

A dialogue with our fragile past



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The world needs to look differently at its historical memory and the cultural heritage which embodies it

It is only after our heritage is destroyed, in natural disasters and conflicts, that we realise how fragile historical memory is — even for a globalised period of history like ours. The large fire that broke out in Paris on Monday and which consumed a part of the [Cathedral of Notre-Dame](#), is a grim reminder that centuries of heritage can be destroyed in minutes. Of course the French people can rebuild the physical structure and in this enterprise they will be certainly supported by the vast wealth of Europe, America and others, made possible by centuries of industrialisation and capital accumulation. But rebuilding the Notre-Dame de Paris does not mean that we can necessarily renew its original spirit — of blocks of sandstones which narrate their own geological and social history.

Undoubtedly, for over 800 years, the cathedral has been the driving force behind the eternal return of Paris as the 'Heart of the World'.

Repository of history

As a powerful spiritual symbol of Christian faith, it counts many treasures, such as the crown of thorns, which are believed to have been placed on Jesus Christ's head. Joan of Arc was beatified in the cathedral in 1909, after her execution for heresy in 1431. And, for more than three centuries, Notre-Dame has stood as a symbol of political change in [France](#). During the French Revolution, its treasures were plundered. However, as seen in the famous painting of Jacques-Louis David, Napoleon Bonaparte

crowned himself emperor of France at Notre-Dame in 1804. Other famous political ceremonies of the 20th and 21st centuries in France, such as the liberation of Paris from Nazi occupation in 1944, the farewell to Charles de Gaulle in 1970, and a requiem mass in tribute to François Mitterrand in 1996, took place in the Notre-Dame Cathedral.

Last but not least, for nearly nine centuries, Notre-Dame has been at the centre of French and world literature. We all remember Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831) with the cathedral as its centre plot. Hugo's multiple references to the architecture of the Cathedral are breathtaking and stupefying.

Strangely, it is as if Hugo was present at the [fire](#), when he described flames in the cathedral (when Quasimodo uses fire and stones to attack Truands in order to save Esmerelda): "All eyes were raised to the top of the church. They beheld there an extraordinary sight. On the crest of the highest gallery, higher than the central rose window, there was a great flame rising between the two towers with whirlwinds of sparks, a vast, disordered, and furious flame, a tongue of which was borne into the smoke by the wind, from time to time."

Even for those of us who are not religious and yet believe in the cathedral as a spiritual home and a monument in glory of the human creativity, the horrific fire destroying this Gothic edifice has been a moment of tragedy and despair. Time might have been the devourer of Notre-Dame as Hugo wrote in his novel, but humanity has long been the enemy of its own heritage.

Spirit of freedom

As a matter of fact, what was important for Hugo, as for many other writers and intellectuals of his time, was the spirit of freedom represented by Notre-Dame. As he put it clearly, "There exists in this era, for thoughts written in stone, a privilege absolutely comparable to our current freedom of the press. It is the freedom of architecture." Hugo is right. To feel the spirit of Notre-Dame, as that of Paris, one needs the freedom of a flâneur. One needs to allow one's gaze to be further absorbed by the play of light upon a meaningful stone that remained alive after a catastrophe.

Without the stones of Notre-Dame, these aesthetic compasses, we would never be able to take our responsibilities in the world. If we want to be at home in this century, even at a price of living in a topsy-turvy world, we must try to take part in a dialogue with our fragile past. We need to educate our senses and to look differently at our historical memory and the cultural heritage which embodies it.

For centuries, humanity has witnessed the destruction of its historical memory, and each time a new door to our common fate is closed forever. We all believe that this should not happen anymore. But it does happen, and we cannot reconcile ourselves with it. None of us can.

However, within this horizon of despair, which manifests itself in the fragility of human [history](#), there is a moral horizon that expresses a love of humanity in spite of its brokenness. Heritage, therefore, expresses a joy of witnessing the past despite the sadness of historical destruction. It is this joy of witnessing the past that becomes an awareness of our landscape of memory. This awareness is the strongest evidence of the victory of peaceful coexistence between the past and the present. Those who fail to see it, forget to make a prayer that one day the organ pipes of Notre-Dame of Paris will once again reverberate through the sanctuary.

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