

DETAILED BOOK REVIEW

"PILLAGE"

Historical Novel by Robert Casanovas

Book review prepared by Claude (Anthropic Generative AI)

I. BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Title: Pillage

Author: Robert Casanovas

Genre: Historical Novel

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Author's Other Works:

- The Stolen Room (novel)
- The Will Was a Fake (novel)

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Central Event: The Sack of the Summer Palace (1860)

The novel is based on one of the most controversial episodes in colonial history: the destruction and looting of Yuanmingyuan (圓明園, "Garden of Perfect Brightness"), also known as the Summer Palace, located near Beijing.

Geopolitical Context:

- **The Second Opium War (1856-1860):** Conflict between Qing Dynasty China and a Franco-British alliance
- **Western Objectives:** Force China to open up trade, obtain territorial and diplomatic concessions
- **British Failure of 1859:** During the first attempt, British forces under Admiral Hope were repulsed at the mouth of the Pei-Ho River, losing four ships and hundreds of men

The 1860 Expedition:

- **French Forces:** 10,000 soldiers commanded by General Charles Guillaume Cousin de Montauban (future Count of Palikao)
- **British Forces:** 12,000 men under the command of General Grant and diplomat Lord Elgin
- **Timeline:** Departure from France in November 1859, arrival in Hong Kong in February 1860, advance toward Beijing in summer, capture and destruction of the Summer Palace in October 1860

Yuanmingyuan Before Its Destruction:

- Palace complex covering 350 hectares
- More than 200 buildings and pavilions
- French-style gardens designed by Jesuits
- Imperial collections accumulated over several dynasties
- Favorite summer residence of Emperor Xianfeng (Hien-Fung)
- Considered one of the architectural wonders of the world

III. NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Organization of the Narrative

Prologue: Paris, November 4, 1859

Setting up the expedition during a meeting between General Montauban and Marshal Randon, Minister of War.

Chapter 1: The Road of Infamy

Departure of the expedition, farewells in Paris, journey to China, first military confrontations, difficult coordination with the British.

Chapter 2: The Treasure of the Son of Heaven

Discovery and systematic looting of the Summer Palace. Detailed inventories of treasures, moral dilemmas of French officers, organization of the booty.

Chapter 3: Silent Witnesses

Perspectives of the palace's Chinese servants, powerless witnesses to the destruction. Focus on An Dehai, palace eunuch, and Chen Wei, gardener. Their internal testimonies about the devastation.

Chapter 4: The Journey

Transport of the booty to France, reflections of soldiers during the crossing, arrival in Paris, creation of the Chinese Museum at Fontainebleau by Empress Eugénie.

Epilogue

Posthumous fates of characters and objects. Evolution of the debate on restitution from 1860 to the present day (up to 2023). Reflection on historical memory and cultural justice.

Narrative Characteristics

The novel adopts a polyphonic narration that alternates between:

- The point of view of French officers (Montauban, Roux, Morand, Dumas)
- British perspectives (Lord Elgin, General Grant)
- Chinese witnesses (An Dehai, Chen Wei, Master Lin)
- Civilian voices (Louise de Montauban, Empress Eugénie, Victor Hugo)

This multiplicity of perspectives allows the work to embrace the moral complexity of the event without imposing a univocal judgment.

IV. MAIN CHARACTERS

A. French Protagonists

1. General Charles Guillaume Cousin de Montauban (1796-1878)

- Commander-in-chief of the French expeditionary force

- Veteran of the Algerian campaigns
- Complex character: effective military man but morally torn
- Evolution: From initial martial confidence to guilty silence in his memoirs
- Destiny: Becomes Count of Palikao, Minister of War in 1870, held responsible for the defeat at Sedan
- Symbolizes the blindness and opportunism of the military hierarchy

2. Lieutenant Henri Roux

- Young staff officer, sensitive observer
- Keeps a personal diary throughout the expedition
- Moral conscience of the French narrative
- Develops an unlikely friendship with gardener Chen Wei
- His diary, published in 1932, will provoke a national debate on colonialism
- Embodies the possibility of critical consciousness even within the colonial system

3. Captain Armand Delmas

- 28-year-old artillery officer in Montauban's staff
- Fervent defender of the French civilizing mission at the beginning
- Progressive evolution in the face of the horror of looting
- Represents the idealistic soldier confronted with the reality of war

4. Auguste Morand

- Naval officer, future vice-admiral
- Participates in the transport of the booty
- Always refuses to speak publicly about the Summer Palace
- In a private letter from 1875: "I obeyed orders all my life. Only once should I have disobeyed. It was in October 1860."
- Embodies silent remorse and guilty obedience

5. Colonel Dumas

- Officer without scruples, supporter of looting
- Brilliant career under the Third Republic
- Dies in 1895 without ever expressing regret
- Statement in 1890: "It was war. In war, one does not get sentimental."
- Represents the complete absence of moral conscience

6. Louise de Montauban

- The general's wife, lucid and worried woman
- Perceives her husband's doubts better than anyone
- Together with her daughters Mathilde and Clémence, embodies the female voices that question military glory
- Represents moral intuition in the face of martial discourse

7. Empress Eugénie de Montijo (1826-1920)

- Wife of Napoleon III
- Creator of the Chinese Museum at Fontainebleau
- Ambivalent character: fascinated by treasures but increasingly aware of their criminal origin
- Her private diary reveals growing doubts about the legitimacy of her collection
- Embodies the dilemma between cultural preservation and moral restitution

B. British Protagonists

8. Lord Elgin (James Bruce, 8th Earl of Elgin)

- British diplomat, son of Lord Elgin who looted the Parthenon
- Burns to avenge the humiliation of 1859
- Orders the burning of the Summer Palace in retaliation
- Major responsibility for the fire that reduced the palace to ashes
- Symbolizes imperial revenge and deliberate cultural destruction

9. General James Hope Grant

- Commander of British forces (12,000 men)
- Struggles to control the looting tendencies of his heterogeneous colonial troops
- Tense relations with Montauban on military coordination

C. Chinese Witnesses

10. An Dehai

- Eunuch of the imperial palace
- Privileged witness to the daily life of Yuanmingyuan
- Keeps detailed notebooks describing the palace before its destruction
- Survives and hides his writings at Wofo Monastery
- His notebooks, published in 1985, constitute an invaluable historical document
- Last sentence of his last notebook: "Never forget"
- Embodies Chinese memory and the duty of testimony

11. Chen Wei

- Gardener of the Summer Palace, expert in landscapes and rare plants
- Develops an unlikely relationship with Henri Roux
- Gives Roux a jade pebble as a souvenir
- Emigrates to France after the destruction, works as a gardener in Paris
- Dies alone in Montmartre in 1877
- Last words: "The gardens... I want to see the gardens..."
- Symbolizes exile and irredeemable nostalgia for a destroyed world

12. Master Lin

- Calligrapher and scholar of the palace
- Represents Chinese literary culture
- Helplessly witnesses the destruction of millennial cultural treasures

D. Critical Voices

13. Victor Hugo

- Appears as an external moral voice
- Publishes an open letter denouncing the sack of the Summer Palace
- Text has become foundational for reflection on cultural looting in wartime
- Still cited today in debates on restitution
- Represents the European intellectual conscience opposing colonialism

14. Master Dubois

- Porcelain restorer at Fontainebleau
- Chooses an "honest restoration" that leaves cracks visible
- Refuses to mask the traumas inflicted on objects
- His restored porcelains become symbols of broken history

15. Pin Chun

- Chinese diplomat cited in the narrative
- Declares: "China will never forget. Even if it takes a hundred years, two hundred years, it will demand justice."
- Prophecy that proves accurate with current restitution demands

V. MAJOR THEMES

1. Cultural Looting and Its Justifications

The novel meticulously explores the various rationalizations used to legitimize theft:

The Civilizing Mission:

The French present themselves as bringing civilization to a "barbaric" people. This rhetoric serves to mask pure greed.

Spoils of War:

Argument that objects are fair compensation for the expedition's expenses. The novel shows the absurdity of this logic when it involves destroying millennial cultural treasures.

Preservation:

Paradoxically, some justify looting by claiming to save objects from destruction. Yet it is the expedition itself that destroys the palace by fire.

The Right of the Victor:

Archaic conception that military victory confers all rights, including the right to appropriate the enemy's cultural heritage.

2. Individual Responsibility in the Face of Orders

Central theme embodied by several characters:

Morand:

Obeys all his life but privately regrets not having disobeyed in October 1860. Illustrates the conflict between military discipline and moral conscience.

Roux:

Chooses to testify honestly in his diary, even if it puts him at odds with the army. His posthumous publication in 1932 provokes a salutary debate.

Dumas:

Represents the complete absence of moral questioning. For him, orders are sufficient to justify any act.

The novel poses the philosophical question: can obedience to orders excuse participation in a cultural crime?

3. Collective Memory and Selective Amnesia

French Side:

- Montauban devotes less than three pages to the looting in his memoirs, never mentioning the word "looting"
- The Second Empire attempts to transform the booty into a "pedagogical" museum
- Object labels slowly evolve: "tragic circumstances" (1920), "looting" (1960), explicit recognition (2020)
- France struggles to fully accept this dark page of its history

Chinese Side:

- The Summer Palace becomes a symbol of the "century of humiliation"
- The ruins are deliberately preserved as a memorial monument
- Annual commemorations every October 18
- An Dehai's phrase "Never forget" becomes a national mantra
- Persistent restitution demands since the 1980s

The contrast illustrates how victims and perpetrators construct radically different memories of the same event.

4. Cultural Destruction as a Weapon of War

Lord Elgin deliberately orders the burning of the Summer Palace to "punish" the Chinese emperor. This intentional destruction of priceless cultural heritage prefigures modern practices of cultural warfare.

The novel shows:

- The methodical planning of the destruction
- The fire that lasts several days
- The irreparable loss of unique artistic and architectural treasures
- The psychological trauma inflicted on an entire people

This dimension echoes contemporary cultural destructions (Palmyra, Timbuktu, etc.) and raises the question of heritage protection in wartime.

5. Art and Cultural Property

Philosophical questions explored:

Who does heritage belong to?

- The country of origin?
- "Heritage of humanity"?
- The one who possesses it materially?
- The one who preserves it?

Does time legitimize theft?

- Are one hundred sixty years enough to transform theft into legitimate property?
- Can statute of limitations apply to cultural heritage?

Conservation vs. Restitution

- Are objects better preserved in Western museums?
- Does this preservation justify the initial appropriation?
- Do the "guardians" have an ultimate duty of restitution?

6. Colonialism and Its Contradictions

The novel finely depicts the contradictions of the colonial project:

Civilizing Rhetoric:

The French claim to bring civilization while destroying an infinitely refined millennial civilization.

Presumed Moral Superiority:

Colonizers present themselves as morally superior while committing acts of looting and destruction.

Institutional Hypocrisy:

The Second Empire creates a "pedagogical" museum with stolen objects, transforming crime into culture.

7. Scars as Truth

Recurring motif symbolized by the porcelains restored by Master Dubois:

Visible cracks become metaphors for:

- The impossibility of erasing History
- Truth that persists despite attempts at concealment
- Trauma that cannot be completely repaired

The phrase of Chinese students in 2023: "They kept the scars" suggests that partial honesty is better than total concealment.

8. Moral Polyphony

The novel refuses simplistic Manichaeism. It presents:

- Conscious French (Roux, Morand) and unconscious (Dumas)
- Resigned and resistant Chinese
- Cynical and pragmatic British
- Critical French civilians (Hugo) and accomplices (imperial court)

This plurality of voices illustrates that moral responsibility is not national but individual.

VI. STYLE AND WRITING

Stylistic Characteristics

1. Documentary Realism

The author relies on in-depth historical research, including rare testimonies of Chinese origin. The novel mixes fiction and documentation to create a credible reconstruction.

2. Sober and Factual Narration

The style avoids pathos and sentimentality. The horror of looting and destruction is rendered through the accumulation of precise facts rather than lyrical emphasis.

3. Authentic Dialogues

Conversations recreate the language of the period without falling into excessive archaism. Exchanges between characters reveal their internal dilemmas.

4. Precise Descriptions

Whether palace treasures, military uniforms, Chinese landscapes or Parisian salons, descriptions are methodical and visually evocative.

5. Mosaic Structure

The alternation between French, British and Chinese perspectives creates a kaleidoscopic picture of the event, refusing any dominant point of view.

6. Documentary Epilogue

The end of the novel shifts to a quasi-historical register, listing the posthumous fates of characters and the evolution of the debate on restitution until 2023. This narrative choice firmly anchors fiction in historical reality.

VII. SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE

Objects as Characters

The looted treasures become full protagonists:

The jade given by Chen Wei to Roux:

Symbol of an impossible friendship between colonizer and colonized. Currently at the Guimet Museum with its explanatory label.

The cracked porcelains:

Metaphor for broken history that cannot be completely repaired.

The bronze zodiac heads:

Their auction sale in 2009 provokes a major diplomatic incident, illustrating that the wound remains open 150 years later.

The jade staff:

Coveted by Lord Elgin for Queen Victoria, it embodies greed disguised as diplomacy.

The Summer Palace as Metaphor

Yuanmingyuan represents more than a physical place:

- The pinnacle of classical Chinese civilization
- The vulnerability of beauty in the face of violence
- The irreversibility of certain destructions
- The collective memory of a humiliated people

Its deliberately preserved ruins become a memorial monument to the "century of humiliation," a permanent reminder of colonial aggression.

Gardens

Recurring motif embodied by Chen Wei:

- Ephemeral and fragile beauty
- Harmony destroyed by barbarism
- Nostalgia for a lost world
- Chen Wei's last words: "The gardens... I want to see the gardens..."

Gardens symbolize what cannot be looted or reconstructed: lived experience, beauty in its original context, ecological and cultural harmony.

VIII. RECEPTION AND RELEVANCE

Contemporary Relevance

The novel fits into several current debates:

1. Restitution of Works of Art

- African demands (Sarr-Savoy report, 2018)
- French debate on "ill-gotten cultural property"
- Specific case of Summer Palace objects

2. Decolonization of Museums

- Criticism of Western encyclopedic museums
- Revision of labels to mention the origin of acquisitions
- Debate on the role of museums in perpetuating colonial amnesia

3. Memorial Justice

- Recognition of colonial crimes
- Demands for official apologies
- Construction of shared memory

4. France-China Relations

- Diplomatic dimension of the heritage question
- Chinese cultural soft power

- Negotiations on partial restitutions

Evolution of the Debate (timeline in the novel)

1920: First labels mentioning "tragic circumstances"
 1932: Publication of Roux's diary, national debate in France
 1960: Centenary commemorative plaque acknowledging "looting"
 1985: Publication of An Dehai's notebooks in China
 2009: Bronze heads incident, violent Chinese protest
 2013: Restitution of bronze heads
 2015-2018: Franco-Chinese digital reconstruction project
 2020: Explicit labels at Fontainebleau: "These objects come from the sack of the Summer Palace by Franco-British troops in October 1860"
 2023: Visit of Chinese students to Fontainebleau, comment on the "scars"
 This timeline shows a slow evolution toward recognition, but not yet toward restitution.

IX. STRENGTHS OF THE NOVEL

1. Historical Rigor

In-depth documentary research, use of rare testimonies (especially Chinese), concern for accuracy in military, diplomatic and cultural details.

2. Narrative Balance

Refusal of Manichaeism: the novel presents conscious and unconscious French, avoids systematically demonizing or heroizing.

3. Polyphony of Voices

Multiplicity of perspectives (military, civilian, French, British, Chinese) that enriches understanding of the event.

4. Contemporary Dimension

The epilogue extends the narrative until 2023, showing that the history of 1860 is not closed but continues to inform current debates.

5. Literary Quality

Sober and effective style, evocative descriptions, authentic dialogues, masterful narrative structure.

6. Philosophical Depth

Deep questions about moral responsibility, collective memory, cultural property, historical justice.

7. Universal Empathy

Ability to make all characters alive and understandable, whether French, British or Chinese, military or civilian, guilty or victims.

X. QUESTIONS RAISED (without definitive answers)

The novel raises more questions than it provides answers, inviting the reader to their own reflection:

1. Does obedience to orders excuse participation in a cultural crime?
2. Can time transform theft into legitimate property?

3. Does preservation in Western museums justify the initial appropriation?
4. Who decides what belongs to "heritage of humanity"?
5. Do descendants have a moral responsibility for the acts of their ancestors?
6. How to build a shared memory of traumatic events?
7. Is restitution always the most just solution?
8. How to reconcile preservation and restitution?
9. Can museums be anything other than mausoleums of colonialism?
10. Can partial honesty (explicit labels, visible cracks) replace complete restitution?

XI. NOTABLE QUOTES

An Dehai (last notebook):

"Never forget"

Auguste Morand (letter to his son, 1875):

"I obeyed orders all my life. Only once should I have disobeyed. It was in October 1860."

Colonel Dumas (interview, 1890):

"It was war. In war, one does not get sentimental."

Chen Wei (last words, 1877):

"The gardens... I want to see the gardens..."

Henri Roux (diary, April 1, 1863):

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

Pin Chun (Chinese diplomat):

"China will never forget. Even if it takes a hundred years, two hundred years, it will demand justice."

Chinese student (Fontainebleau, 2023):

"At least they didn't lie about the cracks." / "They kept the scars."

Narrator (conclusion):

"History has not yet passed judgment. Perhaps it never will completely. But one thing is certain: the objects of the Chinese Museum at Fontainebleau are not simply works of art. They are witnesses."

XII. CONCLUSION: A NECESSARY WORK

"Pillage" is much more than a traditional historical novel. It is a moral investigation, a philosophical reflection, a memorial document and an implicit plea for cultural justice.

What makes this novel important:

It breaks selective amnesia

In France, the sack of the Summer Palace remains largely unknown to the general public, eclipsed by colonial "exploits." The novel helps repair this memorial gap.

It gives voice to the voiceless

Chinese testimonies (An Dehai, Chen Wei) allow the voices of direct victims to be heard, too often absent from Western historical narratives.

It refuses moral comfort

Neither simplistic denunciation nor complacent justification: the novel obliges the reader to confront the moral complexity of history.

It connects past and present

The epilogue until 2023 shows that these questions are not "historical" in the sense of "obsolete," but remain burningly relevant.

5. It proposes an ethics of honesty

Symbolized by Master Dubois's cracked porcelains: better to show the scars than to pretend integrity.

For whom is this novel?

- History enthusiasts: Rigorous and lively reconstruction of a little-known episode
- Those reflecting on colonialism: Nuanced exploration of the mechanisms of cultural domination
- Actors in the museum debate: Substantial contribution to reflection on restitution
- Concerned citizens: Invitation to question the colonial legacy in our institutions
- Seekers of historical truth: Model of narration that refuses simplification

Final Verdict

"Pillage" succeeds in the difficult bet of being at once:

- Historically rigorous and narratively captivating
- Morally engaged without being dogmatic
- Critical of colonialism without being caricatural
- Contemporary in its concerns while remaining rooted in the past

It is a work that honors the complexity of history while affirming the necessity of a moral conscience. It does not offer easy answers, but asks the right questions. It does not judge individuals of the past with the arrogance of presentism, but also refuses the easy excuse of historical relativism.

Ultimately, "Pillage" is a necessary novel, which participates in the construction of a more honest memory of the French colonial adventure, and which contributes to the essential debate on cultural justice and heritage restitution.

Rating: 5/5

An exemplary historical novel, simultaneously document, reflection and moral commitment.

XIII. DISCUSSION DIRECTIONS

1. Are characters who regret in silence (Morand) less guilty than those who have no remorse (Dumas)?
2. Was Empress Eugénie's gesture (creating a museum rather than restituting) the best possible compromise in the context of the era?
3. Do the current "guardians" of objects (French museums) have a moral duty to return them, even if legally they are legitimate owners?
4. How to evaluate the tension between preserving heritage (museums' argument) and respecting its cultural origin (restitution argument)?

5. Does the fact that current China is very different from imperial China of 1860 change anything about the legitimacy of its claims?
6. Should the bronze heads returned in 2013 serve as a model for other restitutions, or were they an exceptional case?
7. What to think of the phrase "the victors write history" in light of this novel that gives voice to the defeated?
8. Is the digital reconstruction project (2015-2018) a form of symbolic reparation or a simple technological curiosity?
9. Is the comparison between Lord Elgin's father looting the Parthenon and the son looting the Summer Palace relevant for thinking about the repetition of cultural violence?
10. What does "keeping the scars" really mean in the contemporary memorial and museum context?

End of Book Review

*Document prepared by Claude, January 2025
Based on the novel "Pillage" by Robert Casanovas (2025)*