

READING GUIDE

«Pillage»

Novel by Robert Casanovas — Second revised and corrected edition (2025)

Historical fiction — the sack of the Summer Palace, memory and cultural restitution

1. Fact sheet

Title: Pillage

Author: Robert Casanovas

Genre: Historical novel / documentary chronicle, multiple voices (France – China)

Structure: Foreword + Prologue + 4 chapters + Epilogue

Edition: Second revised and corrected edition, legal deposit December 2025 (ebook and print)

ISBN: 979-10-980731-9-9

Period(s) covered: 1859-1863 (expedition, plunder and the creation of the Fontainebleau Chinese Museum) and up to 2023 (documentary afterword on the contemporary restitution debate)

Main locations: Paris; the China Sea and the Dagu forts; Peking and the Summer Palace (Yuen-Ming-Yuen); Shanghai; Singapore; Fontainebleau

Complementary resource: The Chinese Museum at Fontainebleau, a real creation of Empress Eugénie, serves as a bridge between fiction and the real debate on restitution

Associated publisher: International Restitutions (NGO chaired by the author)

2. General presentation

«Pillage» reconstructs the sack of the Summer Palace (Yuen-Ming-Yuen), near Peking, in October 1860, during the Second Opium War. The novel interweaves the viewpoints of the Franco-British high command (General de Montauban, Lord Elgin, Baron Gros), ordinary soldiers, Chinese witnesses to the sack — chief eunuch An Dehai and gardener Chen Wei — and Empress Eugénie, who creates the museum at Fontainebleau meant to receive the loot. The narrative thus follows three time frames: the decision and execution of the looting and then the fire (1860), the loot's journey to France and the setting up of the museum (1860-1862), and finally a documentary epilogue that extends the story to the contemporary debate on the restitution of the works, up to 2023.

As the opening foreword states, the novel draws on thorough historical research — military reports, surviving Chinese testimonies, contemporary articles, European museum archives. While some characters are fictional as individuals, their experiences echo real accounts from survivors; the objects, buildings and events are treated with the precision the available sources allow. Victor Hugo's letter condemning the plunder, woven into the narrative, is an authentic document from 1861.

3. Chapter-by-chapter summary

Foreword — opening note

The author situates the novel between reconstruction and fiction: historical figures are named, while fictional characters embody experiences attested to by real testimonies. The Summer Palace is presented as one of the great cultural losses of the 19th century.

Prologue — Paris, 4 November 1859

Marshal Randon entrusts General Cousin de Montauban with command of the French expeditionary corps in China, alongside Lord Elgin's British forces. The official mission is to enforce the Treaty of Tientsin; rumours of the Summer Palace's treasures remain, for now, mere “circumstances” left unresolved.

Chapter 1 — The road to infamy

Montauban's Parisian farewells to his wife Louise let an unspoken worry show through. Aboard ship, Sergeant Beaumont oversees young recruits (Dubois, Leroux) terrified by the crossing to China. In Hong Kong and then Tientsin, strategic tensions between Montauban, General Grant and Lord Elgin flare up, tempered by Baron Gros. The torture-killing of eighteen European emissaries captured by the Chinese pushes Elgin to demand an exemplary “justice”: the destruction of the Summer Palace, which Gros opposes and Montauban delays.

Chapter 2 — The treasure of the Son of Heaven

Montauban tasks three cultivated officers — Bessières, Fould, Lambert — with becoming “commissioners for the spoils of war” and selecting three hundred objects for the Emperor and Empress Eugénie. The meticulous inventory of the throne room, then of the rest of the palace, mixes aesthetic wonder with growing unease at the scale of the sack already underway among the troops.

Chapter 3 — The silent witnesses

On the night of 17 to 18 October 1860, An Dehai, chief eunuch for forty-one years, grasps the scale of the catastrophe with his young protégé Li Lianying. The palace falls, the Great Library burns. An Dehai, Li Lianying and the eunuch Cui Yugui wander through the ruins, gather Qin Yue's testimony about the death of her younger sister Qin Mei, bury her in the plum orchard, and keep a register of the ninety-three victims of the sack before fleeing to the hills, henceforth “eternal guardians” of the palace's memory.

Chapter 4 — The journey

Lieutenant Henri Roux escorts sixty-seven crates of loot to France aboard L'Avalanche, under the critical eye of Captain Morand, who judges the mission close to piracy. In Paris, Roux meets Chen Wei, a former gardener of the Summer Palace exiled and taken in by Father Durand, who bequeaths him a jade pebble and invites him to bear witness. At Fontainebleau, Empress Eugénie inaugurates the Chinese museum while receiving an accusatory letter from Victor Hugo, exiled in Guernsey, which confronts her with her own guilt.

Epilogue

Documentary afterword: the fates of the characters (An Dehai's notebooks found in 1985, Roux's diary published in 1932, the jade bequeathed to the Musée Guimet) join the real history of the Fontainebleau Chinese museum and the contemporary restitution debate, up to a visit by Chinese students in 2023.

4. Main characters

General Charles Cousin de Montauban (1796-1878), later Count of Palikao

Commander of the French expeditionary corps; torn between military discipline and scruples, he refuses to take part in the fire without ever openly opposing the looting.

Lord Elgin (British plenipotentiary)

Orders the destruction of the palace in reprisal for the death of the tortured European emissaries; embodies the logic of punitive “justice” raised to a principle.

Baron Gros (French plenipotentiary)

The only voice to openly oppose the destruction of the palace, in the name of preserving humanity's heritage.

Henri Roux (artillery lieutenant)

Tasked with escorting the loot to France; his meeting with Chen Wei and his private diary make him the witness who chooses truth over a sanitised report.

Auguste Morand (naval officer)

The novel's critical conscience, he names the plunder and the hypocrisy of the civilising mission without flinching; ends his career as a vice-admiral, gnawed by a belated regret.

An Dehai (Chief Eunuch)

Keeper of the palace's memory for forty-one years; through his notebooks, he becomes the Chinese witness to the destruction and the guardian of the victims' names.

Chen Wei (former gardener of the Pavilion of Peacocks)

Exiled in Paris, he gives Roux the intimate account of the vanished gardens and entrusts him with a jade pebble, the sole vestige saved from the palace.

Empress Eugénie (1826-1920)

Creator of the Chinese museum at Fontainebleau; her confrontation with Victor Hugo's letter reveals a guilt she acknowledges but never acts upon.

Victor Hugo (1802-1885)

From his exile in Guernsey, his letter — an authentic 1861 document — calls France and England “two bandits” and demands the restitution of the objects to China.

5. Main themes

Theft dressed as procedure

By the ordinance of 3 May 1832, war spoils become a regulated “sharing” — without ever ceasing, in the very dialogue that lays it bare, to be called theft by those who carry it out.

The torture of a few as collective justification

The death of eighteen captured emissaries serves as grounds for destroying an entire palace: the novel questions the proportion between an individual crime and a mass reprisal.

Naming the dead against the anonymity of tallies

Against the high command's numerical tallies, An Dehai draws up a register that gives each victim of the sack a name, an age and a dream — including young Qin Mei, fifteen years old.

What remains of a destroyed place

Chen Wei's jade pebble, the porcelains with visible cracks, Su Dongpo's poem saved from the flames: the novel dwells on what materially survives a total destruction.

Knowing without acting

Eugénie, Roux and Morand each recognise, inwardly or in writing, the nature of the crime they took part in — without any of them, within the timeframe of the novel, going as far as actual reparation.

6. Documented and invented parts

The sack and then the burning of the Yuen-Ming-Yuen in October 1860, decided by Lord Elgin in reprisal for the death of tortured European emissaries, as well as Empress Eugénie's creation of the Chinese museum at Fontainebleau — still standing today — are established facts of the Second Opium War. The letter quoted in Chapter 4, which calls France and England “two bandits”, reproduces the authentic text that Victor Hugo sent from his exile in Guernsey in 1861, which has since become a reference text on cultural spoliation in wartime.

What remains invented are the dialogues and the private thoughts lent to the historical figures (Montauban, Elgin, Gros, Eugénie), as well as all the characters who carry the novel's gaze on the defeated — An Dehai, Li Lianying, Cui Yugui, Qin Mei and Qin Yue, Chen Wei — and on the French troops — Roux, Morand, Beaumont, Dubois. According to the author's foreword, these characters embody experiences attested by real survivor testimonies, without themselves being a transcription of them. The fate given to each of them in the epilogue — notebooks found, diary published, jade bequeathed to the Musée Guimet — fictionally extends the real history of the Fontainebleau museum up to the contemporary restitution debate.

7. Narrative construction and style

- A structure into only four ample chapters, each devoted to a distinct link in the chain of plunder (the decision, the inventory, the destruction, the transport), rather than a succession of short scenes.
- Alternating cross-cutting rather than a single thread: the novel entirely leaves one group of characters behind at each chapter to follow another, with no figure running through the whole narrative from start to finish.
- A Chapter 3 entirely carried by Chinese characters (An Dehai, Li Lianying, Cui Yugui, Qin Yue), the novel's only moment where the French voice disappears entirely from the narration.
- Scenes of physical violence described without ellipsis (hand-to-hand killing, amputations, the burning of the library), which contrast with the restraint of the command scenes.
- A dossier-epilogue that does not close the plot but traces, character by character, what becomes of each of them over more than a century, in the manner of a historical research notebook.

8. Notable quotations

The euphemism unmasked — Chapter 4

“Filled with imperial treasures. — Stolen, you mean.”

Morand's admission — Chapter 4

“We are pirates in uniform.”

An Dehai's plea — Chapter 3

“You are punishing eight hundred years of art for the actions of a few men.”

Victor Hugo's letter — Chapter 4

“One looted, the other burned.”

Chen Wei's legacy — Chapter 4

“These objects do not belong to you. But you are now their guardians.”

Ma Dequan's lesson, reported by An Dehai — Chapter 3

“We are not what they made of us. We are what we choose to be despite it.”

9. Critical analysis

Strengths

- Chapter 3, carried from beginning to end by Chinese characters with no French viewpoint intervening, gives the sack of the palace a version that does not pass through the victors.
- Victor Hugo's letter, a real document inserted as such into the fiction, tips an entire scene of the novel toward the archive without any break in tone.
- The contrast, never commented on but always perceptible, between the legal vocabulary of sharing and the physical description of the sack, spares the novel any moralising tone.
- An Dehai's act of recording the full identity of an anonymous victim (Qin Mei) gives the register of the dead a significance that goes beyond mere war statistics.

Limitations and points of caution

- No character runs through all four chapters: this lack of a single connecting thread, while it serves the cross-cutting structure, may also dilute the reader's attachment over the course of the novel.
- Chapter 4 alone combines the loot's journey, the meeting with Chen Wei and the Eugénie/Hugo scene, whereas each of the first three chapters focuses on a single event.
- The female characters — Louise de Montauban, Qin Yue, the Duchess of Malakoff — remain confined to secondary roles, with none carrying, as Eugénie does, a full-fledged scene of conscience.
- The Chinese characters of Chapter 3 (Qin Mei, Cui Yugui, Li Lianying) then disappear from the narrative: unlike the French characters, their fate is not taken up again in the epilogue.

10. Conclusion

«Pillage» reconstructs an established but little-known episode for the French general public — the sack of the Summer Palace — by giving voice to both camps, victors and vanquished, where classic historiography often retains only the victors' version. Its strength lies in this cross-cutting construction, which shifts without transition from the war council to the night of a Chinese eunuch, and in the insertion of an authentic document — Victor Hugo's letter — at the very heart of the fiction. The novel thus works both as a reconstruction of a colonial act of war and as a plea for the restitution of cultural

COMPLETE STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

PILLAGE

Novel by Robert Casanovas

A study of language, narrative construction and rhetorical effects

Carried out by Pierre Collonges

Alternating montage — Writings of testimony — Two registers of language — Violence and restraint — A real document within the fiction

Methodological introduction

This study examines «Pillage» by Robert Casanovas in its entirety (foreword, prologue, four chapters, epilogue). Rather than imposing a pre-established analytical grid on the text, it starts from the elements that make this particular novel distinctive: a structure into only four blocks, a montage that entirely abandons one camp for the other from one chapter to the next, a depiction of physical violence without mitigation, and the insertion, at the heart of the fiction, of an authentic historical document. It is from these observations, specific to «Pillage», that the following sections are built.

1. An alternating montage, with no single connecting thread

«Pillage» does not follow a hero who runs through the whole narrative: each chapter entirely changes group of characters, setting and camp. Chapter 1 belongs to the Franco-British command, Chapter 2 to three inventory-taking officers, Chapter 3 switches without transition to the Chinese side — no Frenchman appears in it —, Chapter 4 returns to France with an entirely new character, Lieutenant Roux. This montage of watertight blocks, close to cinematic cross-cutting, forces the reader to reconstruct the links between the viewpoints themselves rather than receive them from a relay narrator.

Chapter 3, entirely carried by An Dehai, Li Lianying, Cui Yugui and Qin Yue, is in this respect the book's boldest gesture: for an entire chapter, the voice and the gaze belong exclusively to the vanquished, overturning the narrative hierarchy that the other three chapters might have installed by default.

2. Two registers of language that never mix

The novel juxtaposes, without merging them, two opposing modes of writing. On one side, the language of command and law — “commissioners for the spoils of war”, “ordinance of 3 May 1832”, “article 119”, “sharing” — which dresses the looting up as administrative procedure. On the other, a raw, concrete language to describe the act itself: porcelains cracking underfoot, a man collapsing “coughing up blood”, a library reduced to “fine grey ashes”. The novel does not comment on this gap: it simply lets the two languages follow one another, page after page, leaving it to the reader to gauge the distance between the word and the thing.

“Filled with imperial treasures. — Stolen, you mean.”

Chapter 4 — the two registers collide within a single exchange.

A third register, rarer, appears whenever speech passes to the Chinese characters: the vocabulary of gardens, calligraphy, tea, a slower cadence of sentences — as though the language itself changed rhythm along with the speaker.

3. Written testimony as a political gesture

Three characters put in writing what they dare not say aloud: Lieutenant Roux keeps a diary, Empress Eugénie confides her doubts to hers, An Dehai draws up a register of the dead and then notebooks that will be hidden for

more than a century. None of the three reads the others' writings: the novel does not make them converse with one another, it makes them converge, independently, on the same conclusion. Private writing thus becomes, in this novel, the only space where official truth can be contradicted without immediate consequence.

"Looted. Things must be called by their name."

Chapter 4 — the first sentence Roux dares write, after having suppressed it aloud.

An Dehai goes further than mere private admission: he names. The passage in which he records the full identity of a young gardener girl killed during the sack — her age, her tastes, her dreams — turns the act of writing into an act of resistance in itself, set point by point against the high command's anonymous tallies.

4. A frontal depiction of violence

Unlike a novel that would hold the battle at a distance, «Pillage» films the killing, the amputation without opium, the fire spreading through the shelves, up close. This physical proximity is never gratuitous: it almost always serves to tip a character over, like young Dubois who, after killing a man in hand-to-hand combat, will never recover.

"Something had just broken inside him, something that would never be repaired."

Chapter 1 — Dubois, immediately after his first combat.

This frontal quality sets the novel apart from a purely diplomatic reconstruction: violence is not evoked scenery, it is the material condition that the high command's deliberations, higher up in the text, are precisely occupied with never naming.

5. A real document grafted into the fiction

The novel incorporates, with no signal other than its author's name, a text that is not fiction: the letter that Victor Hugo actually sent in 1861, from his exile in Guernsey, to condemn the sack of the Summer Palace. This documentary graft — having the fictional character of Eugénie read a text that the historical empress actually received — creates a tipping point where the boundary between novel and document disappears completely, for the duration of a scene.

"One looted, the other burned."

Chapter 4 — excerpt from Victor Hugo's authentic letter, reproduced in the narrative.

The scene that follows — Eugénie rereading the letter, recognising herself in it, yet refusing to act — is entirely invented: it is this articulation between a verifiable text and an imagined conscience that constitutes, more than a simple scholarly borrowing, the novel's most singular stylistic gesture.

6. A sentence that spans a century and a half

A single formula recurs, almost word for word, at three distinct moments of the book, separated by more than a hundred years of novelistic time: from the mouth of Chen Wei facing Roux, then from Roux's own pen in his diary, then in the narrator's voice on the very last page, concerning the museum as it exists today.

"These objects do not belong to you. But you are now their guardians."

Chapter 4 — Chen Wei to Roux; the same idea closes the novel in the epilogue.

Unlike a simple thematic echo, this repetition is literal: the word “guardians” is never replaced by a synonym, as though the author wanted it recognised physically page after page, regardless of the character who utters it.

7. Rhythm: from the short sentence to the archival paragraph

The novel's rhythm varies sharply according to what it recounts. Scenes of combat and mourning (Chapters 1 and 3) proceed by short, sometimes nominal, sentences that speed up the reading tempo.

"Beautiful. Precious. Stolen."

Chapter 4 — three words closing the museum scene.

By contrast, the epilogue adopts a syntax of historical synthesis, with paragraphs that sum up several decades in a single sentence ("An Dehai's notebooks survived [...] they were finally gathered together and published in 1985"). This shift in tempo, more marked than a mere change of scene, makes the epilogue a text apart, closer to a documentary dossier than to narrative.

8. Stylistic strengths and limitations

Strengths

- A montage of watertight blocks that gives the Chinese chapter (Chapter 3) a rare narrative autonomy, without ever subordinating it to a French viewpoint.
- A successful graft of an authentic historical document — Victor Hugo's letter — which shifts, for the duration of a scene, the boundary between fiction and archive.
- A motif-sentence ("you are their guardians") repeated identically a century and a half apart, which gives the novel a verbal architecture visible to the naked eye.
- A refusal of euphemism in the scenes of violence, which spares the novel from reducing the war to its purely diplomatic dimension.

Limitations and points of caution

- The block montage, while it gives Chapter 3 its strength, also deprives the reader of a character who would run through the whole book and emotionally unify it.
- Chapter 4, the only one to cover several months and two continents, concentrates most of the scenes of moral resolution on its own, at the expense of a volumetric balance among the four chapters.
- The epilogue, of an almost documentary character, marks a sharp rhythmic break from the preceding narrative, to the point of reading almost like an appended text.
- The secondary Chinese characters (Qin Mei, Cui Yugui, Li Lianying) appear only in Chapter 3 and then disappear from the narrative, their fate not taken up again in the epilogue, unlike that of the French characters.

Conclusion

The style of «Pillage» owes less to a palette of rhetorical figures than to a construction device: a block montage that gives, once in the book, the floor entirely to the vanquished; two languages that never translate into one another, that of the law and that of the body; a real document slipped into the fiction; a sentence that recurs, identical, a century and a half apart. It is this architecture, more than any single isolated device, that makes the novel a reconstruction that refuses to choose between document and narrative.

"These objects do not belong to us. But we are now their guardians."

A formula repeated three times in the novel — the only one that, on its own, sums up its purpose.