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# FRAGMENTS OF ARTWORKS, FIRE, AND LOSS IN DIDEROT AND BALZAC

Kerr Houston

*L'inventeur de la poésie des ruines, dans notre littérature, c'est bien Diderot.*
—Roland Mortier[1]

In a brief article published in 1950, Margaret Gilman offered a compelling way out of a seeming dilemma.[2] For decades, scholars had wondered about the authorship of the lengthy discourses on painting that were added, in an 1837 revision, to Balzac's celebrated *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*. Had Balzac, some wondered, collaborated with Eugène Delacroix in writing the additional text? Or had the new sections perhaps been composed by Théophile Gautier? No, replied Gilman, citing a variety of difficulties with such hypotheses. Instead, she proposed, they were by Balzac alone but drew heavily on the writings of Denis Diderot. The majority of Diderot's art criticism, she observed, had been published before 1837 and would have been easily available to Balzac. And while there are few exact verbal matches between Diderot's texts and Balzac's story, the thematic and conceptual resemblances, contended Gilman, "are so marked that I find it difficult to believe that they could be a matter of coincidence."[3] The conception of imitation, the notion of a *modèle idéal,* the techniques by which life can be obtained in painting: some of the most important ideas in the 1837 revisions were present as well, Gilman concluded, in Diderot's writings on art.

In this article, I would like to extend Gilman's point by noting a further, and earlier, link between Balzac's story and the writings of Diderot. Gilman, again, concentrated on the passages added to the 1837 version of the story. But, in fact, Balzac had already read portions of Diderot's *Salons* when he first published *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* in 1831.[4] Moreover, Balzac's story was initially published serially in *L'Artiste*—the very journal that was simultaneously running excerpts of Diderot's *Salons*.[5] It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the very climax of Balzac's story, as originally published in 1831, involves a passage that recalls several moments in Diderot's *Salons* of 1765 and 1767.

Let us turn to the sources. In the final paragraphs of *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu,* the aged master Frenhofer finally allows Porbus and Poussin (two talented younger painters) to see the painting on which he has labored for years. Given that Frenhofer has spoken repeatedly of his exhausting efforts to capture female beauty and given that he has used Poussin's own mistress as a model, Porbus and Poussin fully expect to see an image of a woman. But, no. Instead, they can perceive only a mass of colors, a cloud of strokes, from which a single recognizable detail finally emerges:

> *Alors, en s'approchant, ils remarquèrent dans un coin de la toile, le bout d'un pied nu qui sortait de ce chaos de couleurs, de tons, de nuances indécises, espèce de brouillard sans forme; mais un pied . . . délicieux, un pied vivant!* [6]

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> Coming closer, they discerned, in one corner of the canvas, the tip of a bare foot emerging from this chaos of colors, shapes, and vague shadings, a kind of incoherent mist; but a delightful foot, a living foot![7]

The two younger men are simply amazed by the detail:

> *Ils restèrent pétrifiés d'admiration devant ce fragment échappé dans l'œuvre à une incroyable, à une incroyable destruction lente et progressive. Ce pied apparaissait là comme le torse de quelque Vénus en marbre de Paros qui surgirait, riche de beautés, parmi les décombres d'une ville incendiée.*[8]

> They stood stock-still with admiration before this fragment which had escaped from an incredible, slow, and advancing destruction. That foot appeared there like the torso of some Parian marble Venus rising out of the ruins of a city burned to ashes.[9]

A fragment, spared by fire: the image is a moving and evocative one. And yet it was not completely original to Balzac. After all, Diderot had employed a comparable image in the first few pages of his *Salon* of 1765. At the very end—the climax, one might say—of his discussion of Carle Vanloo's *Augustus Closing the Doors of the Temple of Janus,* the very first work of art treated in that *Salon,* Diderot had also described the force of a fragment of a work of art that had escaped damage by fire:

> *Cependant si dans l'absence de l'artiste le feu eût pris à cette composition, et n'eût épargné que le grouppe des prêtres, et quelques têtes éparses par-ci, par-là, nous nous serions tous écrié à l'aspect de ces précieux restes, quel dommage!*[10]

> And yet if, after the artist's death, a fire had consumed this composition, sparing only the group of priests and a few scattered heads, all of us would have acknowledged the impression these precious remains made on us by crying out: What a shame![11]

Now, to be sure, the two accounts differ considerably. The wordings, for one thing, differ entirely. In Diderot, the hypothetical viewers of the fragment cry out in admiration; in Balzac, they stand petrified. Diderot writes of the "*précieux restes*"; Balzac refers instead to a "*fragment.*" As Gilman acknowledged in 1950, then, Balzac's story does not depend directly upon Diderot's work when it comes to diction. Furthermore, the works of art described by the two authors are also distinct: where Diderot imagines damage to an extant painting by Vanloo, Balzac compares an imagined painting to an imagined sculpture. Despite such differences, however, the two passages exhibit a number of similarities. Both comment on the reaction of imagined viewers, and both employ an exclamation point as a means of suggesting the potency of the improbable survivals. And, most importantly, both center upon an imagined fragment of an artwork that has only partially escaped damage by fire. Both, in other words, describe a sort of ruin in which a surviving fragment acts as a metonym, implying the value of something largely destroyed.

One might argue that in invoking the force of a ruin, Diderot and Balzac were merely typical of their period. After all, references to ruins were quite common in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Travelers to sites such as Palmyra and Baalbek spoke excitedly about their evocative potency, and the ongoing excavations at Herculaneum and Pompeii fanned interest in archaeology's ability to reclaim parts of those lost towns. By the early 1800s, moreover, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars had reduced much of

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Europe to rubble. Consequently, as Thomas McFarland has observed, "incompleteness, fragmentation, and ruin . . . not only receive a special emphasis in Romanticism but also in a certain perspective seem actually to define that phenomenon."[12] One thinks, for instance, of Chateaubriand's well-known claim that

> *tous les hommes ont un secret attrait pour les ruines. Ce sentiment tient à la fragilité de notre nature, à une conformité secrete entre ces monuments détruits et la rapidité de notre existence.*[13]

But dozens of other examples, ranging from Normand Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville's *Le Dernier Homme* (an 1800 work in which a disoriented protagonist wanders through an almost entirely destroyed Paris before finally coming across a solitary statue of Napoleon) to Shelley's "Ozymandias" (written in reaction to the 1816 discovery of a massive fragment of a colossal statue of Ramses II), make a similar point. Fragmentary ruins, clearly, were a popular subject in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writing.

Critically, though, it was Diderot who invented what might be called a *poétique des ruins*. Indeed, in his *Salon* of 1767, Diderot used that very phrase after describing the way in which paintings of ruins can create a sweet melancholy by prompting a viewer to consider the inevitable destructive effects of time on his own surroundings. And in his other writings, Diderot frequently extended this idea, noting that ruins have a special ability to remind us of the fragility of our aspirations to eternity and of the impermanence of all existing things—even reading them, in turn, as evidence of the limits of despotism.[14] But Diderot was not merely interested in the ways in which ruins could spark moral or philosophical meditations. At times, he was also sensitive to the peculiar aesthetic qualities of fragments, arguing that they had a greater potency than entire, conserved monuments. Consequently, it seems fair to conclude, as Roland Mortier once did, that no writer before Diderot had grasped the richness and complexity of the theme of ruins as subtly as he did.[15]

Balzac's reference to a marble Venus rising out of the ruins of a city burned to ashes, then, already owed Diderot a broad, indirect debt. But his description of Frenhofer's painting also evokes Diderot's ideas on a more specific plane: it contains what Seznec once called, in a different context, "perceptible echoes" of Diderot. For example, in writing on a painting by Hubert Robert (identified merely as *Autres Ruines*) in his *Salon* of 1767, Diderot offered some advice:

> *Peintres de ruines, si vous conservez un fragment de bas relief, qu'il soit du plus beau travail et qu'il représente toujours quelque action intéressante d'une date fort antérieure aux temps florissans de la cité ruinée. Vous produirez ainsi deux effets: vous me ramènerez d'autant plus loin dans l'enfoncement des temps, et vous m'inspirerez d'autant plus de vénération et de regret pour un peuple qui avait possédé les beaux arts à un si haut degré de perfection.*[16]

> Painters of ruins, if you include a relief fragment, let it be of the finest workmanship, and have it always depict an interesting action from a period antecedent to the flourishing peak of the ruined city. You will thus produce two effects: you'll transport me that much further back into the past, and you'll awaken within me all the more veneration and sorrow for a people that had brought the fine arts to such a degree of perfection.[17]

And then, critically, Diderot offered a specific hypothetical example. "If you truncate

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a statue," he continued, "be sure the legs and feet remaining on its base are of the highest quality and in the most exalted taste."[18]

In describing the foot in Frenhofer's painting in rapturous terms ("a delightful foot, a living foot!"), then, and in comparing it to a fragment of a Venus rising out of the ruins of a city burned to ashes, Balzac was effectively following Diderot's lead. Porbus, Poussin, and the reader are all prompted, by means of such strategies, to feel a bittersweet combination of awe and regret—or veneration and sorrow, to use Diderot's terms—for the master painter's obscured accomplishment. Painting, according to both Diderot and Balzac, is supremely taxing, and even the most skilled painters have their weak moments. Occasionally, though, they manage to produce truly transcendent passages.

But it is also important to consider the broader contexts in which these accounts of loss appear. Diderot's account of Vanloo's painting, after all, formed part of a valediction or eulogy: Vanloo had recently died, and Diderot consequently opened his *Salon* by paying tribute to the accomplished painter. Viewed in this light, Diderot's openly hypothetical reference to a burned canvas acquires a certain touching appropriateness. He is effectively asking the reader to imagine a currently intact painting as a charred fragment and, in the process, is using the motif of a ruined fragment to invoke the *anticipation* of loss.[19] Indeed, in his *Salon* of 1767, Diderot would carry this idea even further, in writing on paintings of ruins: "We contemplate the ravages of time, and in our imagination we scatter the rubble of the very buildings in which we live over the ground."[20] *The very buildings in which we live:* Diderot, here, was nominally referring to structures, but he was also implicitly speaking of our mortal bodies. A building falls to the ground. A painting yields to flames. A prominent member of the Royal Academy of painting dies.

Which leads us, finally, back to the very end of Balzac's *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* in its final, revised form. "The next day," we read, in the story's last sentence, "a worried Porbus visited Frenhofer again and was told that he had died during the night, after burning his canvases."[21] As in Diderot, then, the work of art has been ruined by fire, and a gifted painter is dead. And we are left feeling what Diderot called, in his analysis of the poetics of ruins, a *douce mélancolie,* or sweet melancholy.[22]

## NOTES

1. Roland Mortier, *La poétique des ruines en France: Ses origines, ses variations, de la Renaissance à Victor Hugo* (Geneva: Droz, 1974), p. 91.

2. Margaret Gilman, "Balzac and Diderot: *Le Chef-d'Œuvre Inconnu,*" *PMLA* 65, no. 4 (June 1950):644–648.

3. *Ibid.,* p. 645.

4. Jean Seznec, "Diderot et *Sarrasine,*" *Diderot Studies* 4 (1963):237–245. As Seznec points out, the aesthetic philosophy advanced in Balzac's 1830 novel *Sarrasine* was based upon comparable passages in Diderot's *Salon* of 1767. Also worth noting in this context is "The Diderot and Balzac Affinity," a 1959 Columbia University thesis by S. J. Gendzier.

5. Honoré de Balzac's "Maître Frenhofer" appeared in *L'Artiste: Journal de la Littérature et des Beaux-Arts* première série, no. 1 (31 July 1831):319–323, and his "Catherine Lescaut" appeared in the next issue, *L'Artiste* no. 2 (4 Aug. 1831):7–10. For a parallel observation regarding the simultaneous publication of Diderot's *Salons* in *L'Artiste,* see Helen Osterman Borowitz, *The Impact of Art on French Literature:*

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*From de Scudéry to Proust* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985), p. 16.

6. Balzac, "Catherine Lescaut," 10. The passage cited here was modified slightly in later versions of the story: *remarquèrent* was changed to *aperçurent,* and some of the punctuation was altered.

7. Honoré de Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece; and Gambara,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: New York Review Books, 2001), pp. 40–41.

8. *Id.,* "Catherine Lescaut," 10.

9. *Id., The Unknown Masterpiece,* p. 41.

10. Denis Diderot, *Salons,* ed. and trans. Jean Seznec, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975–1983), II, p. 62.

11. *Diderot on Art,* ed. and trans. John Goodman, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), I, p. 11.

12. Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Modalities of Fragmentation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 7. Also relevant here is Peter Fritzsche, "Chateaubriand's Ruins: Loss and Memory after the French Revolution," *History and Memory* 10, no. 2 (1998):102–117, esp. 104.

13. McFarland, p. 15.

14. Anne Betty Weinshenker, "Diderot's Use of the Ruin-Image," *Diderot Studies* 16 (1973):309–329.

15. Mortier, pp. 97 and *passim.*

16. Diderot, III, p. 246.

17. *Diderot on Art,* II, p. 217.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Mortier, p. 93.

20. *Diderot on Art,* II, p. 197. For the original French, see Diderot, III, p. 227: "Nous anticipons sur les ravages du temps, et notre imagination disperse sur la terre les édifices mêmes que nous habitons."

21. See Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece,* p. 44.

22. Diderot, III, p. 227; *Diderot on Art,* II, p. 196.

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