, built near the end of the fifteenth century, cost twenty-four million, at a time when workers were paid two pence a day. Today it would cost more than one hundred fifty million. It requires only three days and three hundred Francs to tear it down.

Then even if a praiseworthy regret were to take hold of us, even if we would wish to reconstruct these prodigious edifices, we would not be able to. We no longer have the spirit of those centuries. Industry has replaced art.

Let us end this note here, though this last is another topic worthy of a whole book. He who writes these lines will return to the subject often, to the point or not, and like the old Roman who always said “I think so and so, and also Carthage must be destroyed,” this writer will repeat endlessly: “I think so and so, and also France must not be vandalized.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

[*Victor Hugo did not sign this essay when it was first published.*]

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1. Marcus Porcius Cato (called Cato The Censor, or Cato The Elder) (234-149 BC, Tusculum, Latium [Italy]) was a Roman statesman, orator, and the first Latin prose writer of importance. Convinced that the revived prosperity of Rome’s old enemy Carthage constituted a threat, Cato constantly repeated his admonition “Carthage must be destroyed” (“Delenda est Carthago”), and he lived to see war declared on Carthage in 149. (britannica.com) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)